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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AS A SYNTHESIS OF THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS: A CASE STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ABSTRACT: The paper deals with virtual exchange (VE) as an approach to teaching English for specific purposes in higher education. It comprises a theoretical and empirical part based on a pilot project of a virtual exchange conducted at the Faculty of Law in Osijek, Croatia and the University of Giessen in Germany within the framework of the Legal English course. A mixed methods research was applied including pre- and post-VE session questionnaires, task analysis and student reflections. The research results show positive effects of the exchange on motivation, development of professional identity and strengthening of language and intercultural competences, but they also indicate challenges related to language competence, differences in legal education systems and intercultural differences. The findings confirm that VE represents a motivating and effective approach to teaching the English language for specific purposes, while at the same time raising questions about the limitations of the pilot project and directions for future research.

Keywords: virtual exchange pilot-project, language for specific purposes, higher education, legal English, case study.

VIRTUALNA RAZMJENA KAO SINTEZA TEORIJSKIH PRISTUPA I EMPIRIJSKIH UVIDA: STUDIJA SLUČAJA U KONTEKSTU JEZIKA STRUKE U VISOKOM OBRAZOVANJU

APSTRAKT: Rad se bavi virtualnom razmjenom (VR) kao pristupom podučavanju engleskog jezika pravne struke kao stranog jezika u visokom obrazovanju. Rad obuhvaća teorijski i empirijski dio zasnovan na pilot projektu virtualne razmjene u okviru predmeta Engleski za pravnike na Pravnom fakultetu u Osijeku, Hrvatska i Sveučilištu Justus Liebig u Giessenu, Njemačka. U istraživanju se koristi kombinirana metoda istraživanja koja uključuje kvalitativnu i kvantitativnu analizu rezultata prikupljenih upitnicima prije i poslije virtualne razmjene, analizu zadataka i stavova studenata. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju pozitivne učinke virtualne razmjene na motivaciju, razvoj profesionalnog identiteta te jačanje jezičnih i interkulturalnih kompetencija studenata, ali također ukazuju na izazove vezane za jezičnu kompetenciju, razlike u sustavima pravnog obrazovanja i interkulturalnim razlikama. Rezultati istraživanja potvrđuju da virtualna razmjena predstavlja motivirajući i efikasan

pristup podučavanju engleskog jezika struke, a istovremeno ukazuju na ograničenja projekta i pravce budućih istraživanja.

Ključne riječi: virtualna razmjena, jezik struke, visoko obrazovanje, pravni engleski jezik kao strani jezik, studija slučaja.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized educational environment, higher education faces an increasing need for effective and authentic approaches to teaching languages of the specific profession (Languages for Specific Purposes – LSP). University students are progressively expected to master professional language skills alongside soft skills (intercultural competence) that support effective communication in international professional contexts. However, traditional LSP teaching models, which are largely based on classroom teaching and simulated situations, often fail to provide enough authentic opportunities for communication, collaboration and intercultural exchange. A limited contact with real professional language practices and cultures is an obstacle to the development of real, applicable language and professional skills. In this context, virtual exchange (VE) appears as an innovative teaching method that allows students international cooperation and communication through digital platforms, without the need for mobility. Despite growing interest in the implementation of VE in higher education curricula, there is relatively little empirical research that directly links the development of language competence and professional awareness with the application of virtual exchange in the context of the language of the profession.

However, the studies by Vuković Vojnović and Knežević (2023) and by Knežević and Vuković Vojnović (2024) examine virtual exchange (VE) in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education from two complementary but distinct perspectives. The 2023 study represents an initial, exploratory stage, focusing on students' awareness, attitudes, and willingness to participate in VE before it had been implemented in Serbian ESP classrooms. It highlights that while students generally viewed VE positively, as a means of enhancing intercultural awareness and communication skills, the concept remained largely unfamiliar, and some uncertainty persisted due to limited experience with such forms of online collaboration. In contrast, the 2024 research investigates students' perceptions after participating in an actual intercultural VE project. It reports high levels of satisfaction and motivation, noting that participants valued opportunities for intercultural learning, teamwork, and communication with peers abroad, while also identifying only minor challenges such as differing proficiency levels and topic

constraints. Thus, while the earlier study explores the potential and readiness for introducing VE, the later one provides empirical evidence of its effectiveness in promoting intercultural competence and engagement, marking a clear shift from conceptual exploration to practical validation of VE in ESP teaching. Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that VE can significantly contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence and promote engagement with discipline-specific communication in ESP contexts, highlighting the importance of an ecological perspective that considers the interaction between learners, tasks, and intercultural environments (Nicolaou and Sevilla-Pavón 2022: 117–144).

In this regard, the paper seeks to contribute to the existing research on virtual exchange in ESP by examining the students' attitudes that support the introduction of virtual exchange in the ESP classroom and students' professional intercultural awareness. The research is based on the analysis of a pilot project of virtual exchange conducted within the framework of English language courses for law students at the Faculty of Law in Osijek and Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany.

The significance of this research is reflected in its contribution to the international dimension of higher education and in supporting the concept of internationalisation at home (IaH) according to Helm (2015) and Beelen & Jones (2015), which enables students to gain international experience without the need for physical mobility. In this way, the work also contributes to the development of more inclusive and accessible forms of internationalisation and improvement of the practice of teaching English for specific purposes i.e. legal English.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Language for specific purposes (LSP) in higher education

Teaching the language of the profession (Languages for Specific Purposes – LSP) in higher education is aimed at the development of communication competences in specific professional contexts. LSP teaching is based on needs analysis and the development of language tasks that reflect authentic situations from professional practice (Basturkmen 2010: 17–26). Unlike general foreign language teaching, LSP approaches are focused on specific terminology, discursive patterns and genres relevant to a particular profession. However, the traditional classroom approach to LSP teaching often remains limited in terms of actual language use in intercultural and professional settings. As Bocanegra-Valle (2016) states, the challenge of teaching LSP is not only in the transfer of language knowledge, but also

in the development of pragmatic, cultural and professional competences necessary for successful communication in international professional communities.

Foreign language proficiency in higher education is an important factor enabling students to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the European Education Area such as student mobility programmes as well as strengthening students' competitiveness in both national and European labour markets. At non-philological faculties in Croatia, foreign language instruction represents both a continuation of prior language education and its adaptation to the specific needs of students, primarily through the teaching of LSP. The main aim of such instruction is to prepare students for professional communication and the practical application of language skills in a professional context, thereby aligning with the demands of the labor market (Kordić and Papa 2014).

The distinction between general foreign language learning and LSP is not limited to specialized vocabulary, although this oversimplified perception is often present among students. General foreign language knowledge is a prerequisite for learning LSP for learners at higher proficiency levels. LSP instruction is based on methodologies not substantially distinct from those used in general language teaching, where the teacher assumes the role of a language consultant to students who already possess subject-matter expertise. Within this framework, an emphasis is placed on mastering registers, genres, and linguistic features that enable the skills for specific tasks in the LSP classroom (Dudley-Evans 1998). The content, methodology, objectives, materials, and assessment methods of LSP instruction derive from the specific communicative needs of target learners (Trace 2015).

In the context of globalisation and continuous scientific and professional development, the teaching of LSP presents challenges for both students and teachers, as the focus of instruction must extend beyond purely linguistic content. Thus, LSP represents an open and dynamic system requiring an integrated and interdisciplinary approach, since the ongoing development of various fields of human activity continually generates new terminology necessitating collaboration between linguists and experts from different disciplines. Northcott (2008) presents a model of language education for legal professionals that is based on three interdependent dimensions, firstly, a learner's context i.e. who the learners are (law students, lawyers, judges, translators), which legal systems they are familiar with (common law/civil law), and what their professional and communicative needs are. The second dimension is teaching methodology referring to instructional approaches selected according to the needs analysis, with an emphasis on genre analysis and the use of authentic materials from legal practice. Finally, teacher expertise as the third dimension refers to the fact

that language teachers are expected to develop competences that go beyond linguistics, including a basic understanding of legal subject matter and, where possible, collaboration with legal professionals. This model highlights that effective legal language teaching can only occur when learners' needs, appropriate methodology, and teacher competences are properly aligned and each of these dimensions mutually reinforce one another.

2.2. Virtual exchange (VE) as a teaching approach

O'Dowd (2018) defines VE as a form of collaboration between students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds through Internet technologies for the purpose of achieving common educational outcomes. This approach is based on the principles of the socioconstructivist pedagogy of Vygotsky (Vygotsky and Cole 1978) and the theory of intercultural communication competence (ICC) (Byram 1997), emphasizing the importance of real contact, cooperation and reflection in the development of language and professional skills. This section deals with these two complementary approaches. The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) implies that students can achieve higher levels of competence with the support of peers or mentors. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes that learning is a social process and that human intelligence is dependent on society and culture. His theory can apply to online interaction in VE, where a culturally and linguistically different environment is created facilitating adaptation to the globalized world and education. Through language, this virtual society enables an exchange of experiences with people from different cultures, gaining wider knowledge and developing intercultural communication skills other than in case of interaction in real-world environment (Lantolf and Thorne 2006: 159–162).

Furthermore, Byram's model of intercultural communication competence, on which VE relies, represents a framework for understanding the outcomes of intercultural learning. This model consists of five dimensions: (1) knowledge about one's own and other cultural practices, (2) skills to interpret and compare cultural phenomena, (3) interaction skills supporting communicative learning, (4) openness and empathy, and (5) critical awareness of the cultural environment, i.e. reflections on one's own and other people's values (Byram 1997: 31–34). Virtual exchange creates authentic opportunities for the development of the mentioned dimensions (O'Dowd 2018) and encourages authentic learning, active participation in international teams, development of functional language competences, skills such as digital literacy, critical thinking and intercultural sensitivity (Helm 2015). In the

context of the language for specific purposes (LSP), virtual exchange connects language learning with concrete professional contents and practices.

2.3. On terminology in online intercultural cooperation¹

The development of terminology related to online intercultural cooperation has evolved since the mid-1990s. Since then the focus has shifted from the narrow understanding of language goals to a broader educational framework focusing on intercultural communication, global cooperation, and critical reflection. Telecollaboration was the earliest and most frequently used term introduced by Warschauer (1995), and elaborated by Belz (2003), defining it as institutionalized, electronically mediated intercultural communication guided by language and culture experts for the purposes of learning a foreign language and developing intercultural competence. At this stage, the terminology is strongly related to the field of learning and teaching foreign languages in the higher education environment. Along with digital development, the concept of e-tandem appears, derived from the tradition of tandem language learning, underscoring reciprocal, bilingual exchange among students, with each participant assuming the role of both student and teacher (O'Rourke 2007: 3–4). In order to encompass the linguistic and intercultural dimensions, Belz and Thorne (2006: x–xi) proposed the term Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education, thus stressing the role of the Internet as a key mediator of learning and communication.

National contexts have also shaped their own terminological frameworks of online teaching approaches. Since the late 2000s, the terminology has begun to spread beyond language teaching. The State University of New York (SUNY) developed the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) model, while international organisations promoted the term virtual exchange, for example through the Exchange 2.0 coalition initiative (O'Dowd and Beelen 2021). These terms

¹ The terms cooperation and collaboration share common goals but differ significantly in the processes through which participants reach those goals. According to Kvellestad et al. (2021: 3) cooperation is a situation “where each person is responsible for a portion of the problem solving”. In other words, participants divide the work, complete their assigned parts individually, and then combine results. Success depends on individuals fulfilling their separate responsibilities. Collaboration, by contrast, is defined as “the mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve the problem together”. This means that participants work jointly and interactively, sharing perspectives, negotiating meaning, and co-constructing knowledge throughout the process. The terms cooperation and collaboration are used in accordance with the terminology indicated in the relevant literature used in this paper.

illustrate the contribution of online collaboration to the processes of curriculum internationalisation and global education.

In order to achieve terminological clarity and scientific consistency, many researchers have agreed on the umbrella term Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) (O'Dowd 2007). This term encompasses a wide range of practices and models of online collaboration, emphasizing a double dimension: intercultural communication and virtual interaction. OIE has therefore asserted itself as an integrative framework that connects different national, institutional and educational traditions.

The question of the terminological definition of telecollaboration or virtual exchange (VE) is fundamental in discussions about its position within the theory and practice of foreign language teaching. The literature analysis shows that there is no consensus regarding the categorisation of this phenomenon. While the term 'method' in the linguistic and pedagogical tradition refers to clearly defined teaching and learning procedures, including specific activities, teacher and student roles, and expected outcomes (e.g. grammar-translation method), telecollaboration does not meet these criteria because it does not prescribe a universal set of tasks or predetermined procedures (O'Dowd 2018).

Unlike 'method', the term 'approach' in didactic terminology means a theoretically based set of principles and ideas that guide practice, but do not determine detailed implementation. It is precisely in this sense that telecollaboration can be understood as a pedagogical approach, as it rests on widely accepted theoretical frameworks i.e. primarily socioconstructivist and interactional theories of language learning (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf and Thorne 2006). These approaches show that language learning and the development of intercultural competence occur through dialogue, the negotiation of meaning, and the shared construction of knowledge.

Furthermore, telecollaboration has specific features that distinguish it from other pedagogical practices. It involves geographically distributed students in interactions that have an authentic communicative purpose, with the ideal outcome being the co-construction of knowledge and the development of intercultural competencies (Byram 1997; O'Dowd 2007). Although the tasks and activities within the virtual exchange projects are so diverse that one cannot speak of a single 'method', common theoretical foundations and pedagogical logic justify the understanding of telecollaboration as an approach in foreign language teaching and learning, i.e. as a growing instructional practice based on principles. It can therefore be concluded that telecollaboration is not a method in the strict sense of the word, but is more appropriately described as a pedagogical approach or principle-based

practice. Such determination enables simultaneous recognition of the theoretical foundations behind the practice and flexibility in its application in different educational contexts.

2.4. VE and COIL approaches – advantages and challenges

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is grounded in collaboration between instructors from different countries in the joint design and implementation of courses (Rubin 2017). Unlike the broader concept of VE, which encompasses a range of formats from short-term projects to integrated modules, COIL represents an institutionally supported model that requires careful pedagogical and technological planning. According to Dooly and Vinagre (2022), discussions on VE address fundamental research questions, e.g. what constitutes virtual exchange, which aspects are underapplied, appropriately applied, or excessively applied. The authors also argue that VE should not be viewed as a single method but rather as a pedagogical approach that educators adapt in line with their professional beliefs and contextual opportunities. At its core, VE is based on linguistic and intercultural communication, with the Communicative Approach (CA) shaping the dominant theoretical framework of learning languages. Thus communication is not merely a tool to practise languages and it should be observed as a means to learn a language through interaction, which is closely linked to Vygotsky's approach to teaching. Finally, Dooly and Vinagre identified three levels of VE implementation in foreign language teaching. These are (1) underapplied or underexplored dimensions, where theoretical insights have not yet been sufficiently transferred into practice; (2) appropriately applied aspects, where research findings have been successfully integrated into teaching practices; and (3) misapplied or overapplied uses, where concepts are applied out of context (Dooly and Vinagre 2022: 395–397). Although COIL and VE share the same overarching goals such as enhancing intercultural competence, professional awareness, and language skills, they differ in terms of institutional support, activity structures, and focus. While COIL may be embedded within an entire course, VE activities are typically more flexible and project-oriented (O'Dowd 2022).

O'Dowd notes that the main areas of research within VE concern language development objectives, the evaluation of learning outcomes, and the advancement of intercultural competence. However, authentic communication in VE does not guarantee the development of language competence at the same time, since the interactions are often not pedagogically structured enough to support effective language learning, because careful didactic planning is lacking (O'Dowd 2022: 395–

397). It is further pointed out that communication in itself is not a prerequisite for effective learning if there is no additional methodological elaboration and planning support. VE project participants come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which can further complicate communication, and it is important for the teacher to anticipate possible obstacles in advance, such as differences in the way of communication, different levels of language competence and cultural norms, and include them in the preparation and implementation of activities in VE (ibid.).

In the focus of the research on the effectiveness of virtual exchange (VE) are the goals related to the development of language competences, the evaluation of the process and the stimulation of intercultural competence. Research has shown that, in the context of teaching LSP, VE has a number of advantages. In addition to the opportunity for authentic communication in learning a foreign professional language (Belz & Müller-Hartmann 2003), VE encourages the development of intercultural communication competence (Byram 1997) and contributes to the internationalisation of the curricula of higher education institutions, in accordance with the IaH concept (Beelen & Jones 2015). Uncertainties of a technical and organisational nature are cited as the main challenges in the implementation of the VE/COIL approach. Byram, along with O'Dowd (2022) and Helm (2015), states that the successful implementation of virtual exchange requires a thorough preparation on behalf of teachers, strong support from the institution and an educational linguistically and professionally balanced approach. Furthermore, the issues of uneven language competence and digital skills of the participants, as well as the time difference of holding VE sessions must be taken into consideration.

2.5. Motivation for the research

Although interest in the application of VE in education is on the rise, we find a limited number of empirical studies systematically dealing with its impact on the development of language and professional competences in LSP. Thematically, they are mainly focused on the role of general language or intercultural outcomes, often ignoring the demands of professional discourse. As O'Dowd (2021) points out, a larger number of studies is required that integrate both quantitative and qualitative approaches in assessing the effectiveness of VE within individual disciplines, which is the focus of this research, as well.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research approach and methods

This research uses a mixed methods approach by Cresswell and Plano (2017) that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to determine the impact of virtual exchange (VE) on the development of language competence and professional intercultural awareness of students in the course English for the legal profession. Such an approach enables data triangulation and a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, as well as objective and quantitative results of their participation. The research is based on a case study, which enables a detailed analysis of the VE pilot project organized by two higher education institutions. According to Yin (2014), a case study is an appropriate method for researching a complex phenomenon in a real educational context in order to comprehend its dynamics and effects.

3.2. Context and participants of the case study

The study was conducted during summer semester of the academic year 2024/25 as part of legal English courses for law students at the Justus Liebig University in Germany (Giessen) and the Faculty of Law, Osijek, in Croatia. The project participants were law students (N=42), who collaborated through structured online tasks in smaller international teams in the project that was not integrated into the curriculum or assessment of the courses taught at both universities. The participants' English knowledge levels ranged from B1 to C1 according to the CEFR, but all of them had previously attended at least one LSP course. Before starting the virtual exchange, two lecturers (ESP teachers) had been preparing the students for VE by providing them with detailed introductory training in VE and its objectives, topics and technical requirements for online communication tools.

3.3. Research objectives and questions

The research objectives were to examine how participation in VE affects the development of discipline-specific language competences in legal English, to explore the extent to which VE contributes to the development of professional intercultural awareness among law students, and to analyze students' perceptions of differences in legal education systems and cultural aspects of professional practice. Accordingly, the main research questions were the following:

- a. To what extent does VE contribute to the development of language competence in a specific professional context?
- b. How does VE influence student perception of professional and intercultural exchange?
- c. What are the key benefits and challenges of virtual exchange from a student perspective?
- d. How do students perceive differences in legal education systems and cultural dimensions of professional practice through their participation in VE?

3.4. Instruments and data collection

The main instruments for data collection included the pre- and post-session questionnaires with open-ended, closed-ended and reflective questions. The questionnaires were used to gain insight into students' expectations of VE and intercultural awareness before and after the project and also into benefits and challenges of VE.

The pre-session questionnaire was used prior to the Giessen-Osijek Virtual Exchange (May 2025) to gather baseline information about the participants' backgrounds, prior international experience, expectations, and motivations for joining the project. The instrument was designed to provide insight necessary for tailoring instructional support and to serve as a comparative reference point for post-project evaluation. The questionnaire comprised seven items organised into three sections: (1) Background and Interests, (2) Expectations and Motivation, and (3) Communication and Collaboration. It combined closed- and open-ended questions to elicit both factual and attitudinal data. Section 1 collected demographic and academic information, including participants' level of study, legal areas of interest, and previous experiences with virtual or international collaboration. Section 2 explored participants' reasons for engaging in the exchange, target skill areas for development (e.g. communication, intercultural competence, critical thinking, teamwork, and legal English), and perceived challenges. Section 3 assessed participants' self-reported comfort level in using English to collaborate with international peers. Overall, the pre-session questionnaire provided a contextual and motivational profile of the participants, forming a basis for interpreting changes in linguistic, intercultural, and professional awareness observed in the post-session responses.

The post-session questionnaire was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative feedback on students' experiences in the Giessen-Osijek Virtual

Exchange 2025. It aimed to evaluate participants' satisfaction with the project, their perceived learning outcomes, and the development of discipline-specific, linguistic, and intercultural competences. The instrument consisted of 20 items divided into four thematic sections: (1) Overall Satisfaction, (2) Content-Specific Feedback, (3) Skill Development, and (4) Reflection and Future Outlook. Items 1-17 were closed-ended statements rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree), enabling a quantitative assessment of students' self-reported attitudes and perceived progress. These items addressed areas such as project organisation, understanding of legal education systems in Germany and Croatia, intercultural communication, collaboration, and professional skills relevant to legal studies. The final three items (Questions 18–20) were open-ended, allowing respondents to elaborate on the most enjoyable and challenging aspects of the exchange, to suggest improvements for future iterations, and to select or propose an appropriate title summarising the overall experience. The inclusion of open-ended prompts provided richer qualitative insights into participants' reflections and affective responses, complementing the quantitative data obtained through the Likert-scale items.

The qualitative analysis of students' written reflections was conducted according to the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis model allowing for identification of key topics related to professional communication, cultural differences and the development of intercultural awareness. A special focus was placed on the analysis of student observations about the differences in the legal education systems of Germany and Croatia, with an emphasis on the cultural aspects of legal practice and professional ethics. Reflexive evaluations provided insight into the students' ability to compare and critically refer to these differences.

4. CASE STUDY: VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PILOT-PROJECT IN THE CONTEXT OF LEGAL ENGLISH TEACHING

The pilot project of virtual exchange involved law students from two higher education institutions – one from Germany (Giessen) and one from Croatia (Osijek) – and the main communication platform was a video conferencing tool (Zoom) with the functionality of “breakout rooms” for group work. The project goal was to enable students to communicate authentically in English in legal and intercultural contexts and to develop their professional awareness by comparing two foreign legal education systems.

4.1. Preparation and organisation of the pilot-project

The preparatory phase lasted six weeks and included regular organisational meetings of two lecturers of legal English from both law faculties, agreement on terms, content and educational goals of VE, development of instruments for data collection (pre- and post-questionnaires), training students to work in an online environment. Students were provided in advance with an activity plan and clearly defined goals, tasks and guidelines for preparation, including prior research on the partner city, the university as well as on their national legal education system.

4.2. Structure of virtual exchange

The virtual exchange session via video conference platform enabled the participants to be divided into smaller international groups. The total duration of the session was 90 minutes, and the organisational format included a plenary introductory, closing and students' work in smaller groups in breakout rooms.

The programme consisted of four parts. In the introductory part taking place in plenary, both lecturers shortly presented the objectives of the activity to the participants and started with a short "icebreaker" task to encourage interaction. In the following part of the session, students were assigned to different breakout rooms of mixed international groups to collaborate on two thematic tasks presented in subsection 4.3. The group work was followed by a final plenary session aimed at sharing insights, exchanging reflections and questions. The post-activity included filling in the post-session questionnaire and a reflective evaluation.

4.3. Themes and tasks in the VE pilot-project

There were two thematic tasks aimed at fostering intercultural communication and the development of specific academic competences. The first theme was "Pitch your University" focusing on the exchange of experiences related to student life and mobility. In break-out rooms, students presented their cities and universities and formulated recommendations for peers from other countries who might participate in a student exchange programme. The activity included the articulation of five recommendations for their Faculty (e.g. favourite motivating lectures, extracurricular activities, elements of local culture). The emphasis was placed on interactivity through visual support (images, links) and a two-way communication motivated by questions and comments.

The second task was to compare legal education systems in two countries (Croatia and Germany). Students asked questions, analyzed and discussed admission requirements and selectivity, stages of education with an emphasis on academic and practical components, curriculum structure and major branches of law, as well as teaching formats and teaching groups at each Faculty respectively. The participants were particularly interested in differences and similarities of extracurricular professional activities for law students (e.g., moot court, legal clinics) and in career opportunities and students' professional expectations. Finally, the students were required to select and present five similarities and five differences between the legal education systems, followed by a discussion on possible teaching and studying improvements.

4.4. Reflection and educational insights

The pilot-project activity was designed to address multiple dimensions of learning. On the cognitive level, students engaged in comparative analysis and the formulation of recommendations. From a linguistic perspective, they practiced not only the use of general English but also legal and administrative terminology, used listening and speaking strategies within interactive exchanges. At the intercultural level, the students shared their personal and educational experiences in an authentic communicative context. Finally, the reflective dimension was fostered through post-session evaluation of their VE experience and insights.

As noted by Helm (2015) and O'Dowd (2021), structured tasks that integrate interaction, reflection, and professional contexts contribute to the development of multidimensional competences, which is particularly significant in the teaching of languages for specific purposes. In this case, the virtual exchange provided students with an opportunity to experience international collaboration without the need for physical mobility, thereby supporting the IaH concept by Beelen and Jones (2015).

4.5. Alignment of research questions with outcomes

The analysis of project participants' experiences, the results of pre- and post-session questionnaires, and outputs (presentations) provide insights into the extent of learning dimensions influenced by VE. The results obtained point to an expansion of discipline-specific language competence in legal English, the development of the ability to conduct structured discussions on professional topics, the enhancement of intercultural awareness within the context of legal education, deeper understanding of similarities and differences between legal education systems, and drawing the

comparison-based conclusions. These outcomes are discussed in Section 5 presenting the results of both qualitative and quantitative analyses and their interpretations in light of the theoretical framework and educational implications.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Quantitative analysis results of the pre- and post-questionnaires

The result analysis of pre- and post-session questionnaires shows a significant shift in participants' self-assessment of language competence and professional awareness after the virtual exchange. Thus, the pre-session questionnaire provided insight into students' initial motivations, expected learning outcomes, and perceived challenges before participating in the Giessen-Osijek Virtual Exchange 2025. Most students indicated that their main motivation for participation was the opportunity to communicate with international peers and gain insights into another legal education system. The skills most frequently prioritised included intercultural competence, communication in English within a professional context, and teamwork. Several participants expressed interest in developing critical thinking skills through the comparison of legal systems and professional practices. Anticipated challenges primarily concerned linguistic confidence, differences in legal terminology, and technical or time-management issues. These responses established a baseline for observing the changes in students' attitudes and competences after the VE sessions.

As regards the post-session questionnaire results, 76% of students reported greater confidence in using English to discuss legal topics (higher language competence), compared to 43% before the activity. The participants showed the greatest progress in the skill of asking questions and giving explanations in a professional context. A total of 81% of participants stated that VE had a positive impact on the formation of their awareness of differences and similarities in legal education systems. Moreover, 69% of participants expressed willingness to participate in live exchange after VE in the future, which means that they were encouraged by the VE experience. The above data confirm the results of previous research on the positive impact of VE on the development of communicative and intercultural competences (Helm 2015; O'Dowd 2018).

5.2. *Qualitative analysis: thematic analysis of reflections and transcripts*

Analyzing themes appearing in participants' reflections (Braun & Clarke 2006) we identified four interrelated thematic frameworks derived from the post-session questionnaire, which indicate how students experienced and evaluated VE. The students reflected that the main benefit was the opportunity to use legal English in authentic communicative contexts. Many students emphasized that the activity required a spontaneous, unstructured form of interaction, which is quite different from controlled classroom environments. The participants noted that it was "the first time they had to improvise in a legal discussion in English", thus emphasizing the value of the exchange to encourage authentic language use (Belz & Müller-Hartmann 2003). One student from Croatia reflected on advantages of VE: "I learned new legal terminology, but more importantly, I practiced how to use it in a real conversation with someone who knows nothing about our legal education system."

Closely related was the topic of finding out about the other students' legal culture. The students were interested in the educational practices of their peers and emphasized the culturally rooted nature of national legal education, respectively. A German student responded here: "I was surprised how practical their legal education system is, especially because of the early involvement in practices and moot courts." This observation points to the development of cross-cultural professional awareness (Byram 1997), whereby students recognize how cultural and institutional contexts shape professional development and practice.

VE also encouraged students to reconsider their own views on legal education across Europe. Several students admitted that before the activity they expected legal training within the EU to be mainly homogeneous, but in the course of the conversation with their peers, they discovered both diversity and complexity. One of the students said: "I assumed that legal education in the EU was similar everywhere, but apparently it is not." This process of questioning stereotypes and assessing their expectations is followed more critically by looking at the advantages and disadvantages of one's own educational system. In this sense, VE encouraged critical reflection and self-awareness, aligning with the principles of the concept of internationalisation at home by Beelen and Jones (2015).

Finally, students' reflections indicate that VE fosters a sense of empowerment and motivation for future international engagements. They saw the activity as an inclusive opportunity to expand their horizons related to studying law and working abroad. One student remarked: "I realized that I can actually study or work abroad – it's not just reserved for the best students." This coincides with Helm's (2015) understanding of VE as a tool for inclusive internationalisation,

demonstrating its potential to provide access to global educational opportunities. Taken together, these four themes suggest that virtual exchange not only promotes authentic language practice and cross-cultural professional awareness, but also challenges preconceived notions and their stronger sense of agency in international contexts. The results show the multiple value of virtual exchange as a pedagogical approach that simultaneously improves language competence, intercultural sensitivity, critical reflection and motivation for further mobility.

6. CONCLUSION

This research deals with investigating the impact of VE on the development of language competence specific to professional intercultural awareness among law students in the context of LSP classes. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected data yielded results that confirm that even time-limited VE activities can have significant educational effects. In the post-session questionnaire, the students indicated increased self-confidence in using legal English for professional communication, a clearer understanding of the differences and similarities between legal education systems, and better motivation for future international cooperation and mobility. The research is grounded in the socioconstructivist approaches to learning by Vygotsky (1978) and O'Dowd (2018), which assume that knowledge is created through cooperation and interaction. The VE activity offers an environment in which students applied the language of the profession in authentic contexts, co-constructed meaning and collectively shaped professional insights. The results also support the understanding of intercultural communication as an integral part of professional competence (Byram 1997). Through the exchange, students engaged in critical thinking about their own and foreign educational systems, recognizing not only the differences but also the value of these differences for their professional development. Moreover, the research aligns with previous research that emphasizes the role of VE in supplementing traditional classroom instruction, while simultaneously advancing the broader internationalisation of higher education, especially within the concept of internationalisation at home (Helm 2015; Beelen & Jones 2015).

According to the results of the research, VE represents a valuable supplement to approaches to teaching LSP, with a special contribution to the activation of language competence in authentic situations, the development of professional intercultural awareness, the empowerment of students for international communication and cooperation, and the integration of language knowledge, professional knowledge and culture into a functional whole. One of the key

advantages of this approach is its broad accessibility to internationalisation, as students do not need to travel abroad to gain significant international experiences. In the specific context of LSP, where language serves as a means of professional communication, VE enables a productive connection between theory and practice, thus overcoming some limitations of traditional classroom teaching. This observation is consistent with earlier research that emphasizes the synergistic effect of interaction, reflection and professional relevance in LSP teaching (O'Dowd 2021; Bocanegra-Valle 2016).

Despite these positive results, several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The sample is small and the limited number of participants reduces the possibility of generalizing the conclusions. Also, the study does not allow a longitudinal analysis of competence development. Finally, relying on student self-assessments of attitudes toward socially desirable answers introduces subjectivity and bias. When interpreting the results and designing future research, these shortcomings should definitely be taken into account and their appearance should be prevented.

Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the results are indicative of questions related to this topic. Importantly, the findings confirm that VE can compensate for certain limitations of conventional LSP teaching, especially with respect to authentic communication, professional interaction and reflective practice, elements that are difficult to achieve solely within classroom simulations (Bocanegra-Valle 2016; Basturkmen 2010).

The pedagogical implications of this research are significant. VE emerges as a feasible and justified approach for enhancing LSP instruction. Its value is in enabling the activation of knowledge through authentic language use in professional situations, the development of transversal skills such as digital literacy, intercultural sensitivity and teamwork, and the implementation of an inclusive and accessible model of internationalisation regardless of physical mobility. VE empowers students to recognize and articulate their professional identity in a wider international context.

At the same time, this paper highlights the need for further research to gain new insights into VE. Therefore, future studies should include larger samples of participants for reliable results, and apply longitudinal research that monitors the long-term impact of VE on the development of competencies over a certain period of time. Valuable results on the impact of VE on learning in a certain area would also be obtained by conducting comparative research among different disciplines. Finally, a combination of self-report and performance-based measures would allow

for a multi-layered understanding of how VE contributes to both linguistic and cross-cultural development.

Overall, the results of this research suggest that VE is not only an innovative supplement to teaching LSP, but also a strategic tool for shaping the future of internationalisation of higher education, as it offers inclusive, pedagogically based opportunities for students to develop the competencies needed in a global professional environment.

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Dubravka Papa
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VIRTUALNA RAZMJENA KAO SINTEZA TEORIJSKIH PRISTUPA I EMPIRIJSKIH
UVIDA: STUDIJA SLUČAJA U KONTEKSTU JEZIKA STRUKE U VISOKOM
OBRAZOVANJU

Sažetak

U radu se proučava virtualna razmjena (Virtual Exchange, u tekstu VE) kao suvremeni pedagoški pristup podučavanju engleskog jezika pravne struke kao stranog jezika u visokom obrazovanju. Koncept virtualne razmjene temelji se na suradničkom učenju u digitalnom okruženju te omogućuje studentima iz različitih zemalja da razvijaju jezične, interkulture i profesionalne kompetencije kroz autentičnu komunikaciju u međunarodnom kontekstu. U teorijskom dijelu rada analiziraju se temeljna teorijska uporišta koja podupiru VE pristup, uključujući konstruktivističke i sociokonstruktivističke modele učenja, te se VE uspoređuje s modelom Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), koji je nastao u američkom kontekstu, ali se u posljednjem desetljeću sve češće primjenjuje i u europskim visokoškolskim institucijama. Posebna se pažnja posvećuje metodičkim implikacijama primjene VE-a u poučavanju jezika struke, osobito u kontekstu pravnog obrazovanja, gdje je

jezik istodobno i sredstvo i predmet profesionalne komunikacije. Empirijski dio rada temeljen je na pilot-projektu virtualne razmjene provedenom između studenata prava Pravnog fakulteta Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Sveučilišta Justus Liebig u Giessenu u Njemačkoj, u okviru kolegija Engleski za pravnike. U istraživanju je primijenjena kombinirana metoda prema Creswell i Plano (2017), koja obuhvaća kvalitativnu i kvantitativnu analizu podataka. Podaci su prikupljeni pomoću upitnika provedenih prije i nakon virtualne razmjene, analize jezičnih zadataka te tematske analize studentskih refleksija. Takav metodološki okvir omogućio je sveobuhvatno razumijevanje učinaka sudjelovanja u virtualnoj razmjeni na razvoj jezičnih, interkulturalnih i profesionalnih kompetencija studenata prava.

Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da je sudjelovanje u virtualnoj razmjeni imalo pozitivan učinak na motivaciju studenata, razvoj profesionalnog identiteta i svijest o važnosti interkulturalne komunikacije u pravnom kontekstu. Studenti su pokazali povećanu samouvjerenost u korištenju engleskog jezika struke te veće razumijevanje razlika između hrvatskog i njemačkog sustava pravnog obrazovanja. Ipak, identificirani su i određeni izazovi povezani s razinom jezične kompetencije, terminološkim razlikama, tehničkim ograničenjima i vremenskom usklađenošću aktivnosti. Zaključno, istraživanje potvrđuje da virtualna razmjena predstavlja motivirajući i učinkovit pristup integriranom razvoju jezičnih i stručnih kompetencija u nastavi stranog jezika struke na visokoškolskim ustanovama. Osim toga, VE potiče međunarodnu suradnju, razvoj interkulturalne osjetljivosti i profesionalne refleksije među studentima. U završnom dijelu rada ističu se ograničenja istraživanja te daju preporuke za buduće projekte virtualne razmjene i njihovu sustavnu integraciju u kurikulum visokoškolskih ustanova.

Ključne riječi: virtualna razmjena, jezik struke, visoko obrazovanje, pravni engleski jezik kao strani jezik, studija slučaja.

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