Virtual Exchange and the Role of Foreign Language Pedagogy in Educating Learners for Global Citizenship
Gender Equality and Diversity

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the (neglected) role of foreign language pedagogy in educating learners for global citizenship, and in particular for gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. I begin by pointing out the necessity of authenticity in foreign language pedagogy, of the development of intercultural communicative competence, and of the adoption of an intercultural/global citizenship pedagogy. Approaches integrating foreign language education and intercultural/global citizenship education bring real cogent contemporary issues into the classroom, promoting community engagement and active citizenship. In this context Virtual Exchange could have a fundamental role for developing self-regulated language learning, creating communities of inquiry and extending learning beyond the classroom. A Virtual Exchange project between the University of Virginia, United States, and an upper-secondary school in Pavia, Italy is presented. Centered on the question of gender equality, it took place over four years (2018–2022). The project aims to create a virtual space where students' social participation and engagement is stimulated, and formally valued.

Keywords: virtual exchange, intercultural citizenship, global citizenship, active citizenship, gender equality, foreign language pedagogy.

The (neglected) role of foreign language pedagogy in educating learners for global citizenship: intercultural competence, intercultural citizenship and active citizenship.

This paper aims to explore the (neglected) role of foreign language pedagogy in educating learners for global citizenship, and in particular for gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. A premise to this study is a reflection of the condition of foreign language teaching in the era of globalization:

Through its mobility of people and capital, global technologies, and global information networks, globalization has changed the conditions under which foreign languages are taught, learned, and used. It has destabilized the codes, norms and conventions that foreign language educators relied upon to help learners be successful users of the language once they had left their classrooms. These changes call for a more reflective, interpretive, historically grounded, and politically engaged pedagogy than was called for by the communicative language teaching of the eighties (Kramsch, 2014, p. 296).

Most communicative methods in foreign language pedagogy are based on artificial dialogues, artificial question/answer interactions: "[a]uthenticity in the classroom is hard to design and often simply reduced to the use of so-called authentic material, without engaging students as a whole person, with their feelings, interests and culture" (Jaccomard, 2016, p. 2). Meaningful interaction is needed, that is, the students' motivation and engagement to create meaningful learning.

Interacting is a semantic activity, a process of making meanings. As we take turns in any interaction, we negotiate meanings about what we think is going on in the world, how we feel about it, and how we feel about the people we interact with. This process of exchanging meanings is functionally motivated: we interact with each other to accomplish a wide range of tasks. Very often *we talk to other people to accomplish quite specific, pragmatic tasks*: [...] to pass on knowledge, to make appointments, to get jobs and to *jointly participate in practical activities* (Eggins and Slate, 1997, p. 6; my emphasis).

Using a foreign language involves interlinguistic and intercultural acts: "developing the capacity to 'move between' linguistic, cultural and knowledge systems, participating in and understanding communication as an act that involves reciprocal exchange of meaning […] creating and exchanging meaning in diversity" (Scarino & Liddicot, 2016, p. 21).

I have begun by pointing out the necessity of authenticity in the interlinguistic and intercultural acts constructed by foreign language pedagogy. In order to create reciprocal exchange of meaning in foreign

language acquisition, the development of intercultural communicative competence is fundamental. It relies crucially on the ability to interact 'with people from another country and culture in a foreign language', which entails appropriate levels of language competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence (Byram, 1997, p. 71). Michael Byram (1997) was one of the first researchers to define intercultural competence. He argued that when people from other languages and/or cultures interact in a social context, they contribute with what they know about their own country, but also with what they know of people from other cultures. In this sense, both knowledge and attitude are important and they are affected by the processes of intercultural communication, which, in his words, refer to "the skills of interpretation and establishing relationships between aspects of the two cultures" and "the skills of discovery and interaction" (1997, p. 33). In order to organize the intercultural dimension, which consists of sustaining interaction and building communication for the development of intercultural skills, we need to offer students the opportunity to build relationships and develop communicative skills through the exchange of information, thus helping them to reflect on different ways of doing things and to be capable of accepting different views and opinions, as well as negotiating difference.

Intercultural competence consists of a "set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, 2008, p. 97). From this perspective, critical cultural competence is conceived of as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 53). Fostering intercultural competence entails the development of an intercultural speaker, who "acquires a deeper understanding of the relationships of languages and cultures" (Wagner & Byram, 2017, p. 2). It is apparent how the often-limited time and space of traditional face-to-face classes are insufficient; therefore, they must be expanded through opening up and negotiating further spaces for intercultural and interlinguistic interaction to foster intercultural competence.

In 2008 Byram introduced the concept of "intercultural citizenship", postulated as a learning outcome to guide curriculum designers and teachers in schools and higher education. It is parallel to other concepts such as "global citizenship", "intercultural competence", or "cultural awareness", which are commonly used in education (Wagner & Byram, 2017, p.1). In particular, Byram's concept of intercultural citizenship entails: learning more about one's own country by comparison; learning more about 'otherness' in one's own country (especially linguistic/ethnic minorities); becoming involved in activities outside school; making class-to-class links to compare and act on a topic in two or more countries (2008, p. 130). Intercultural citizenship "occurs when people who perceive themselves as having different cultural affiliations from one another interact and communicate, and then analyze and reflect on this experience and act on that reflection by engaging in civic or political activity" (Barrett, 2017, p. 9).

A key dimension of Byram's recent construct is active citizenship, which implies "being involved in the life of one's community, both local and national" (Wagner & Byram, 2017, p. 3). In this light intercultural citizenship is instrumental in promoting the development of foreign language speaking citizens who are able to act in multilingual and transnational spaces effectively, that is, global citizens ready to act and interact in multilingual and international contexts through active citizenship (Wagner & Byram, 2017, p. 3) implemented through civic actions in their own national communities (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2017, p. 6). Wagner and Byram's most recent definition of intercultural citizenship is as follows: causing/facilitating intercultural citizenship experience, which includes activities of working with others to achieve an agreed end; analysis and reflection on the experience and on the possibility of further social and/or political activity; thereby creating learning that is cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral change in the individual; and a change in self-perception, in relationships with people of different social groups (pp. 3-4).

The essential difference between global competence and global citizenship or intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship lies in

the importance attributed to active engagement in society. […]. So, while intercultural or global competence refer to the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to communicate and act effectively and appropriately in different cultural contexts, global or intercultural citizenship borrow from models of citizenship education to refer to the application of these competences to actively participating in, changing and improving society (O'Dowd, 2019, p. 17).

When we consider intercultural/global citizenship in foreign language acquisition we aim at introducing concepts such as: to believe in a shared humanity; to respect and value diversity; to foster interdependence, empathy and reciprocal help; to foster social justice, equality and inclusion; to sustain the environment; to engage in active citizenship in order to act out these beliefs.

In 2019 Byram gave the opening keynote speech at the international conference on global citizenship 'Educating the Global Citizen. International Perspectives on Foreign Language Teaching in the Digital Age', which took place in Munich in March 2019. He referred to the 'Norway Aims for language Teaching' highlighting four main ideas:

1. Foreign languages are both an educational subject and a humanistic subject. This area of study shall give opportunities for experiences, joy and *personal development*, at the same time as it opens greater possibilities in the world of work and for study in many language regions.
2. Competences in language and culture shall give the individual the possibility to *understand, to 'live into' and value other cultures'* social life and life at work, their modes and conditions of living, their way of thinking, their history, art and literature
3. The area of study (languages) can also contribute to developing interest in tolerance, *develop insight in one's own conditions of life and own identity,* and contribute to a joy in reading, creativity, experience and *personal development*.
4. Good competence in languages will also lay the ground for

> *participation in activities which build democracy* beyond country
> borders and differences in culture.
> (Byram's translation, and numbering added – my emphasis)

The idea introduced by "live into" is related to the notion of decentering, of putting oneself in the perspective of the other, to understand their way of thinking, to be physically, mentally and socially involved, that is to say exposing oneself to newcomers and new interests.

Byram argued that foreign language education can be enriched by reference to citizenship education and related this idea to the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* to show how language teaching can become part of an interdisciplinary approach to intercultural dialogue; the values in the models are the values adopted by the Council of Europe and the member states. He focused on the definition of competences as "the ability to mobilize and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and / or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given context" (RFCDC 2018, Vol. 1, p. 32). Competences are made of: Values, Attitudes, Skills, Knowledge and Critical Understanding.[1] Foreign language educators might argue that it is complex to include the indicator "Values" in competences; however, it must be considered that students using other languages in an intercultural environment need resources, "values" which can be "activated, organized and applied through behavior in order to respond appropriately and effectively in democratic and intercultural situations" (RFCDC 2018,

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1. Values (Valuing human dignity and human rights; Valuing cultural diversity; Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law), Attitudes (Openness to cultural otherness and other beliefs, world views and practices; Respect; Civic mindness; Responsibility; Self-efficacy; Tolerance of ambiguity), Skills (Autonomous learning skills; Analytical and critical thinking skills; Skills of listening and observing; Empathy; Flexibility and adaptability; Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills; Cooperation skills; Conflict-resolution skills), Knowledge and critical understanding (Knowledge and critical understanding of the self; Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication; Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, laws, human rights, culture, cultures, religion, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability).

Vol. 1, p. 33). Taking into consideration this model of competences in foreign language acquisition we can help students to realize their potential, to reflect on what it is to be human. This process brings the human being to the center of attention.

Values are also at the core of Emiliano Bosio's work on intercultural/global citizenship: he proposes a "values-based" curriculum (2019, 2021):[2]

I propose that higher education should adopt a 'values-based' curriculum. A values-based curriculum engages the learner on multiple levels. Lessons emanating from a values-based curriculum should foster in our learners at least five areas:

1. an understanding and acceptance of their *obligations to all humanity*;
2. a belief in *the possibility of making a difference in the world*;
3. looking inwardly to assert a *compassion* that begins with the local communities they will interact with;
4. *multicultural respect* with a view that students should become socialized into living successfully in a global society;
5. *civic commitment and global consciousness*, including participation in community development and involvement in work that has public meaning and lasting public impact, with students coming to realize that their own choices can make a difference.

Education is not complete, however, until students have not only acquired knowledge but *can act on that knowledge in the world*. Bridging the gap between learning and participation is essential […] (Bosio 2019, 2; my emphasis).

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2. Emiliano Bosio's list of publications can be accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/ Emiliano-Bosio. His interview series on global citizenship education is available at: https://www. youtube.com/channel/UClO23p1xFQDsrlQcAaKNrBQ.

In a recent online conference in 2021[3] Bosio proposed a values-based curriculum which, like the one previously defined, focuses and promotes social justice but also emphasizes the need for an ecological perspective in education. He identified six key elements:

1. decolonialism to fight injustice and inequality: certain preconceptions and ideas are based on prejudice, whereas we need to be inclusive (*multicultural respect*);
2. caring ethics, to care for individuals and human rights (*compassion*);
3. an eco-critical perspective and an eco-ethical consciousness, to create interconnectedness between humans, animals and plants: education for a true ecological justice;
4. global moral consciousness, humanistic consciousness as an awareness of others' perspective, that is, a consciousness to act for the good of the world and of humanity (*civic commitment and global consciousness*);
5. autonomy and carefulness involve educators in cultivating the students' relationships with others, to improve the students'responsibility and human potential (*obligation to all humanity*);
6. empowering humanity to achieve collective emancipation; in other words, humanity empowerment (*the possibility of making a difference in the world*).[4]

Such a values-based curriculum introduces an interpersonal dimension which recognizes human drive as essential: this way students become active citizens taking action in their community. The issues we have

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3. An international conference organized by ATEE (The Association for Teacher Education in Europe) in August 2021, "What's Happening: Assessing the Health and Well-being of Students, Teachers and the Environment".

4. The words in italics refer to the five areas of the 'values-based' curriculum Bosio proposed in 2019.

in our local community are perceived as a global phenomenon.[5] Global citizenship education is presented as an educational imperative to combat growing inequality and foster inclusion. Knowing without acting is insufficient; educators should make it possible for the students to become themselves active agents taking action in their community.

The discussed approaches – integrating foreign language education and intercultural/global citizenship education – bring real cogent contemporary issues into the classroom, promote community engagement, and can introduce dimensions of Education for Sustainable Development; they could work towards reducing inequality on the premise of the 2030 agenda. Behind the 17 goals there are 169 very precise targets. This leads to a curriculum that integrates values among its competences, relying on the connections and the degrees of interdependence between the various goals and using the 2030 agenda in an integrated way.

A reconsideration of foreign language pedagogy through global citizenship-focused Virtual Exchange

A reconsideration of foreign language pedagogy is needed, placing the development of the above mentioned competences at its center. In doing so, I call for a revision of pedagogic priorities, a re-evaluation of the role of the foreign language classroom and an exploration of new means that may complement it. In this context the so-called Virtual Exchange could have a fundamental role in developing self-regulated language learning, creating communities of inquiry, and extending learning beyond the classroom.

Virtual Exchange is an umbrella definition used to refer to the different ways in which groups of learners are engaged in online intercultur-

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5. Bosio's reflections on global citizenship education can be also found in *Conversation on global citizenship* (2021), a volume he edited where a pedagogy of global citizenship is outlined. The volume brings together the narratives of a diverse group of educators who share their unique experiences in global citizenship education. The conversations focus on why and how educators' theoretical and empirical perspectives on global citizenship education are essential to achieve an all-embracing curriculum, which underpins global peace and social justice.

al interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work and under the guidance of educators (O'Dowd, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Over the past two decades different models or applications of Virtual Exchange have emerged in the field of foreign language education. Current debates on the economic and environmental cost of study abroad programs, as well as the challenges to physical mobility posed by global pandemics (White & Lee, 2020) have made Virtual Exchange an attractive option for institutions as they search for sustainable and low-cost models of international learning, which can serve as an alternative or be complementary to physical mobility programs (de Wit, 2016). Virtual Exchange can contribute to overcoming students' stereotypes, gaining confidence as communicators in their foreign language and reconceptualizing English as a tool for communication rather than as an abstract academic activity. The available data[6] demonstrates that Virtual Exchange offers the greatest scope for the qualitative shift that is required for a foreign language pedagogy preparing learners to become global citizens.

Virtual Exchanges aim to foster the development not only of foreign language skills but also of intercultural competence through culture-based activities. Besides promoting language learning, telecollaborative tasks need to foster the intercultural analysis of the practices and values of the cultures of the groups involved. Virtual Exchange design can help "learners in moving between cultures and reflecting on their own cultural positioning and the role of language and culture within it" (Liddicot & Scarino, 2013, p. 112). A challenging objective of Virtual Exchange projects is the development of intercultural/global citizenship, which envisions learners as working actively to deal with world issues (Leask, 2015, p. 17) while tackling them in context specific settings (Porto & Byram, 2015, p.

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6. Data to illustrate these arguments is drawn from the EVALUATE project, an Erasmus-funded European Policy experiment (2019), which was the first attempt to apply a randomized controlled trial method to measure the effectiveness of Virtual Exchange in developing digital literacy, intercultural competence, and foreign language competence in participants. https://sites.google.com/unileon.es/evaluate2019/. See also O' Dowd (2021).

24). "There is a challenge […] about how to make linguistic-competence oriented courses not only intercultural but also citizenship-oriented" (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2017, p. 237). In Porto's words intercultural citizenship "integrates the pillar of intercultural communicative competence from foreign language education with the emphasis on civic action in the community from citizenship education" (2014, p. 5).

The increasingly intercultural citizenship-related dimension of Virtual Exchanges envisions learners as active global agents able to address world challenges (Leask, 2015, p. 17). Here, telecollaborative tasks are expected to foster not only students' foreign language skills and intercultural awareness but also learners' engagements with global problems tailored to local contexts: "intercultural citizenship education […] mean[s] […] that learners would be encouraged to act together with others in the world and that those others would be in other countries and other languages. The purpose would be to address a common problem in the world" (Porto & Byram, 2015, p. 24).

While engaged in intercultural citizenship-focused Virtual Exchange, partner groups analyze together topics related to their own societies within an intercultural framework; as a result of the co-participated analysis, each national group plans and carries out a form of civic action in its own community to foster social changes (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2017, p. 6): "[language] learners […] would decide on a project of significance in their community, share ideas and plans with each other, critically analyze the reasons / assumptions in their plans by comparison with the plans of the other group, carry out and report to each other their projects" (26). This is done by taking students past their comfort zone and engaging them in real-world tasks through a project that has direct relevance to their own communities.

The adoption of an intercultural citizenship pedagogy is thus emerging as a new challenging dimension of telecollaborative instructional design. As such, the objectives of our virtual space are learning beyond the classroom walls through Virtual Exchange, intercultural communicative competence, working in a transnational team, motivation and

engagement (meaningful learning), community engagement, and active citizenship.

O'Dowd used two models of intercultural/global citizenship education to lay the foundations of a transnational model of Virtual Exchange for global citizenship education (O'Dowd 2019: 15), which engages students with different and alternative worldviews within a pedagogical structure of online collaboration, critical reflection, and active contribution to global society (Leask 2015). These two models are the above mentioned *Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (2018) – based on a culture of democracy that refers to values common in Western societies – and Byram's *Framework for Intercultural Citizenship* (Byram 2008, 2011; Wagner & Byram 2017). Byram's intercultural citizenship construct, which is strictly connected to foreign language learning, has evolved (Wagner & Byram 2017, p. 1) since his first articulation; the subsequent evolution is adopted in O'Dowd's transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. Although the idea of "democratic culture" is still central, Byram interprets it as connected with what is inherently human, that is, a "common core of values"; however different in detail, there are "universal values to live a really human life in dignity and respect", valuing human dignity and human rights, cultural diversity, justice and equality, as in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). This "core of values" – he argues – can be taught, not so much to give answers but to ask questions about ethical issues and responsibilities in this world. This leads to a discussion that makes learners reflect on the notion of decentering in order to put themselves in the perspective of the other, to understand other societies' way of thinking, and to find a logic in different perspectives. This encourages learners to go beyond their national perspective, to respect and value diversity, to be aware of our shared humanity and interdependence, and – finally– to engage and take action.

In his new intercultural citizenship construct Byram argues that in the contemporary world language teaching has the responsibility to prepare learners for interaction with people from other cultural back-

grounds, teaching them skills and attitudes as well as knowledge. In this perspective, the word "democracy" is expanded, and related to political engagement and participation. "Democracy" is intended as living together more than as a form of government, a mode of associated living, involving citizens in order to create a better society where everyone participates. As O'Dowd affirms, the model proposed by Byram understands democracy and political education as the development of "transnational communities", which are made of critical thinkers who engage in social and political activity together to improve their own personal lives and the societies they live in (O'Dowd 2019, p. 20).

Intercultural or global citizenship approaches involve learners either instigating change in their own societies based on their collaborations with members of other cultures or actually working with members of other cultures as a transnational group in order to take action about an issue or problem which is common to both societies (O'Dowd 2019, p. 21). The transnational model of Virtual Exchange for global citizenship education proposed by O'Dowd creates opportunities for rich intercultural interaction, which can include but is not limited to bicultural/bilingual comparison.[7] In a recent article O'Dowd engaged in a qualitative content analysis of learning outcomes across multiple exchanges. A theme which was identified in the data is how Virtual Exchange led learners to reconceptualize their foreign language learning experience: "For many students the online interactions and their relationships with their partners moved the foreign language from being an abstract, text-based academic activity to being a communicative and social activity involving people who were genuinely interested in what the students have to say. It also gave many

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7. It establishes partnerships across a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds using a "lingua franca" for communication with these partners; it encourages learners to engage with themes that have social and political relevance in both partners' societies; it enables students to work with their international partners to undertake action and change in their respective local and global communities; it includes ample opportunities for guided reflection on intercultural encounters in the classroom; it is an integrated and recognized part of course work and institutional academic activity; it increases awareness of how intercultural communication is mediated by online technologies and how social media can shape the creation and interpretation of messages (O'Dowd 2019).

students their first experience of using English for an authentic communicative purpose outside of the classroom context. Their perceived success in communicating with international partners gave them confidence and an impetus to continue their study of the foreign language" (O'Dowd 2021, p. 9).

Gender equality focused Virtual Exchange projects: "Gender equality through toponymy. Urban landscape in Charlottesville and Pavia" and "Language & Gender"

Professor Francesca Calamita (Italian Studies, University of Virginia, who coordinates the research group on the "Language Forward Initiative", Institute of World Languages) and I co-designed a foreign language acquisition project focused on cultural learning, based on Virtual Exchange between students studying Italian at the University of Virginia, United States, and students studying English at an Italian upper-secondary school, Liceo Adelaide Cairoli (Pavia, Italy). Centered on the question of gender equality, the project has been realized over four years (Autumn 2018–Spring 2022), and, since 2019, with direct reference to the transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education proposed by Robert O'Dowd (2019). As an integrated part of the language learning curriculum, this project consistently blends face-to-face foreign language lessons with Skype-mediated digital learning. We have created a virtual space which parallels the space-time of traditional class tuition, which students can inhabit with a significant degree of autonomy. Through these projects students could develop global citizenship through real-world tasks. The structure and scope of the course aimed to foster the development of both foreign language skills on the one hand and intercultural competence and global citizenship on the other.

In the project's second academic year (Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020) a challenging objective was the development of Virtual Exchange focused on intercultural citizenship. To this purpose, both groups of students in Charlottesville and Pavia were required to plan and carry out some form of "civic action" in their local communities; more precisely,

they were encouraged to become global citizens ready to interact effectively in multilingual and international contexts through active citizenship (Wagner & Byram, 2017, p. 3).

I will specifically refer to the project's second academic year, a Virtual Exchange focused on intercultural citizenship. The project was developed in twelve weeks from October 2019 to February 2020; each semester included six Skype meetings. The project's main objective was to plan a civic action to foster gender equality in the students' respective communities. This form of civic engagement in the community involved research, reflection, and co-creating a formal proposal. We chose to address the question of gender equality; so, the title of the project was "Gender equality through toponymy. Urban landscape in Charlottesville and Pavia". The goals were: learning beyond the classroom walls through both Virtual Exchange and contact with local organizations concerned with equality and gender-based violence; community engagement and active citizenship; intercultural communicative competence, including linguistic gender equality; working in a transnational team; motivation and engagement (meaningful learning).

Thirty North American students were partnered with twenty Italian upper-secondary school students to discuss (in dyads or triads) via desktop videoconferencing the theme of gender equality. Using Skype as a synchronous video communication tool, students met weekly to speak for 20/30 minutes in Italian and 20/30 minutes in English. The students did the Skype component privately (tandem learning set up) using both languages, and chose their favorite day/time within the week.

First off, even before introducing themselves to their partners, students engaged in pre-virtual exchange activities, which guided them in the discussions that could then start. For example, to activate students' prior knowledge of the theme, "ice-breakers" and brainstorming activities centered on gender equality took place in face-to-face lessons and on the university/school platforms. They were targeted to introduce key vocabulary items and/or concepts necessary for students to discuss the theme in Skype meetings, which were introduced by means of matching

activities implemented through digital noticeboards (Padlet). Students were required to match vocabulary with definitions and images presented in sticky notes on a wall-like space. Secondly, articles and short authentic videos between five and ten minutes long on the question of gender equality were made available on the university and school platforms (for instance articles about the imbalance in main European cities between numbers of streets named after men and those named after women).

In their first Skype meeting students introduced themselves and their school/university to their international partners in North America or Italy in the target language. As Carloni and Zuccala point out "task-based learning seems especially suitable to online intercultural exchanges. […]. In screen-based learning environments, tasks (such as problem solving, decision making, opinion-exchange, and jigsaws) can thus promote dialogical interaction focusing on real-world issues effectively" (2018, pp. 419-420). Consequently, three main types of tasks were used in this kind of Virtual Exchange: "information exchange, which 'involves learners providing their telecollaborative partners with information about their personal biographies, local schools or towns or aspects of their home cultures' (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009, p. 175); comparison and analysis, which 'requires learners not only to exchange information, but also to go a step further and carry out comparisons or critical analyses of cultural products from both cultures (e.g. books, surveys, films, newspaper articles)' (p. 175); and collaboration and product creation, which 'require […] learners not only to exchange and compare information but also to work together to produce a joint product or conclusion (178)'" (Carloni & Zuccala, 2018, p. 424). The objectives were to promote the analysis of the chosen issue, i.e., gender equality; to enhance dialogical interaction in the target language; to foster intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship.

In their second online meeting students discussed articles and videos uploaded to the University/school platforms. The task was to read and watch the materials individually before discussing them within the class face-to-face and with the students' respective international partners on line. In the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth Skype meeting with their in-

ternational partners, students reflected on the creation of a transnational group, whose aim was to consider the issue of gender equality and plan civic action. To begin this phase of the project, the student dyads/ triads planned to seek information about a woman who – although not well known – happened to be relevant to the history/life of their town and its community. Each dyad/triad chose a woman in Pavia and one in Charlottesville. The students then planned to organize a written proposal to name after these women new or unnamed streets/places in their respective towns. The last phase of the project consisted of writing down proposals in English and Italian (in dyads/triads) to be presented to the mayors of Pavia and Charlottesville.

The final discussion of this civic action and its contents was organized in the form of a group-to-group video conferencing session, in which both groups of students (in Italy and in the USA) were involved. Through this group-to-group discussion the Italian and North American students narrowed the final selection to six women (three for Charlottesville and three for Pavia and Milan) and to a final version of the written proposal (both in English and Italian) to be presented to the respective city mayor. We decided to include the city of Milan since one of the most interesting names of women selected by the Italian students was that of Bianca Ceva (intellectual, teacher, and translator who fought as a Partisan in the Resistance groups that were active throughout northern Italy in the war against Italian Fascism). Born in Pavia, Ceva worked extensively in Milan, the capital of Lombardy, the region where the Italian high school involved in this project is located.

The development of intercultural citizenship-focused exchange in the final phase of the project took students out of their comfort zone and engaged them in real-world tasks. Seeking others' perspectives and advice, the students proposed change, and finally acted together to instigate change in their local communities (Byram 2008; O'Dowd 2019). We assisted students during in-class face-to-face activities in considering the value systems underlying the Italian and North American cultural practices in relation to gender equality. In the classroom, the students'

learning was continuously supported by guided reflections concerning the intercultural encounters and questions made possible by the virtual exchange: "Video conferencing [was] seen as developing students' abilities to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and also elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their partners' behavior and their opinions" (O'Dowd, 2018, p. 11). The Skype meetings and other means of exchange and collaboration increased the students' exposure to spoken Italian/English. Also, they fostered the development of the students' speaking/interactional skills (especially in the target language), allowed them to experience authentic language use (thus enabling access to meaningful interactions), and increased their motivation, sense of agency, and autonomy. Finally, those same Skype meetings allowed students to cultivate active citizenship.

As regards the part of the project developed in Italy, the mayors of Milan and Pavia immediately answered the students' requests in Spring 2020, expressing great appreciation for the project. Eventually, they showed sincere willingness in considering the candidates after whom the students proposed that new streets be named. Due to the Covid-19 emergency the procedures and celebrations to name new streets were drastically slowed down; in fact, they came to a complete halt. Yet, the city council representatives in Milan reassured students that their proposal would be considered, and that Bianca Ceva was on the list of names to be examined for new streets. On 3 and 4 October 2021 municipal elections took place in Milan, to elect the mayor and the 48 members of the city council. Mayor Giuseppe Sala was reconfirmed, and soon after the election the students wrote to the new city councilor for cultural affairs (Tommaso Sacchi) and his colleague in charge of international relationships (Antonella Amodio), who had kindly followed the students' request through the whole process since its initial stages. On 13 December 2021 the students and I received a message from her, on behalf of councilor Sacchi, saying that a new street in the Milanese urban area of Bisceglie would be named after Bianca Ceva sometime in 2022. It took time and patience, but in the

end the students got the result they had aimed for: one of the names they chose (Bianca Ceva) was to be given to a new street in Milan, thus finally commemorating her brave and significant life. It is also very important to note that during the three years in which the Virtual Exchange was being developed, the students presented their project to younger schoolmates. By doing so, they raised awareness about such crucial issues as gender equality and women's invisibility/visibility in toponymy (and, consequently, within Italian society as a whole). They also wrote articles on the project, which appeared in local newspapers.

In Spring 2022 the North American and Italian classes involved in the most recent phase of the Virtual Exchange project dealt with the issue of Language and Gender. Their transnational project focused on gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in both the Italian and the English language. Its complete title was "A Gendered Wor(l)d: Grammar, Sexism and Cultural Changes in Italian and English Language and their Society".[8] The students met online to talk 20/30 minutes in Italian and 20/30 minutes in English for 6 times over the semester/term. As in the other projects of this kind, students could choose their favorite day/time; the topics assigned to work on had to be discussed within the assigned week. The aim of this course component was to assess the connections between gender equality on the one hand and the Italian/English language on the other, so as to foster reflections on gender-inclusive language. The latter is a language that avoids using certain expressions or words that might be considered to exclude particular groups of people, especially gender specific words (e.g., mankind and masculine pronouns whose use might be considered to exclude women). Using gender-inclusive language means speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate or perpetuate stereotypes against any given sex, social gender or gender identity. Given the key role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes, using

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8. I wish to express my most sincere gratitude to Prof. Francesca Calamita for allowing me to use the topics and the materials of her most valuable course on Language and Power ("A Gendered Wor(l)d: Grammar, Sexism and Cultural Changes in Italian Language and its Society", which she taught at the University of Virginia) for our Virtual Exchange project.

gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender bias.[9]

Students were required to close-read and analyze a number of newspaper headlines (previously uploaded on the school and university websites by the educators) and rewrite them in such a way that their language would not reflect any gender stereotypes. Students also read articles on gender equality before discussing and analyzing them with their respective international partners. Foreign language acquisition was carried out through discussion on gender equality, inclusion and diversity. The students posted their entries on the meeting (school/university platforms) after consulting with their international partners. This task enabled our students to strengthen and advance their proficiency in Italian and English, while thinking critically about a socio-cultural issue animating current debates in Italy, in North America, and – more broadly – around the world.

The best way for me to describe the project in a nutshell is to quote what two students of mine (Sam Pavia and Huijie Zhu) wrote about it. Sam's virtual exchange partner was Katherine Shelton, from the University of Virginia. Going over the project, this is what Sam wrote:

> During our first calls we discussed […] articles that underline the importance of research into the way a language evolves when wanting to master a foreign language. They also state that inclusive linguistic variations are needed when trying to transmit to students messages of gender equality and social justice, with the aim of discussing modern day issues. […] We also discussed the issue of pronouns for the LGBTQ+ community in romance languages, such as Italian: Katie said that in North America they use the third person plural in school emails, which is pretty inclusive. In my opinion, Italian would also need a genderless pronoun for this aim and also for some transgender people to use. […].

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9. See the "Gender-inclusive language" section (in particular the chapter titled "Background and purpose") on the United Nations website at www.un.org.

In the following call we conversed about how women were treated during the pandemic, and Katie noted that in the US women quit their job to homeschool their children instead of making them do online school. This is very similar to the article we read about how -- when deciding who had to go back to work -- men decided to do so and women stayed home instead.

Another topic in our calls was the invisibility of women during the pandemic in Italy: women scientists were treated as though they knew less than men in the same field, and were excluded when making decisions about the pandemic. They were absent from the task force set up to deal with the emergency.

In the fourth call we made, we changed the title of the articles uploaded to our platform objectifying women in politics and science. [10]

In my personal opinion gender equality is still a current problem in our society, as some of us face inequality in our day-to-day life. Also, in advertisements women only appear to be sexualized, whereas

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10. Sam Pavia wrote: "We changed the title of the first article "Hanno riesumato Nilde Iotti" to "L'onorevole eredità di Nilde Iotti: una figura di grande importanza nella politica italiana" ["They exhumed Nilde Iotti" to "The honorable legacy of Nilde Iotti: a figure of great importance in Italian politics"]. The article continues saying: "Era facile amarla perché era una bella emiliana simpatica e prosperosa come solo sanno esserlo le donne italiane. Grande in cucina e grande a letto. Il massimo che in Emilia si chiede a una donna" ["It was easy to love her because she was a beautiful emiliana (a woman from Emilia Romagna, an Italian region), lovely and voluptuous as only Italian women can be. Great in the kitchen and in bed. One could not hope for more from an Emilian woman."]. We commented that the original title and this part of the article were problematic because the journalist objectified Nilde Iotti and based her whole identity around her cooking and sexuality, which is horrible. In the fifth call we changed the second article's title "Gli angeli della ricerca, le due scienziate che hanno isolato per prime il coronavirus" to "Le due scienziate italiane il cui lavoro è stato fondamentale nella ricerca sul coronavirus" ["The angels of research: the two women scientists who were the first to isolate the coronavirus" to "The two Italian scientists whose work was fundamental in the research on coronavirus"]. We said that the original title was problematic because it emphasized as extraordinary for women to achieve this sort of accomplishments, especially if they come from Southern Italy. We thus found that title to be wrong. Likewise, we eventually changed the title of the third article from "E per gradire nella capitale arrostiscono una ragazza di 22 anni" to "Ennesimo femminicidio: ragazza di 22 anni trovata morta a Roma per mano del suo fidanzato" [from "And for good measure a 22-year-old girl has been roasted in the capital" to "The latest feminicide: a 22-year-old girl found dead in Rome killed by her boyfriend"]. What we found problematic in the original title was, first of all, the inappropriate attempt to be humorous when talking about a tragedy and the act of objectifying the deceased woman as though she were some kind of food".

male figures are used to gain the customers' trust. We see the same dynamic in the lack of female representation in history, science, arts and literature in school programs. […] In conclusion, from this experience I gained not only a friend with whom I can talk about women's daily struggles without being wrongly contradicted, but also greater awareness about gender based discrimination.

I will conclude this section on the 2022 Virtual Exchange with another student's perspective, that of Huijie Zhu. Huijie did her calls together with Antea Galli, and their international partner was Isabella Lagazzi Rogazy.[11] I believe student remarks like these best serve to prove how the project worked:

> […] I found the discussions, sparked by the articles we had to read, very interesting, because even though the places we come from are quite different, and many of our habits are very different, some experiences are universal. For example, the objectification of women which we encountered while reading the articles; in the articles in Italian we saw women as important as Nilde Iotti being considered just for their bodies and their cooking, as objects. This, however, doesn't only apply to high profile figures; it's a widespread view of women, a view that is engrained in our patriarchal society, and which lives on through an outdated education.
> We often don't realize how much our education and our culture influence the way we think and what values we have acquired through our entire lives. A lot of sexism and misogyny can be detected in our language, even in the arts. While reading the articles and talking to our partner, I realized that in certain subjects (such as Art History, Italian and Spanish Literature) we study countless male artists and writers, but no female counterparts, even though there have been

many of them throughout the centuries. Moreover, we do study the idea of 'woman', but always from a man's point of view. This can sometimes be a positive or empathetic representation, but it is still filtered. Just recently, for instance, we have studied Gustav Klimt's paintings of *femme fatales* and read descriptions of lovers or wives, but we never hear from them; they are objects with the only purpose of being observed, represented, and judged.

Not only in our culture, but in our language as well, as we reflected with Isabella on the Italian and Spanish languages in particular, our thinking is influenced in a very subtle way; in both these languages the masculine dominates over the feminine, both in grammar and lexicon. Also, there are many words that exist exclusively in one gender or the other (e.g., 'casalinga' in Italian or 'nanny' in English are only in the feminine form). This enforces how we perceive these roles, as roles bound to women and inappropriate for men. As the French philosopher Michele Foucault once said, as our culture influences our language, the opposite is true, our language influences our culture, since it shapes the way we think, giving us prejudices and restricting our view. What we can do, is to address this issue (the flaws of our modern day society, the roots of ideas which lead to discrimination and injustice) through education.

When we learn a language or when we come in contact with different cultures, we realize how absurd some traits are. I noticed this, for instance, while trying to explain to our partner some of the expressions used in those articles. This is one of the reasons why it is so important not only that we study other languages and cultures different from our own, but that we do so in a certain way. When we pick up a language or we start studying any given subject we should always have a critical approach, instead of passively assimilating the information we are given.

I think projects like the Virtual Exchange are opportunities to do this, as we have the freedom to talk about these topics without the limitations we usually encounter in school, where – in most cas-

es – we don't feel free to contradict speakers or to start a debate. Also, this project (where we get to talk to students our age, without any adults passing judgment on us) gave us the chance to exchange ideas and express our thoughts honestly and freely.

For educators like us, who designed this project, our students' words are the best evidence that initiatives of this kind are urgently needed. Students' voices, experiences, and background knowledge have been central to discussing gender equality within an intercultural framework; students have been encouraged to examine phenomena and experience their own cultural reality while seeking to enter a different culture. It has required an act of engagement in which learners have compared their own cultural assumptions, expectations, practices, and meanings with those of others, and have reflected on the many ways in which women are made invisible in both societies. We thus put emphasis on the importance of using an inclusive language in Italian and English (avoiding the generic masculine) to address issues of identity, inclusion, gender equality, and diversity in order to make women more visible and better represented.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the urgency of discussions and actions in Italy, North America, and – more broadly – in the whole world both to foster gender equality and inclusion on the one hand and to increase women's visibility and representation on the other, projects like the one I have just described could be among the tools to make students aware and active on this issue. Our projects aim to create a virtual space where students' global social participation and engagement is stimulated, facilitated, and formally valued. Regular virtual exchange between transnational teams allows the students to address an urgent socio-political issue, which should be brought to the fore in foreign language learning. It is important that while studying languages young people be empowered to actively reflect on their role in a democratic society and how to become active contributors (in other words, intercultural and global citizens).

Higher education institutions and schools should promote spaces where the students' social participation and engagement are both stimulated and officially evaluated, and where links with the community are created. The above mentioned Evaluate Findings seem to justify a more sustained and systematic work in a 'third space' situated between the university, the school, and the community. This might help educators to build up their confidence and integrate global citizenship into their knowledge and teaching practice.

A critical and social perspective in the design of Virtual Exchange projects within a global citizenship approach will result in the enhancement of intercultural competence through community engagement. From the students' comments we realized that the project increased their desire to learn foreign languages: learning beyond the classroom's walls and connecting universities and schools to society through citizenship initiatives promotes an authentic use of language and meaningful learning. This effective collaboration of global teams – in an effort to address real current social problems in innovative ways – could restore confidence in young people who believe that only inclusion, gender equality, and the richness of diversity can make the world a better place.

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