



Students' English Language Development through the International VCL Module of the ValeuX project

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Purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate the development of students' English language in terms of speaking, pronunciation and vocabulary while their participation in the "International Virtual Collaborative Learning" (IVCL) Module under the framework of the Erasmus+ programme European Union funded Project: *ValeuX: Virtual Albanian European Universities Exchange*. Students from 8 Albanian and European universities participated in the *ValeuX* incubator for 6 weeks. They had to work on a business start-up concerning eco-tourism in Albania. During these weeks, students had to talk in English and schedule meetings to discuss the tasks they had to prepare. During this experience, they developed their English language skills.

Study design/methodology/approach: The methodology of this paper is focused on a questionnaire distributed to 43 students via Google Forms to gather the data concerning the impact that students had after joining the "International VCL" Module and their development of different aspects of the English Language.

Findings: The findings showed that the student's English language development was noticeable. They perceived natural communication in English and expanded their vocabulary as well.

Originality/value: This study is important because it brings into light an aspect of taking part in International Virtual Learning, which is the development of English Language skills. It was a Foreign Language for all the students, and they worked on designing a start-up business idea about eco-tourism in Albania.

Introduction

ValeuX (Virtual Albanian European Universities Exchange) is an Erasmus+ program funded by the European Union. It focuses on empowering Albanian academic staff and students with contemporary digital competencies. As a result, Albanian HEIs can explore, implement, and disseminate internationalization practices at home to increase their students' and staff's exposure to a European and international academic, economic, and societal context.

The VALEU-X project expands the limited exposure of Albanian university students and academics to international experience in virtual collaborative learning. To this end, it *proposes international virtual collaborative learning* based on technology-supported blended collaborative learning activities as a flexible and effective element for implementing these practices. <https://valeu-x.eu/>

This project aims to qualify the academic staff at Albanian HEIs for innovative virtual teaching and learning settings, support Albanian HEIs in adopting and implementing effective ICT-based internationalization at-home activities, and integrate Albanian HEIs in a global network for "virtual mobility." Another objective is to qualify the administrative staff at Albanian HEIs on adopting and recognizing virtual and blended mobility as part of their institutional internationalization strategy. <https://valeu-x.eu/>

The partners of this project are 8 Albanian and European universities: the Epoka University of Tirana, "Fan S. Noli" University of Korca, "Aleksander Moisiu" the University of Durrës "Luigj Gurakuqi" the University of Shkodra, the University of Elbasan "Aleksander Xhuvani", TU Dresden, Germany, and International School for Social and Business Studies of Slovenia (ISSBS).

Regarding the International Virtual Collaborative Learning Module (IVCL), 43 students participated in the ValeuX incubator for 6 weeks. They were organized into seven groups. In each of them, there were students from eight project partners. The incubator aimed for students to develop a business idea into a successful start-up. Their ideas would be presented in a contest to win "funds" for Albania's next unicorn. Eight experts from universities located in Albania, Slovenia, and Germany were leading the ValueX incubator. They provided students with a wide range of methods for organizing and thinking about their business ideas. Every team was assigned an e-tutor. They all worked via Microsoft Teams. The e-tutors were trained to support the groups if they had any technical problems with the connections. However, at the same time, they encouraged them to participate in the lessons and facilitated their job by providing the necessary help.

English Language Development through the International Projects

Developing English language skills through international projects differs from traditional instruction because it emphasizes learning through student-centred, interdisciplinary, and integrated activities in real-world situations (Solomon, 2003; Willie, 2001).

In particular, international collaborative learning can be characterized as follows (Fried-Booth, 1997; Simpson, 2011; Srikrai, 2008; Stoller, 1997):

- First, the focus is more on content learning than specific language patterns.
- It is student-centred, so the teacher becomes a facilitator or coach.
- It encourages collaboration among students.
- It leads to the authentic integration of language skills and information processing from multiple sources.
- It allows learners to demonstrate their understanding of content knowledge through an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, or a stage performance).
- It bridges the gap between using English in class and real-life contexts.

Learning becomes fruitful for learners because they exhibit their abilities to plan, manage, and accomplish projects through their content knowledge and language skills (Simpson, 2011).

In real-life contexts, it rarely happens to communicate with only one language skill. Instead, the person uses two or more language skills to interact with others. It also happens in learning English using project-based learning. According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), project-based activities emphasize interactive language use of various language skills and components". Imtiaz and Asif (2012) proved that projects played an essential role in improving students' language skills. Stoller (2006) stated that projects provide opportunities for the natural integration of all four skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

Method

Participants of the study

The participants of the study who took part were 43 students from 8 Albanian and European universities: the Epoka University of Tirana, "Fan S. Noli" University of Korca, "Aleksander Moisiu" University of Durres "Luigj Gurakuqi" the University of Shkodra, University of Elbasan "Aleksander Xhuvani", TU Dresden, Germany, and the International School for Social and Business Studies of Slovenia (ISSBS). They were asked about students' impact after joining the "International VCL" module and their English language development from this module.

Instrument of the study

The instrument of this study is a questionnaire composed of 16 questions. They were based on the students' experience in the IVCL and their English language development in these main fields: speaking, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

The findings of the study

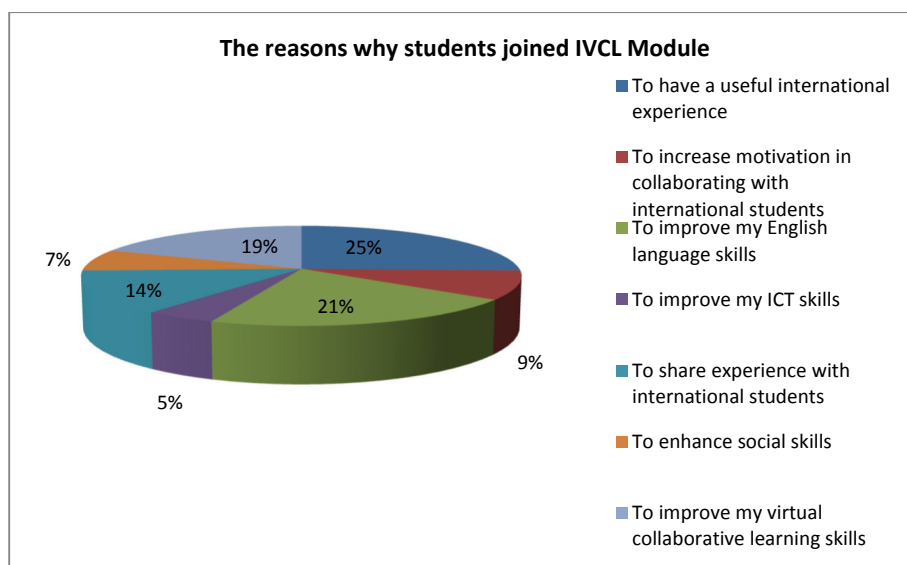
First, students were asked which institutions they were from. Their answers showed that 6 students were from the European University of Tirana, 6 students were from the Epoka University of Tirana, 7 students were from the "Fan S. Noli" University of Korca, 6 students were from "Aleksander Moisiu" from the University of Durres, 5 students were from "Luigj Gurakuqi" the University of Shkodra, 5 students were from the University of Elbasan "Aleksander Xhuvani", 6 students were from TU Dresden, Germany, and 2 students were from the International School for Social and Business Studies of Slovenia (ISSBS).

Then students were asked if participating in an international project was an excellent opportunity to develop their English language skills. Again, 98% of the students answered yes, and only 2% answered no.

They were asked to justify their answers when they chose "yes". The responses are listed below:

- *It enhances language knowledge through expanding vocabulary, using patterns in terms of linguistic item use, and learning and using new terminology.*
- *I had to communicate with international students and work in groups for a successful project.*
- *International collaboration is an excellent opportunity to develop English language skills because the learning environment is different. So, we show more interest than before.*
- *I had the opportunity to practice English by communicating with international students and formulating a well-structured project.*
- *We also got the opportunity to communicate in English with our team members and professors.*
- *We developed our English language skills as we spoke with international students.*

Later, students were asked to choose three reasons for joining the IVCL module. The answers are shown in the chart below:

Chart 1. The reasons why students joined IVCL Module

The most chosen reasons by students were to have a beneficial international experience (25%), to improve their English language skills (21%), and to improve their virtual collaborative learning skills.

Students were asked about their thoughts concerning their English-speaking skills before joining IVCL in the ValeuX project. 49% of the students were fluent in speaking English, 37% were good enough, 9% were not confident enough to speak English, and 5% had a limited vocabulary.

The other question was connected with their attitude towards learning English before joining the IVCL module. Sixteen students answered that they were satisfied with their achievement; 15 were serious learners; 11 felt they were good students; and only 1 answered that he or she was a lazy learner.

Students were asked if they had improved their English-speaking skills after the end of the IVCL Module. 93% of them answered yes, and only 7% of them answered no.

The reasons why they thought that they had improved their English-speaking skills are listed below:

- *I have used many new linguistic items and expressions. I have had a chance to argue and analyze the acquired terminology.*
- *Because I got to speak and interact with others in English.*
- *We improved our speaking skills.*
- *I learned new things, and my confidence in speaking improved.*
- *I have learned interesting things.*
- *I had the chance to practice it more on a daily basis.*
- *Yes, because we had different tasks that required different meetings in which we discussed them.*
- *We only had to use English in order to communicate with one another and be clear about our ideas.*

Students who answered no mentioned the ideas below:

- I have been studying every subject in English for 7 years, so I do not think that Valeu-X enhanced my English vocabulary. I did more practice than usual, improving my oral proficiency.
- It was a good practice, but the project itself did not last long enough.

Later, students were asked if joining the IVCL module affected their pronunciation.

95% of the students answered yes, and 5% answered no.

Students who answered yes gave the following reasons:

- *The time spent in meetings with team members and project members made me feel confident while speaking, analyzing, and discussing with others. I feel I can speak more fluently and with a much larger lexicon than before.*
- *Interactions with international students.*
- *We had the chance to communicate in English.*
- *We share our ideas with international students in English.*
- *We had to share ideas, communicate, and present what we had done, so our pronunciation improved.*
- *We had to give presentations, and this improved my pronunciation.*
- *I was in contact with students who sounded like native English speakers, which made me try to improve my pronunciation. I learned to pronounce some linguistic items I had pronounced differently as well.*
- *Listening to others' pronunciations made me improve mine.*

The student who gave a negative answer mentioned that the module did not last long and that he or she wanted more practice in communication with international students, especially.

Later, students were asked if joining the IVCL module affected their vocabulary. 93% of the students answered yes, and only 7% answered no.

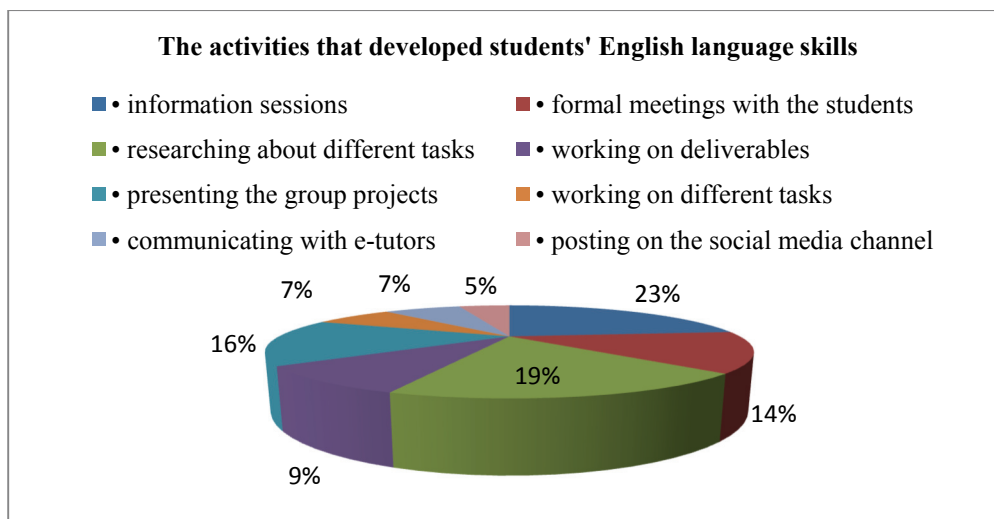
The majority of students gave the following reasons why the IVCL affected their vocabulary:

- *To a great extent, working on different tasks directly related to the business domain and economic field enabled me to expand my vocabulary by adding new terms.*
- *I learned new words from different cultures and language fields.*
- *I learned words concerning the virtual and economic vocabulary.*
- *I think it affected my vocabulary because I learned some new terms.*

Students were asked to write what new vocabulary they learned during their international collaboration: competitive strategy, dissemination plan, raw profit, testimonials, mockup, booking fee, gamification system, facilitator, start-up, protocol template, incubator, unicorn, cash flow, stakeholder.

Then students had to choose three activities that developed their English language skills.

The answers are shown in the following pie chart:

Chart 2. The activities that developed students' English language skills

As the chart shows, the three activities that students most choose are information sessions (23%), researching the different tasks (19%), and presenting the group projects.

At the end of the questionnaire, students are asked if they want to participate again in a virtual collaborative learning module. Most answered yes (91%), and only 9% answered maybe.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of the study show two significant educational implications. First, including such a disciplinary-based project in an English module makes sense, especially in an online international EFL environment where opportunities to utilize English are restricted. Second, because international projects can motivate learners to employ language skills taught in English classes and boost learners' confidence in using English, they can incorporate the vocabulary for their future needs. On the other hand, this study is an exploratory investigation of strengthening learners' language skills through international projects.

The findings indicate that most students feel their oral proficiency, vocabulary, and pronunciation improved after joining the "International VCL" module. They improved their speaking skills mostly in three activities: information sessions, researching different tasks, and presenting the group projects. Following the improvement of their speaking, their vocabulary and pronunciation also improved because they were urged to use English during meetings and their work with international students. The many benefit the students gained imply the urgency of involving students in joining such an international module since it will support their soft skills, especially their English-speaking proficiency, which is needed in the future.

More support from universities is needed to include more students eager to participate in such international modules. It is recommended that these modules last more than six weeks. In this way, students will have more extended periods to communicate in English with international students online. In addition, they will develop their language skills in vocabulary, pronunciation, and oral proficiency.

Future research may concentrate on employing a range of online-based classroom activities and other measurements to analyze how learners' language abilities improve.

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