Virtual Exchange for English Language Teaching (VEELT): Engagement and Inclusion Challenges

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study exploring students' engagement with the project Virtual Exchange for English Language Teaching (VEELT). With the aim to provide insights into how we can better engage students, ensuring that future virtual exchanges are more inclusive, this paper focuses on the behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement dimensions in an exchange utilising English as an International Language (EIL). VEELT involved 53 undergraduate and postgraduate students on English education courses in the UK, Mexico and Spain whose mother tongue was not English and who interacted both synchronously and asynchronously on topics relating to their ELT syllabus in their respective higher education (HE) institutions. The three distinctive features of this paper are: its focus on the three above mentioned engagement dimensions; the discussion relating to English as an International Language (EIL) in VEs and the involvement of students who were trained as e-mediators in Zoom breakout rooms in facilitating the VE task completion. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to analyse the impact of the VE on the students' ELT learning journey and their levels of engagement with the VE. While the students' evaluation of their VEELT experience was positive on the whole, a number of engagement and inclusion challenges were identified. For example, affective engagement was found to be fundamental to the success of VE. Anxiety about English emerged as a concern for the students whose mother tongue was not English. These challenges will be discussed as well as solutions based on the lessons learnt proposed to support the delivery of the next VEELT project to make it more engaging and inclusive.

Keywords: English as an International Language; collaborative online international learning (COIL); Inclusion; English language education; Telecollaboration

1. Introduction

There are numerous studies exploring key notions related to virtual exchange (VE), such as internationalisation at home (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Satar, 2021), intercultural communicative competence (Clouet, 2023; Di Sarno-García, 2021, 2023; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018), or barriers and challenges that can be encountered in VE (Gimeno, 2018; Nishio & Nakatsugawa, 2020). However, there has been limited exploration of participants' engagement

in a primarily synchronous VE setting within English Language Teacher (ELT) education at university level (Satar & Akcan, 2018). The challenges faced by VE practitioners have been exacerbated by the broader post-COVID 19 context, where many students have shown signs of fatigue from online learning (Griggio & Pittarello, 2020; Weaver et al., 2024). This paper aims to examine whether and how a lack of engagement is connected to issues of inclusion and exclusion in VE and explores the factors that may influence this.

In educational settings, the construct of engagement is often defined as learners' behavioural, cognitive, and affective involvement to accomplish a task (Fredricks et al. 2004; Halverson & Graham, 2019). Behavioural engagement refers to learners' actions that can be observed such as attendance and adherence to the requirements. Cognitive engagement involves learners' intellectual work such as learning strategies while affective engagement refers to learners' emotions or feelings.

The VEELT project discussed here was designed to facilitate knowledge-sharing on ELT and global citizenship competence development (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018) for students enrolled in ELT courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The UNESCO (2024) states that global citizenship is based on the idea we are connected not just with one country but with a broader global community. Orsini-Jones et al. (2025) discuss how VE can develop citizenship values, such as mutuality, inclusivity, respect for diversity, as well as capitals, such as cultural, social, digital, psychological and linguistic, and how such values and capitals can be amplified through the global dialogue facilitated by VE. VEELT aimed at promoting such dialogue and was built on the experience of integrating VE in ELT with prior cohorts of students in UK higher education institutions (e.g., Hildeblando Júnior, 2023; Orsini-Jones, 2023; Orsini-Jones & Finardi, 2024). VEELT consisted of both synchronous sessions and asynchronous preparatory activities. During the six synchronous sessions (using the Zoom platform), students engaged with a given task on a subject related to their ELT curriculum (for example Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching) in small groups in breakout rooms (BoRs), following a brief plenary introduction for each session provided by the tutors.

The synchronous sessions were preceded by asynchronous email correspondence utilised to distribute preparatory materials to discuss during the live sessions and ice-breaking activities (e.g., a Padlet wall was used so that participants could introduce themselves before the start of the synchronous VE sessions). The VE aimed to foster reflections on language learning and teaching with a particular reference to a selection of key topics in ELT, including English as an International Language (EIL) (see Xu, 2018 or Selvi et al., 2023), with a focus on decolonising ELT and challenging the myth of the "native speaker" (Holliday, 2006) as the ideal English language teacher. This theme was chosen due to the reflections of our project team. Based on our extensive experience in teaching ELT and English courses as tutors whose mother tongue is not English, as well as our involvement in previous VE/COIL projects where the power of English appeared to be intimidating for many participants. We aimed at lowering the anxiety towards English observed amongst our students, who are in the majority either not L1 English speakers (e.g., Chinese nationals) or speakers of what they perceive to be less prestigious varieties of English (e.g., Indian nationals) studying in the UK. They are often concerned about making errors, and/or about their accent and/or about the variety of English they speak. Therefore, we argue that it is imperative to raise our students' awareness about EIL, make them feel at ease about the English they speak and demystify the native-speaker myth (Hildeblando Júnior, 2023).

Also based on the lessons learned in previous VEs carried out by some members of the project team (e.g., the ViVEXELT project) (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022), we agreed that it was of fundamental importance to have trained mediators to facilitate the activities in the BoRs (Wells et al., 2021) to encourage engagement and inclusion. Due to the number of participants from

the three institutions (n=53) and the challenges of recruiting a sufficient number of tutors to facilitate as e-mediators in the BoRs, it was decided to select and train students as e-mediators, implementing a practice utilised in previous VEs organised by the tutors involved in VEELT. The decision was in fact also driven by the positive experience of training students as e-mediators in previous VEs, where the majority of the students involved in BoR tasks fed back that they had felt more at ease with carrying out a task with the facilitation of an expert peer than that of a tutor (Hildeblando Júnior, 2023). This is another distinctive feature of this VEELT project.

Understanding how students engage with learning on a VE can shed light on how to provide a more inclusive experience for students from diverse backgrounds and different parts of the world, with varying levels of infrastructure, digital literacy and access. This paper, therefore, aims to investigate students' engagement with VEELT, addressing the following research questions:

1. How do students engage with the VEELT in terms of their behavioural, cognitive, and affective involvement?
2. What were the issues and challenges encountered in students' engagement with VEELT?

3. How can the next VEELT iteration build on the lessons learnt to provide a more inclusive VE learning experience?

2. Literature review

2.1 Virtual exchange

VE is a relatively new definition (O'Dowd, 2023; also refer to Hauck et al. in this special issue on this topic). In the field of language learning and teaching, "telecollaboration" (Belz, 2003) is also used and defended against the use of VE by Colpaert (2020). "Collaborative Online International Learning" (COIL) has become widely used too (Rubin, 2022). These terms are not fully equivalent, but they will be considered as such in this study.

While the benefits of VE for the purpose of language teacher education have been illustrated in the above-mentioned relevant literature, VE can also present challenges for both students and teachers. Ware (2005) was one of the first to identify the difficulties that learners may face when participating in VE projects. In particular, she identified three main issues, namely, participants' different expectations, social and institutional matters, and different degrees of motivation and time management (Ware, 2005). Other studies (e.g., Di Sarno-García, 2024; Sevilla-Pavón, 2016) also identify "insufficient guidance and help concerning the use of the online tools, as well as the disparity in the levels of commitment of the participants" (Sevilla-Pavón, 2016, p. 222) as the main challenges encountered by learners in online exchanges. This is further corroborated by Gimeno (2018) and Di Sarno-García (forthcoming), who point out time differences and different levels of engagement as one of the main challenges when collaborating with distant partners. Oskoz et al. (2018) suggest providing students with additional guidelines regarding the type of interaction they are expected to participate in with their international partners. Despite overall positive results, Desoutter and Martin (2018) found that different groups of learners presented diverse levels of engagement, negatively affecting those students who felt that they were working harder than

others. As suggested by Nishio and Nakattsugawa (2020), "the concept of successful participation is context-dependent. Learners have different definitions, which are subject to potential tension in the manner of participation that affects other aspects of the interaction" (p. 154).

Engagement can also be affected by other factors. As suggested by Helm (2020), "virtual exchanges are not exempt from the creation of unequal power dynamics and relations of coloniality by virtue of being bottom-up, bi- or multi-lateral, class to class projects" (p. 321). VEELT presented an unusual asymmetry, as it included students from the Global South (e.g., China) studying in an institution in the Global North (UK). Their tacit (cultural) knowledge of what a higher education experience should be like appeared to affect their engagement with the VE, as discussed later in this paper. VE can be challenging, as it takes students "out of their comfort zone" (Orsini-Jones & Finardi, 2024), particularly if they are used to face-to-face and tutor-centred teaching and learning contexts. Having said that, VE designers need to be sensitive to this type of prior learning experience and design tasks that can include all students and/or invest more time on preparing students for the VE learning experience.

The language chosen for a VE also impacts on engagement and inclusion. Many VEs, this one included, rely on English as an International Language (EIL), which can be an enabler, but also cause anxiety about the hegemonic power that this language exerts worldwide in its UK-USA varieties (Hildeblando Júnior, 2023). The choice of only utilising EIL for VEELT will need to be revised in future iterations of the project, in the light of the findings discussed below, in order to provide a more inclusive and diverse experience for all participants and make them feel valued.

2.2 English as an International Language (EIL)

The concept of EIL was first introduced by Smith (1976), although initially he referred to it as "English as an International Auxiliary Language". He defined an international language as "one which is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another" (p. 38). The British Council also published a collection of papers on EIL in 1978 (Patel et al., 2023). According to the report *The Future of English: Global Perspectives* (Patel et al., 2023), where Graddol's predictions on the spread of English is evaluated (1997; 2006), English is recognised as the dominant global language in the 21st century, which was forecast by Crystal (2018): English is estimated to be spoken by around two billion people as an additional language (Patel et al., 2023).

EIL is therefore an established field in applied linguistics. Marlina (2018), however, identifies two major issues with it: 1) misconceptions regarding the teaching of EIL and what it advocates, and 2) EIL classroom application. He claims that it is erroneous to understand EIL as an English *variety* employed in international contexts, as EIL encompasses the paradigms of World Englishes (WEs) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF, Jenkins, 2015), and the term EIL acknowledges that the use of English in different international contexts is both plural and fluid (Marlina, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of education, reshaping the role of EIL. In post-pandemic learning environments, English continues to be used for cross-border communication in virtual classrooms and international collaborations. However, this evolving role raises critical questions about equity, access, and linguistic diversity.

The shift to online learning platforms has amplified the dominance of English,

particularly in higher education, where English-medium resources and instruction predominate. While this facilitates global engagement, it can marginalise students from non-English-speaking backgrounds who may face additional cognitive and emotional challenges navigating academic content in English. This unequal access risks reinforcing existing socio-economic and linguistic hierarchies. Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted the potential for EIL to promote global citizenship and intercultural understanding. In virtual learning spaces, students from diverse contexts can engage in collaborative projects, fostering mutual respect and empathy. Yet, this requires careful pedagogical design to ensure that English serves as a medium for meaningful and equitable intercultural dialogue.

In this study, we acknowledge the existence of different conceptualisations of EIL, such as WE, ELF, and Global Englishes (Patel et al., 2023). However, we do not intend to delve deeply into the nuances that differentiate these definitions. Instead, we follow the argument put forth by Selvi et al. (2023), opting to use EIL as an umbrella term.

3. Methods

3.1 Overall approach

This study is exploratory (Sweldberg, 2020) and, as previously mentioned, aims at shining a light on aspects of VE that are relatively unexplored to date. It is based on the analysis of mainly qualitative "thick" data (i.e., the students' perspectives on their VE experience, the staff reflections on the project), even if some quantitative data are also reported (e.g., demographics). A mixed-method data collection approach was therefore utilised, in the variety defined by Dörnyei (2007) as "QUAL/quant" (p. 169), due to the predominance of qualitative data. The developed instruments for data collection were:

- Pre- and post-VE non-anonymous surveys via JISC OnlineSurveys (which comply with both the UK and European privacy laws). The goal of these surveys was to obtain demographic information, personal experiences, and opinions concerning their VEELT learning experience.

- Six end-of-session anonymous evaluation forms via MS Forms where students provided weekly feedback about each synchronous session.

- Reflections via Mentimeter, collected from one of the synchronous sessions dedicated to promoting students' reflections on their VEELT journey.

- Formative assessment tasks as part of the VE programme (e.g., Padlet wall reports on ELT topics).

- Participating tutors' reflections/notes for the duration of the VEELT programme.

The quantitative data in the current project consist of closed-ended items such as ranking, multiple choice questions, or Likert scale ones. For example, after reading a statement (e.g., "I am able to use technology for collaborating with others"), participants need to choose a response from "strongly agree", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree", and "strongly disagree". The qualitative data consist of open-ended responses from the surveys and evaluation forms, or text comments from the reflection sessions both staff and students engaged with. A Word Cloud was also used to illustrate the reflection survey results collected via

Mentimeter. Only the pre-VE survey was mandatory for the students as it was also used for registration purposes and to provide informed consent to participate.

As previously discussed, engagement can be interpreted as students' behavioural, cognitive, and affective involvement (Fredricks et al., 2004). The data collected were therefore classified in alignment with these three dimensions:

- Behavioural: involvement in the activities and with materials, such as attending sessions, pre-readings and in-session lecturers, completing tasks, engaging in the BoR discussions, and utilising resources (e.g., tools);

- Cognitive: intellectual strategies to develop the technical skills of how to engage in VE as well as subject-specific knowledge required to reflect on key concepts in ELT;

- Affective: attitudes, feelings, and emotions towards VEELT interaction, including language use.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2012) using these three dimensions. The data from each source (e.g., surveys, end-of-session evaluations) were then manually mapped to the corresponding dimensions. We acknowledge that some data may fit into more than one dimension. For example, in the section on behavioural engagement, some participants indicated that they (or others) did not engage with the materials or tasks partly due to the materials being too challenging or partly due to a lack of confidence. The former (level of materials) can be linked to the need for tutor support, as discussed in the section on cognitive engagement, while the latter (lack of confidence) may be associated with affective engagement (including the choice of English as the medium of communication on the VE).

Underneath each of the categories (behavioural, cognitive, or affective), various themes (for example, behavioural engagement with the tasks or materials) were grouped as they emerged from the data as well as the authors' previous experience of managing comparable projects. This was due to the fact that the data collection instruments were developed on the basis of the project team's collective experience.

3.2 Participants and setting

Ethics clearance was obtained to process data involving human participants in compliance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation legislation (GDPR) (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018), and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Fifty undergraduate students (in their third or fourth year) and three postgraduate students, all enrolled on ELT-related courses, from three universities in the UK (n=15), Spain (n=19), and Mexico (n=19) participated in the VEELT. As can be seen in Table, the majority of the students from the three higher education institutions (HEIs) were aged between 18 - 20 (38%) and 21-30 (60%). Female students accounted for 79% of the registered participants, and 58% of participants spoke Spanish as their first language, followed by Chinese Mandarin (21%) and English (11%).

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants' Numbers

Institution	Age	Gender	First language	Total
UK	21-30 (14) 31-40 (1)	Female (14) Male (1)	Chinese (11) Vietnamese (2) English (1) Hindi (1)	15
Spain	18-20 (8) 21-30 (11)	Female (14) Male (5)	Spanish (15) English (2) Romanian (1) Valenciano (1)	19
Mexico	18-20 (12) 21-30 (7)	Female (14) Male (5)	Spanish (16) English (3)	19
Total	18-20 (20) 21-30 (32) 31-40 (1)	Female (42) Male (11)	Spanish (31) Chinese (11) English (6) Vietnamese (2) Others (3)	53

At the UK university, the MA students were from the course MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, and the undergraduate students (mostly Chinese students) were from the direct entry top-up course BA in English and Education Management. Although the VE was integrated into both curricula and linked to optional assessment tasks, VE attendance was not compulsory.

At the Spanish university, participants were third-year undergraduate students on the English Studies Degree (*Estudis Anglesos* in Valencian, *Estudios Ingleses* in Spanish). The VEELT project was an optional part of their course's assessment, and attendance on the VEELT accounted for 20% of their final mark.

The undergraduate students based in Mexico were in their last year on the BA course in ELT (*Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés* in Spanish), and they needed to prepare for Cambridge CEFR B2 qualifications with a set of prescribed topics. Participation in the VEELT project was part of the assessment criteria linked to the development of the four core language skills, as well as their intercultural competence as future English language teachers.

As previously mentioned, the two tutors based in Mexico and in the UK selected students (n=12) who they trained as e-mediators for the BoR (see Orsini-Jones et al., 2023 and

Wells et al., 2022, on this). This training was provided before the start of the first VE session. The training was underpinned by the e-mediator guide created for another VE project (Wells et al., 2022). It focused on the e-CIIC (e-classroom interactional and intercultural competences) needed for Zoom BoR mediation, namely, technological competences, online environment management competences, and online teacher interactional competences (Mann & Walsh, 2021) with the addition of "intercultural competence" due to the finding relating to sensitive critical incidents that had occurred in previous VEs (Orsini-Jones, 2023).

The VEELT was originally designed to consist of five sessions (including the training event only attended by the trainee mediators); due to a sudden change of the class schedule in the Mexican HEI involved, one of the sessions had to be postponed to Week 6, and one extra session was added (Week 4) for the UK and Spanish HEIs. Further disruption to the schedule was caused by a clash with a field trip for the UK students, which impacted the attendance for that session. Also, despite all the planning, one of the sessions clashed with a national bank holiday in Spain. Because of the above reasons, the number of students who joined the VE synchronous sessions varied every week, ranging from 21 to 41. The number of students who completed the pre- and post-VE surveys is reported in Table 2. The participation of the students in each of the sessions, the weekly topics, and the numbers of completed responses to the Microsoft Forms and Mentimeter are reported in Table 3. We have decided to include the e-mediator training feedback as an integral part of the VE, due to the fundamental role played by the student e-mediators in facilitating the BoR tasks.

Table 2

The Number of Students Who Completed the Pre- and Post-VE Surveys

	Online Surveys	
Source of data	Pre-VE	Post-VE
Number of participants	53 registrations	
Number of completed responses	53	26
Completion rate %	100%	49%

Table 3

Statistics Reporting Weekly Attendance and Completed Responses (Microsoft Forms and Mentimeter)

	Weekly Feedback via MS Forms						**Final Reflections via Mentimeter**
Source of data	Week 1 Mediator training	Week 2 VE Taster	Week 3 EIL	Week 4 EIL Part 2	Week 5 Reflections	Week 6 TBLT	Week 5 Reflections
Number of participants	12 (mediators only)	31	41	21	35	24	35
Number of	9	28	25	14		12	28

					22		
completed responses (feedback)							
Completion rate %	75%	90%	61%	67%	63%	50%	80%

3.3. Format, instruments, and materials

Before the start of the first synchronous session, all participants (including the tutors) were invited to briefly introduce themselves on a Padlet wall as an ice-breaking activity. Prior to each synchronous session, pre-reading, often in the form of one or two articles on the topics covered, was circulated to all the participants and the BoR tasks were also sent to the student mediators, so that they could prepare for the forthcoming session. The live sessions were delivered via the videoconferencing platform Zoom, and two online quiz tools, Mentimeter (Madish et al., 2022) and Socrative (Alharbi & Meccawy, 2020), were used for formative assessment and/or reflections.

Because of the challenge posed by finding a time slot that would suit all partners, the six VEELT sessions had to be limited to one hour per week, even if the slots from prior iterations of VEELT were longer (75 minutes). Table 4 illustrates how the synchronous sessions 2-6 were structured, following prior "tried and tested" models of VE implementation carried out by the UK HEI with previous VE partners (e.g., Hildeblando Júnior, 2023). A typical session started with a brief introduction and a mini-lecture on the ELT topic of the session, followed by instructions for the task(s) in the BoRs. Students then moved to the BoRs, where the group discussion was facilitated by the above-mentioned student e-mediators. In each BoR group, with the help of the student e-mediator, the group members had to select one member (the Scribe) to take notes on the group discussion to be posted on a dedicated Padlet Wall and another person who would report back after returning to the plenary session (the Speaker). After reporting back from the BoR discussion, students engaged with a formative assessment using, for example, a quiz on Socrative aimed at checking the students' understanding of the key ELT concepts covered. As previously mentioned, a short anonymous evaluation on a Microsoft Form was administered after each session.

Table 4

VEELT Typical Synchronous Session Outline

Preparation: Circulation of reading materials and key information such as BoR grouping and URLs of the Padlet via emails	Prior to the synchronous session
1. Introduction/Presentation of the weekly topic	15 minutes
2. Discussion in breakout rooms (BoRs)	20 minutes
3. Reporting from each BoR	10 minutes (around 1 minute per group)
4. Formative activity to verify that some learning had taken place	5 minutes

5. Anonymous end-of-session Microsoft Form evaluation	5 minutes
6. Wrap-up and Q&A	5 minutes

In terms of the BoR activity, the project team allocated students to groups before each of the sessions. Due to the irregular students' participation (cf. Section 3.2), every week the students were divided into six to ten groups, and each group would include between five to ten members (including one or two student e-mediators).

4. Results & discussion

4.1 Behavioural engagement

4.1.1 Engagement with the tasks

To encourage participation, students were informed that a completion certificate would be awarded to the VEELT participants subject to the completion of a minimum of three VE sessions. Despite this, and despite the fact that the VE was embedded in the curriculum of each of the participating ELT courses, there was a lack of engagement from the students based in the British university. As this study focuses on engagement, the team reflected on this problematic issue and identified the following possible explanations:

1. while the Spanish and Mexican participants were studying on teacher training courses and were nationals of Mexico and Spain in the majority, the students based in the UK were studying on a course on education management as well as English and were mostly Chinese nationals, so their level of motivation towards ELT topics might have been affected by this, as ELT was an optional subject for them;

2. It transpired from informal conversations after the exchange had started, that the Chinese students in the UK had taken part in another VE in the previous semester and had not enjoyed that experience;

3. the participants in Mexico and Spain attended the VE from university premises, with their tutor in attendance, while this was not possible for the students based in the UK as there were no suitable rooms for them at the time of the VE and they had to join online from home;

4. there were assessment incentives for the participation in the VE for the students in Mexico and Spain, but not for those based in the UK;

5. one of the sessions coincided with a field trip for the students in the UK organised by staff not involved in the VE and organised after the VE sessions had been agreed;

6. the Mexican and Spanish students shared another language (Spanish), and this might have contributed to the Chinese students feeling less included.

The above illustrates that even if careful VE planning is carried out, unexpected events could affect behaviour and motivation. As mentioned in the methodology, logistical challenges, such as scheduling conflicts and differing practices among the participating institutions, required the project team to remain flexible and adaptable. For instance, one HEI scheduled VE sessions at 7 a.m., and participants often arrived late. This caught participants from the other two HEIs off guard, especially during the first warm-up session, when over 30 students

and tutors waited for the lead tutor who was also late. Following this experience, the project team consistently prepared a Plan B and additional materials to handle similar situations more effectively in the future.
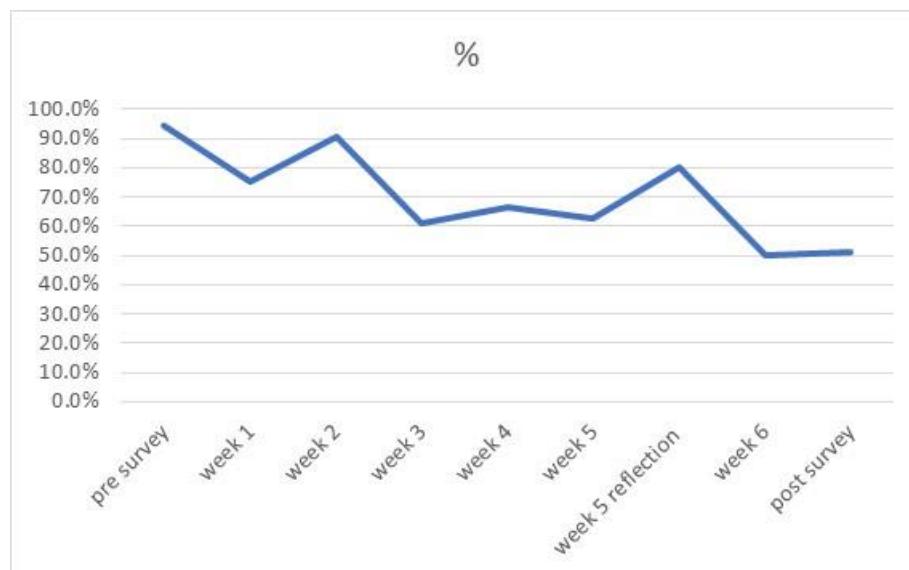
Also, as the lack of engagement was mainly from Chinese nationals, the team reflected that it might be necessary to review the VE content and structure to make it more inclusive. In addition, it may be useful to include more questions about students' prior VE experience in the enrolment survey to ensure that the team prepares the participants better for any biases that may arise from their negative previous experience, if any.

In terms of how the participants engaged with the VEELT tasks, the attendance data will be discussed first. As mentioned in Section 3.2, those who completed three out of the six synchronous sessions were issued with a certificate of attendance. Out of the 56 students who registered for the project, 46 (82%) received a completion certificate. The UK group, as discussed, had a poorer completion rate compared with the other two institutions.

As it was not possible to measure how individual participants engaged with many of the VE tasks, such as the ones carried out in the BoRs (where the tutors deliberately chose to leave students free to express themselves without the constraint of being registered), here we report the completion rates of feedback/reflection tasks that were part of the weekly sessions (cf. Table 3). The completion rates of the feedback task during Week 1 to 6, the pre- and post-VE surveys, and the reflection survey (which took place in Week 5) are presented chronologically in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Completion Rates of Feedback or Reflection Tasks

As can be seen in Figure 1, there appears to be a slight decline in the completion rate throughout the programme, except for two more prominent peaks in Week 2 and Week 5 (the reflection). Week 2 was the first time when all the students from the three universities were in attendance, and students appeared to be motivated by the VE novelty at the beginning of the project. In Week 5, the reflection survey was the primary activity during the session delivered via Mentimeter, where all the students could see the results once they submitted the responses. The Mentimeter tool proved to be very successful for the purpose of engaging participants and was also used in Week 4. The Week 4 feedback showed a very high percentage of satisfaction

with the Mentimeter interactive activity, a quiz with live results, where the whole group reviewed key concepts from the last session on English as an International Language. One of the participating tutors shared that their students particularly enjoyed the gamification element of the tool and the choice to provide answers anonymously. Anonymity appeared to be an important feature of a successful VE interactive experience from the students' perspective.

4.1.2 Engagement with the materials

Regarding students' behavioural engagement with the materials, several responses from the reflection session show that students acknowledge the need for support for the pre-readings (often in the form of a journal article or a book chapter on the ELT topic to cover in the synchronous session). The preference for "short readings" or video/audiovisual materials was mentioned in their feedback. This feedback is corroborated by evidence from another question in the same reflection session, where students shared their views regarding why some participants were not keen to contribute to the BoR discussion. Some students reported that their lack of engagement related to their lack of content knowledge in some of the ELT areas covered and that they did not engage because they did not feel confident to do so. Similar evidence emerged from the weekly anonymous feedback, where participants pointed out that some members of their BoR had not engaged with the pre-reading texts and were therefore unable to contribute to the discussion: "Not all the people in the BoR wanted to talk, they did not read the (preparatory) article at all, and only a few ones helped us to answer the questions" (Session 3, reported *verbatim*); "Most of students didn't read about the topic" (Session 3, *verbatim*).

Another challenge in relation to behavioural engagement was identified as insufficient amount of time spent on tasks, which was mentioned more than once in the same reflection session. This is reiterated in the weekly feedback as can be seen below, where the participants pointed out that they would have liked to have more time for the groupwork in the BoRs in almost every session, e.g., "We are not having enough time, and we already have an opinion regarding the questions assigned, we want to discuss and also interact" (Session 5). This is a positive finding, as it could be inferred that many of the participants genuinely engaged in the activities and wished they had had more time for discussion. This has implications for better planning and time management for future VEs.

Behavioural engagement and inclusion were also negatively affected by technical issues encountered, e.g., issues with the camera, microphone, Internet connection, functionality of Zoom, and setting of the physical room they were working in. Various technical issues occurred in almost every session as can be seen in the excerpts of students' weekly feedback: "I couldn't log in at first. We didn't know how to use some functions. We didn't have cameras today" (session 1); "The slow wifi connection made it difficult to follow some parts of the conversation, and it was a bit difficult to manage how to use some Zoom tools" (session 2); "I had trouble with my wifi, and I had to switch to my phone but couldn't see myself" (session 3); "My internet connection was unstable" (session 5).

The above mirrors findings in related work (Orsini-Jones, 2023; Orsini-Jones et al., forthcoming) and highlights the fact that accessibility and digital inclusion are challenges that have still not been overcome in VE. For this reason, Hauck (2023) proposes a "low tech" VE solution to enhance inclusion, for example, the use of low bandwidth technology and asynchronous communication.
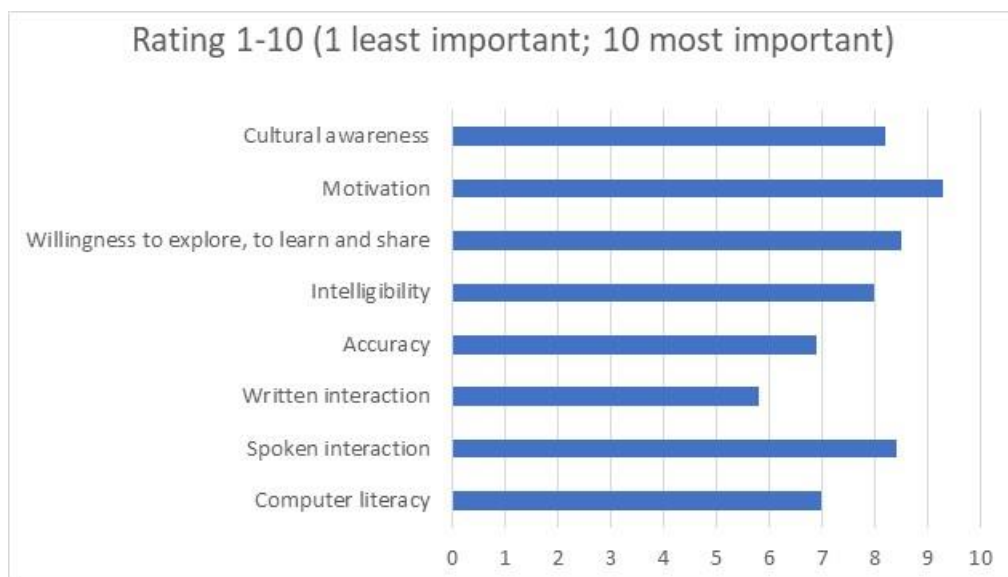
4.2 Cognitive engagement

In this section, the strategies, skills, and knowledge regarding cognitive engagement will be divided into 1) VE-related (technical) and 2) VEELT-specific (subject-specific). VE-related engagement is further divided into groupwork related and e-mediator related. Some of the discussion may also involve behavioural and/or affective engagement, and what is presented here shows the participants' awareness of those different aspects.

4.2.1 VE-related cognitive engagement

In the reflection session in Week 5 (which should have been at the end, in Week 6, but had to be moved to Week 5 for the logistics reasons mentioned earlier), the students were asked to respond to several questions delivered on Mentimeter based on their experience of the VEELT. The questions on cognitive engagement and VE skills developed were designed by the project lead based in the UK. In one of the questions, the students were invited to rate the importance of aspects which may contribute to a successful VE experience. Figure 2 illustrates that the top three aspects were motivation, willingness to explore, learn and share, and spoken interaction, two of which fall into the scope of affective engagement that will be discussed later in this section. The bottom three were written interaction, accuracy, and computer literacy. As the primary tasks in our VE sessions were group discussions in the BoRs, it is understandable why students considered spoken interaction to be more important than written interaction. Regarding accuracy, the comparison of accuracy and intelligibility is a key topic that was discussed in the two sessions on EIL. Although here we can see that students generally agree that intelligibility outweighs accuracy, the difference seems marginal, which we will come back to and discuss later for VEELT-specific engagement. Computer/digital literacy would appear to be one of the least important areas for the participants in this set of responses, but this contrasts with their statements about not being familiar with the Zoom affordances in the feedback provided at the end of each live session.

Figure 2

Rating of the VE Aspects in Terms of Their Importance for a Successful VE Experience

4.2.1.1 Groupwork related cognitive engagement

In the reflection survey delivered via Mentimeter, when asked about the factors contributing to successful groupwork in a BoR, 83 responses in total were received from the participants as they were invited to contribute more than one answer, and identical words/phrases were grouped in a word cloud as seen in Figure 3. It was nice for the tutors to see "respect" "kindness" and "empathy", associated with the semantics of affective engagement, being nearly as prominent as "communication" and "interaction". However, lack of motivation also emerges in the margins.

Figure 3

Factors that Contribute to Successful Groupwork in a BoR

In terms of group size, according to the reflection survey on Mentimeter, 69% of the responses consider 4-6 members as the ideal size for a BoR group (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Reflection Feedback Regarding the Best BoR Size

4.2.1.2 E-mediator related cognitive engagement

The feedback that we received on the e-mediator training was overall very positive. The e-mediators commented on the professional skills acquired, such as mediation, digital literacy and listening. The pivotal role of a good e-mediator emerged again, as in previous studies (Orsini-Jones, 2023); however, it also emerged that more training was needed, as some e-mediators found it challenging to facilitate interaction in the BoRs and participants' experiences were therefore uneven.

Because of logistics, each session only lasted one hour. In the post-VE survey, the students were asked to choose the type of training that a student e-mediator should be required to engage in. The findings echo the above observations, i.e. communication skills (86%), managing a group/room (81%), and technical skills (52%) are the top three competencies that the majority of the participants agreed on, whereas intercultural awareness (48%) and regular meetings to discuss any issues (41%) were considered less important, even if the percentages of agreement were still high (see Figure 5).

In the same post-VE survey, in terms of the challenges that student e-mediators encountered, "participation and engaging" (85%) significantly outweighs any of the other listed challenges (see Figure 6), which will be discussed in more detail in the next section on affective engagement. The second place "managing time" (56%) and the third place "not understanding key concepts" also correspond to the prior discussion of more extended time required and the lack of engagement with the reading materials, even for the student e-mediators. "Technical issues", "background noises", and "not understanding the BoR task" also appear to be commonly encountered. The above findings support the importance of various competencies required to assist and mediate interaction in a synchronous online learning environment (Moorhouse et al., 2022).

Figure 5

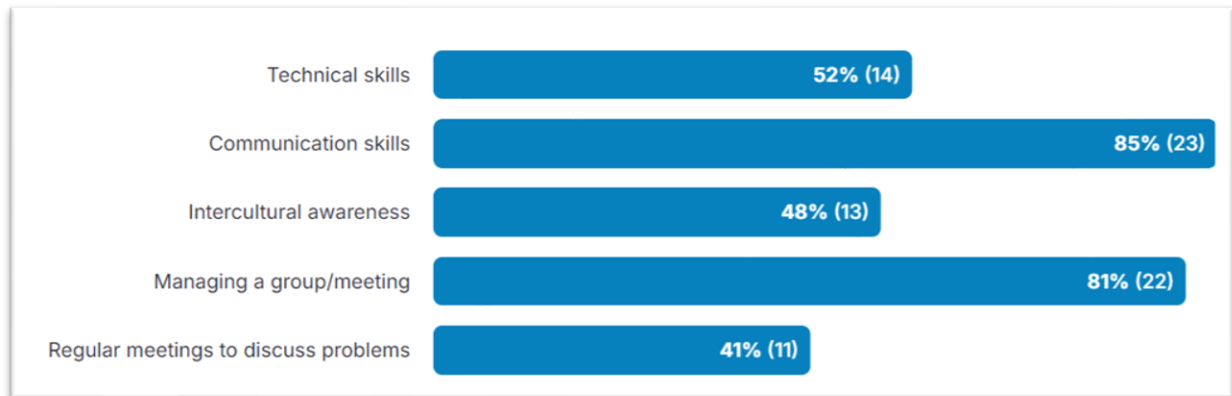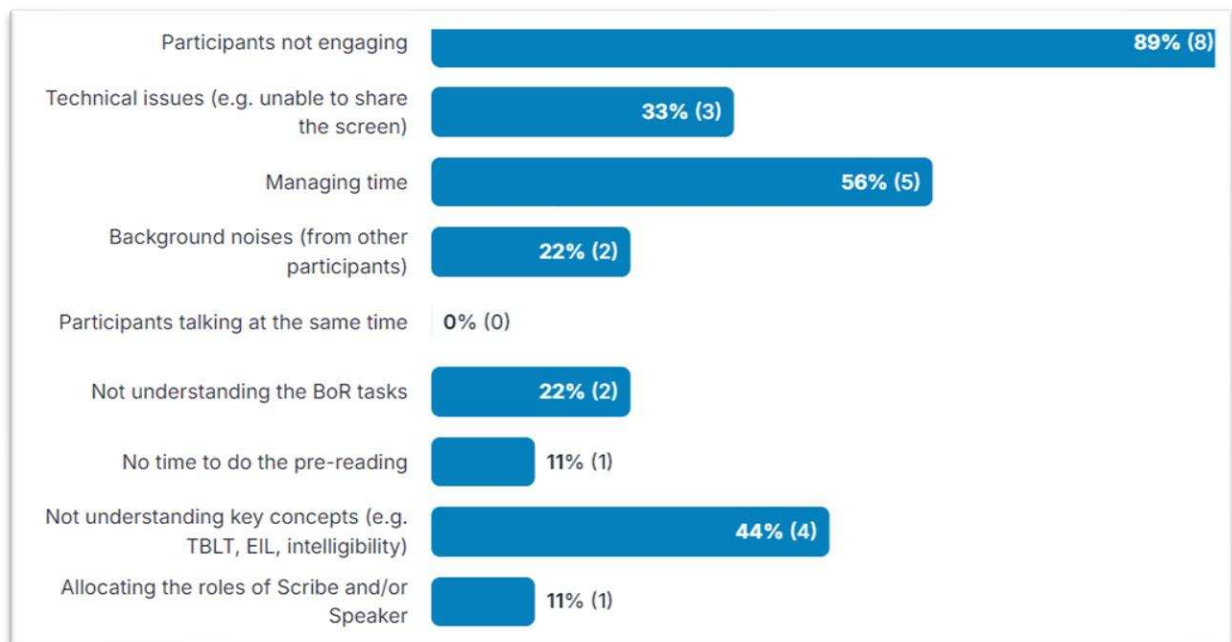*Types of Training Required to Be a Student E-mediator*

Figure 6

The Challenges That Student E-mediators Encountered in a BoR

4.2.2 VEELT-specific cognitive engagement

EIL was one of the key topics addressed in this VEELT project with the aim to raise students' awareness that "native norms" should *not* be the benchmark and that in VE meaning or intelligibility are more important than language form (or accuracy), in alignment with a decolonial stance on what English to teach and learn (Hildeblando Júnior, 2023). In the post-VE survey, we can see that the majority of the students (89-93%) agree or strongly agree with the statements concerning this notion whereas a very small group (4%) still disagree with the statements (see Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7

The Responses to the Statement "I Have Learned That the Importance of Communication Is Meaning, Not Form".
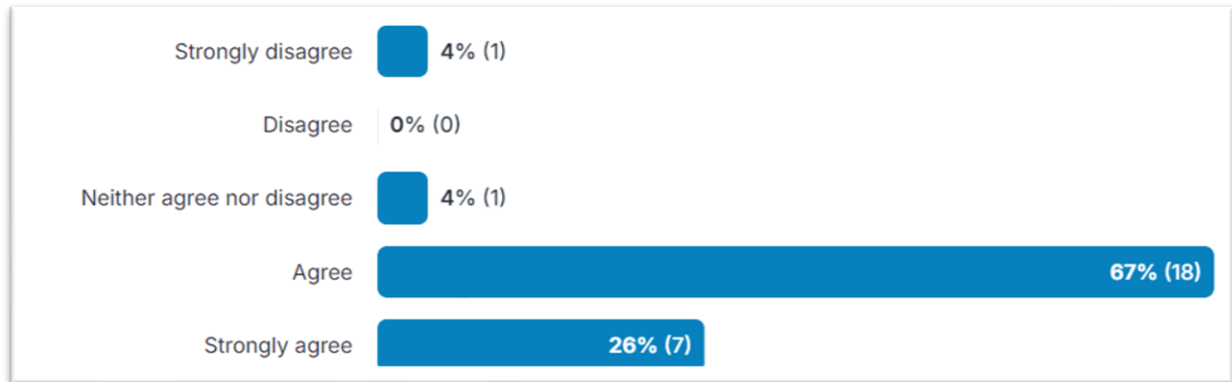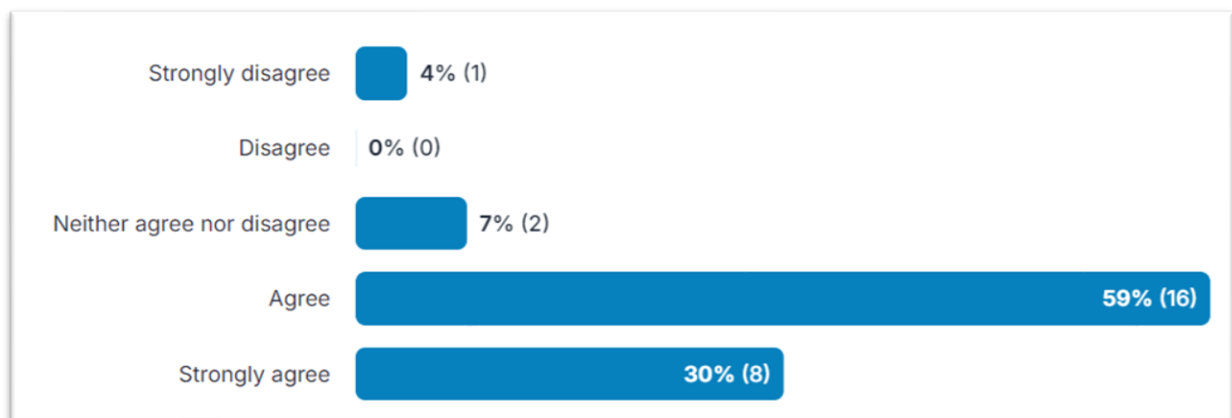

Figure 8

The Responses to the Statement "I Have Realised That the Core of English as an International Language Is Intelligibility, Not Accuracy".

Interestingly, the participants appear to be more tolerant of others' accents than their own. As can be seen in Figures 9 and 10, 71% of the responses (strongly) agree with the statement "I don't mind the accent (from myself)", but the agreement increases to 89% when it is about others' accents. This seems to suggest that some participants are more critical of themselves, which exhibits different attitudes toward language standards between themselves and others.

Figure 9

The Responses to the Statement "I Don't Mind the Accent (From Myself)".
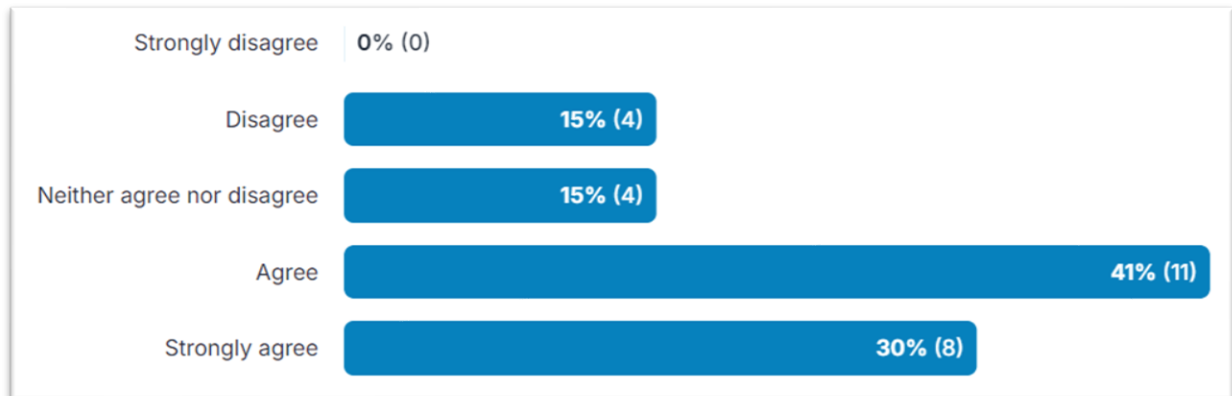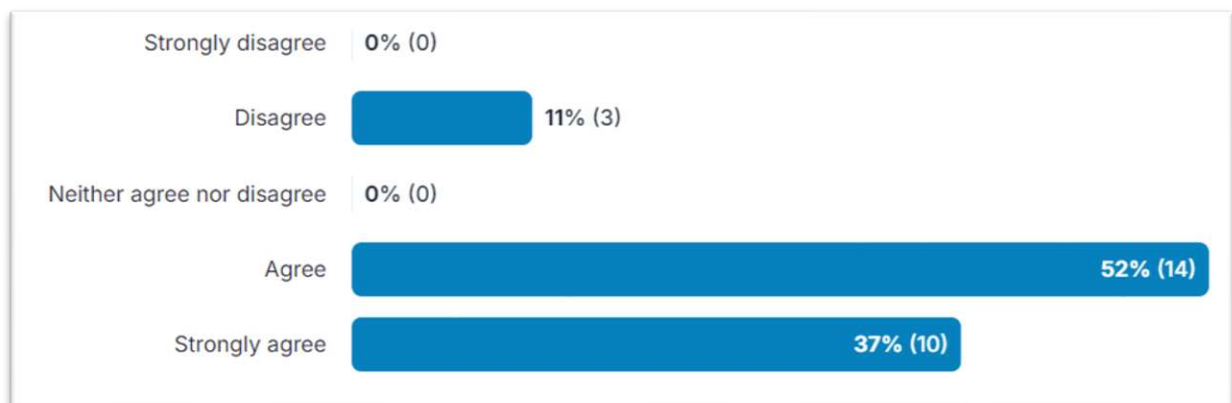

Figure 10

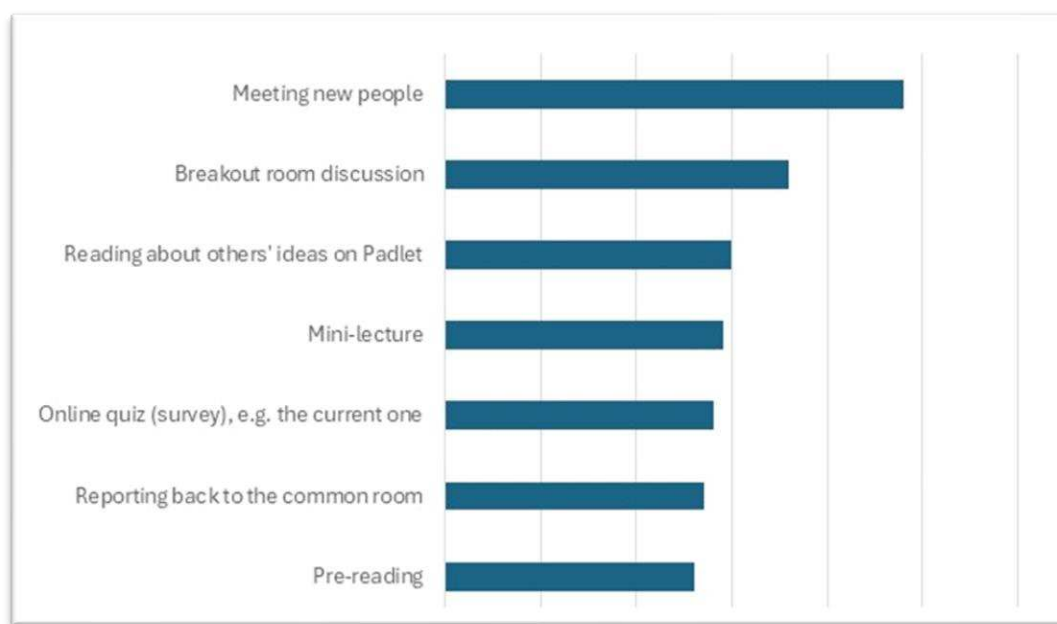*The Responses to the Statement "I Don't Mind the Accent (From Others)".*

4.3 Affective engagement

Affective engagement in this project refers to the attitudes, feelings, and emotions towards the VEELT programme, including how the participants perceived the interactions in the VE environment such as respecting, understanding, relating to, and working with others. As confirmed in the last two sections (cf. Sections 4.1 and 4.2), it appears that affective engagement plays an essential part in the success of a VE programme, as also illustrated in Figure 3. Students chose "meeting new people" (relating) as the top feature they enjoyed the most from the VEELT, while content-specific pre-reading was their least favourite task (see Figure 11). This provides useful insights for the planning of future VEs. Except for the inclusion of an ice-breaking activity in the VEELT (cf. Section 3.2), the project team generally prioritises the "academic" elements of a VE, hence the careful selection of ELT topics and reading materials as well as the incorporation of formative assessment to check students' understanding, but the "social" elements of the VE that allow the students to meet their peers from other parts of the world seems equally important, if not more, to them.

This is corroborated by what one of the tutors found when she joined one BoR in one of the sessions to see if the students needed any support and she discovered that the students had spent the first five minutes discussing a movie before moving to the task set. Other feedback from the post-VE survey also highlighted the desire of some students who would prefer to interact with their peers about their daily life rather than engage with the ELT tasks. This indicates the importance of allocating more time to the affective dimension and incorporating more social activities for the VE to allow better interactions among the participants, and/or asking them to discuss the ELT topics they would like to explore themselves and encourage them to co-create ELT knowledge that is relevant to them.

Figure 11

What the Participants Enjoyed the Most in the VEELT (Mentimeter)

In the reflection session, when asked about why some participants were not keen on contributing to the BoR task, the majority of the students associated the causes with shyness or fear of speaking, although other factors, such as technical issues, were also mentioned. In terms of the fear of speaking, this may be partly related to the anxiety of making a mistake as an L2 speaker or the lack of knowledge because they did not prepare for the session by completing the pre-reading. The issue of the anxiety related to speaking and writing in English online during VEs of students in English language teacher education has emerged in related studies (Hildeblando Júnior, 2023; Orsini-Jones et al., forthcoming) that highlight the hegemonic 'weight' of what are perceived to be the canonical English varieties (UK and US English) by future teachers of English whose mother tongue is not English. There is initial evidence that engaging in COIL-VE-Telecollaboration utilising EIL/ELF can support the lowering of anxiety in these students and strengthen their confidence in the variety of English that they speak, positively adding to their linguistic and psychological capital (Orsini-Jones et al., forthcoming).

In terms of students' attitudes regarding whether it is acceptable *not* to engage in the BoR, the responses were mixed (see Figure 12). The results also indicate varying degrees of acceptance of how the participants engaged with the BoR. 59% of respondents agree or strongly agree that it is OK not to turn on the camera (see Figure 13) while only 30% of respondents

agree that it is acceptable for the participants not to speak (see Figure 14). However, 66% of the respondents consider it acceptable if the participants only want to contribute to the discussion by typing in the chat (see Figure 15). It appears that any form of engagement in the BoR discussion, either by speaking up or expressing ideas in writing (even without the camera on), is generally welcomed by the students, which reflects findings in related studies (Orsini-Jones, 2023).

Figure 12

The Responses Regarding the Statement "It is OK if Some Participants Do Not Want to Engage in the BoR".
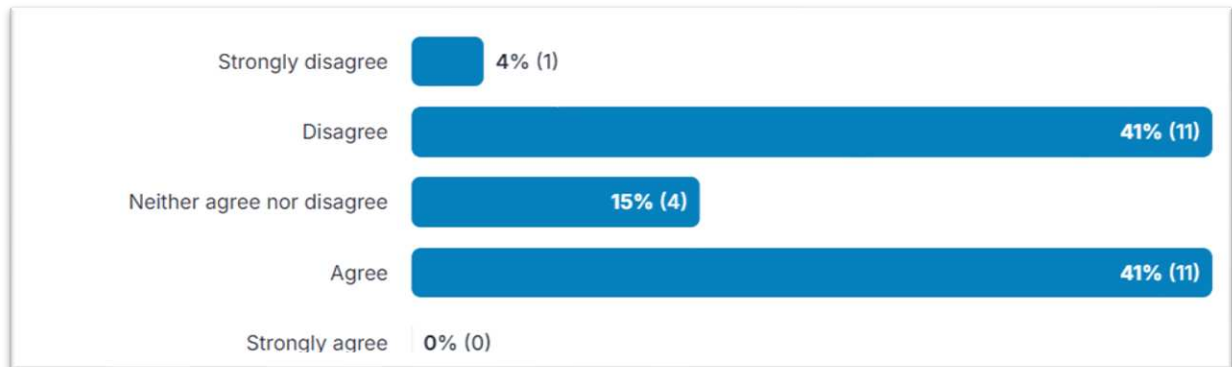

Figure 13

The Responses Regarding the Statement "It is OK if Some Participants do Not Want to Turn on Their Camera".
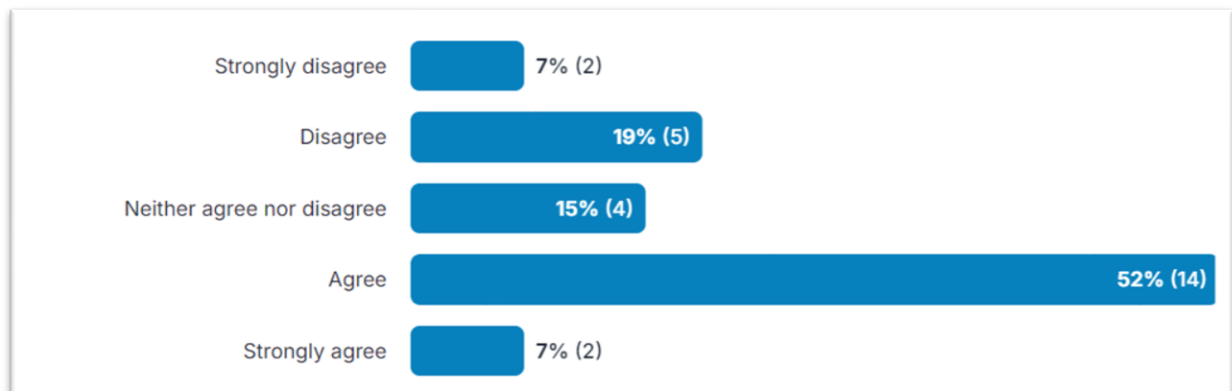
Figure 14

The Responses Regarding the Statement "It is OK if Some Participants do Not Want to Speak".
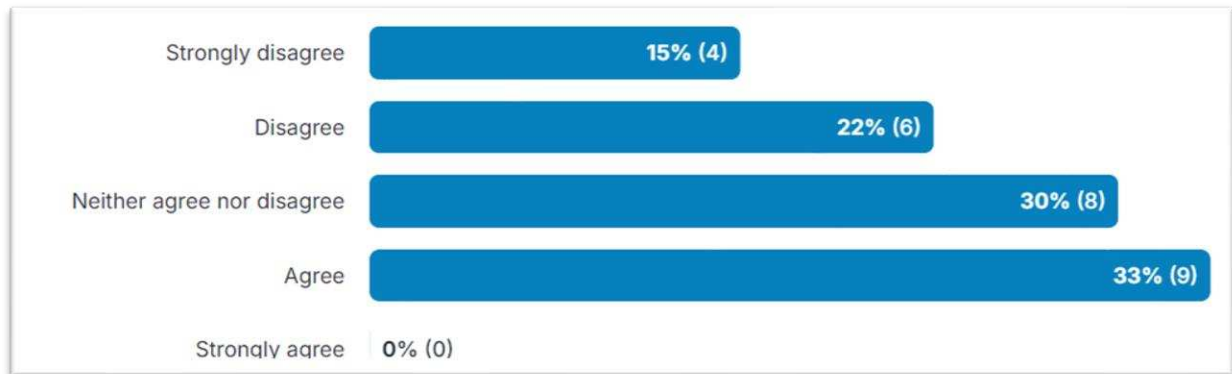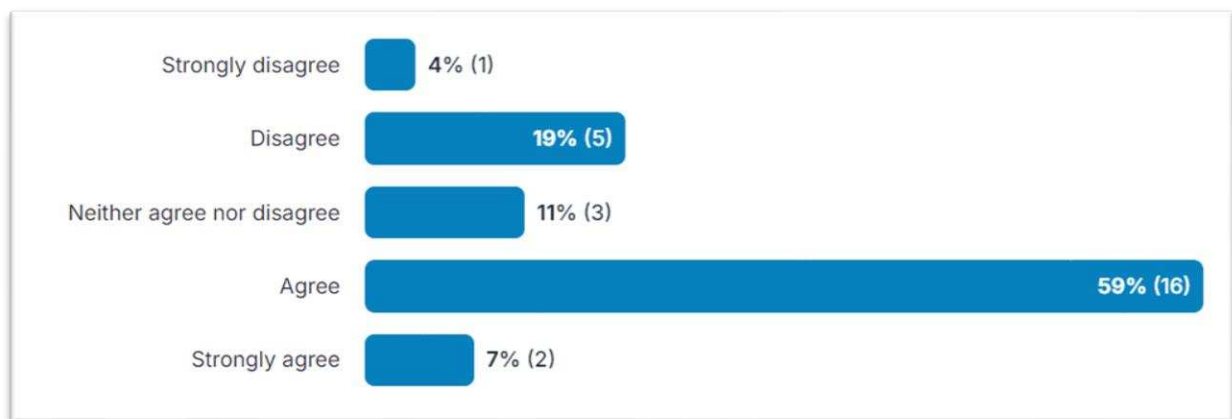

Figure 15

The Responses Regarding the Statement "It is OK if Some Participants Only Want to Type Their Ideas in the Chat".

Despite the various challenges that we have encountered in this project, the results from the post-VE survey indicate an overall positive attitude regarding the students' experience in the VEELT project discussed here, as can be seen in the quotes below. In addition, students were generally satisfied with a peer as the e-mediator while a few responses pointed out the skills and further training required for some of the student e-mediators, e.g.,:

> After this COIL, I have realised that online teaching could be very useful for students who study languages.

> I feel now more comfortable about both learning and teaching online. This gives the opportunity to reach outer spaces of your own city, province and country.

> It helped me to develop and improve my communication skills and avoid feeling pretty nervous or anxious when communicating with others.

> This specific online experience has provided me with more cultural knowledge and a fresh perspective on how online community learning is possible.

> I really enjoyed them, normally I am really worried about my English in general, but little by little these sessions help me to feel more comfortable.

Future research could explore the role of peer relationships and how fostering them might help reduce language-related anxieties in COIL settings.

5. Recommendations & conclusion

This paper has reported on an explorative study which investigated students' engagement and issues of inclusion/exclusion in the VEELT project, focusing on the behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions of students' engagement. While many of the participants provided positive feedback on their VE learning experience, a number of engagement and inclusion/exclusion challenges were identified. Research Questions 1 and 2 were addressed in the data analysis and discussion. We will focus on Research Question 3 here in the conclusion: "How can the next VEELT iteration build on the lessons learnt to provide a more inclusive VE learning experience?"

In view of the comments on how the students valued getting to know the partners better, the tutors reflected that intercultural interactional sensitivities need to be borne in mind in future VEs to make students feel more included and valued. Participants from both Spain and Mexico stated that more time should have been spent on 'getting to know each other' and even added that knowing more about their partners took priority for them over subject-specific ELT content. The anxiety about English also emerged as a barrier in the initial stages of a VE. One possible way to address both of these issues could be to make the introductions to VE peers more inclusive by inviting students who are L2 speakers of English to introduce themselves in their own mother tongue in the ice-breaker. This could be followed by an invitation for their peers who do not share their mother tongue for questions on what they have written (online translation tools could be used to support this multilingual approach to introductions). Utilising participants' mother tongue on the introductory Padlet wall might alleviate the issue of the reported anxiety about expressing themselves in English. This course of action also addresses the affective domain and the students' linguistic and psychological capital. The problematic issue of how to "depower" English emerged at a round table discussion held in June 2024 (Orsini-Jones, 2024) and the use of the participants' mother tongue for some of the VE tasks was suggested there by Dr Jacobs, based in South Africa.

The tutors also had to reflect on the lack of engagement of the group of participants based in the UK (mainly Chinese nationals). This could be partly attributed to the issues identified before, namely:

1. Logistics issues (the unexpected scheduling conflicts);

2. VE engagement not linked to summative assessment;

3. Negative prior experience of a VE; and

4. Nationality dynamics of participants.

However, it could also be attributed to the fact that some of these were students who felt ill at ease with the VE experience, which was too alien to them, too different from their prior HE teaching and learning experience. The tutors felt that future participants from this group of learners will need to have a more thorough preparation for the VE experience so that they do not feel too challenged by it. The affective dimension of belonging must be addressed here, particularly in relation to the negative experience of the Chinese participants who appeared not to feel included.

With reference to the cognitive dimension and the feedback received from many students, the lesson learnt is to co-create the curriculum of the VE in a more inclusive way. Staff and students could negotiate its content to foster students' agentification. Most of these students were training to become future teachers of English, and the biggest lesson learnt is that tutors must build on students' existing knowledge, on the capital of "others" instead of "othering".

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