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Adaptation of eTwinning in higher education: Its impact on English teaching

Adaptación de eTwinning en educación superior: Su impacto en la enseñanza del inglés

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of classroom twinning and virtual exchange programs, particularly through eTwinning (inspired by an initiative of the European Commission's eLearning Program in 2005), as a strategy to enhance English proficiency in countries with low EF EPI rankings. By facilitating digital collaboration between EFL learners and native English speakers, these initiatives aim to improve language acquisition, intercultural competence, and student motivation. The literature review synthesizes recent research on telecollaboration and blended learning models, emphasizing their role in foreign language education. A systematic literature search was conducted in indexed databases, focusing on studies published since 2020. Inclusion criteria prioritized research examining classroom twinning projects, digital collaboration, and their impact on EFL learners' language proficiency. Excluded were studies unrelated to language acquisition or intercultural exchange. The findings highlight the positive effects of virtual interactions on linguistic skills, digital literacy, and cultural awareness, while also identifying challenges related to time zone differences, curriculum misalignment, and unequal technological access. The study proposes a three-year phased implementation of eTwinning in universities, beginning with pilot programs, faculty training, and technological integration, followed by institutional adoption. Future research should address the impact of technological disparities on student participation, the role of teacher training in virtual exchanges, and strategies to enhance oral proficiency in digital environments. The findings provide practical recommendations for integrating digital collaboration into EFL education, contributing to innovative pedagogical practices in foreign language learning.


Keywords: classroom twinning, english as a foreign language, ef english proficiency index, language learning strategies, intercultural competence

Resumen

Este estudio analiza el potencial del classroom twinning y los programas de intercambio virtual, particularmente a través de eTwinning (inspirado en una iniciativa del Programa de Aprendizaje eLearning de la Comisión Europea en 2005), como una estrategia para mejorar el dominio del inglés en países con bajas clasificaciones en el EF EPI. Al facilitar la colaboración digital entre estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) y hablantes nativos, estas iniciativas buscan fortalecer la adquisición del idioma, la competencia intercultural y la motivación estudiantil. La revisión de la literatura sintetiza investigaciones recientes sobre telecolaboración y modelos de aprendizaje

combinado, destacando su papel en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. Se llevó a cabo una búsqueda sistemática en bases de datos indexadas, enfocándose en estudios publicados desde 2020. Los criterios de inclusión priorizaron investigaciones sobre classroom twinning, colaboración digital y su impacto en la competencia lingüística de los estudiantes de EFL, mientras que se excluyeron aquellos estudios no relacionados con la adquisición de idiomas o el intercambio intercultural. Los hallazgos muestran beneficios de la interacción virtual en el desarrollo de habilidades lingüísticas, alfabetización digital y conciencia cultural, pero también identifican desafíos como diferencias horarias, desajustes curriculares y acceso desigual a la tecnología. El estudio propone una implementación gradual de eTwinning en universidades durante tres años, comenzando con programas piloto, formación docente e integración tecnológica, seguida de su adopción institucional. Investigaciones futuras deberían abordar el impacto de las brechas tecnológicas en la participación estudiantil, el papel de la formación docente en los intercambios virtuales y estrategias para mejorar la fluidez oral en entornos digitales. Los resultados ofrecen recomendaciones prácticas para integrar la colaboración digital en la enseñanza del inglés, contribuyendo a prácticas pedagógicas innovadoras en la enseñanza de idiomas.

Palabras clave: classroom twinning, etwinning, inglés como lengua extranjera, ef english proficiency index, competencia intercultural

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, English proficiency is essential for academic and professional success. However, countries and regions such as Ecuador, the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia struggle with low English proficiency, as indicated by the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) 2024. This highlights the need for innovative language-learning strategies. One effective model widely implemented in Europe is eTwinning, a virtual collaboration platform that enhances language proficiency and intercultural competence through ICT (Information and Communication Technology)-based exchanges.

This literature review examines the potential of eTwinning to improve English proficiency in higher education settings within low EF EPI regions. The study focuses on recent research (last five years) to explore how digital collaboration can be adapted for university-level implementation. Key concepts such as eTwinning, digital collaboration, telecollaboration, and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) are defined within the context of foreign language (FL) acquisition.

The study proposes a three-year phased implementation across universities, beginning with pilot programs, faculty training, and technological integration, before expanding to nationwide adoption. By promoting interactive, technology-driven learning experiences, this research evaluates how eTwinning-inspired projects could provide a structured, scalable approach to improving English proficiency, digital literacy, and intercultural skills in these regions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic approach to critically evaluate the quality of the selected studies and synthesize their findings. The methodological framework involved three key stages: study selection, critical appraisal, and synthesis of results.

Study Selection and Data Sources

A systematic literature search was conducted using the indexed database Google Scholar, focusing on research published since 2020. The selection process followed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Studies that examined classroom twinning, digital collaboration, and their impact on EFL learners' language proficiency were prioritized, while those unrelated to language acquisition or intercultural exchange were excluded.

Inclusion Criteria

Empirical studies examining classroom twinning between EFL learners.

Research measuring outcomes related to language proficiency and intercultural competence.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies unrelated to language acquisition or cultural exchange.

Papers published before 2020.

Critical Evaluation of Study Quality

To assess the reliability and validity of the included studies, a qualitative analysis that involved comparing methodologies across different research contexts to identify patterns and inconsistencies was applied.

Thematic Synthesis of Results

A comparative analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and discrepancies in the literature. Key aspects synthesized included:

The role of eTwinning in language acquisition and student motivation.

Challenges in implementation, such as technological disparities and scheduling conflicts.

The impact of digital literacy and intercultural competence on language learning outcomes.

Through this structured approach, the study provides a comprehensive evaluation of existing research, offering insights into the effectiveness and limitations of virtual exchange programs for EFL education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classroom twinning and virtual exchange models

Classroom twinning is a collaborative exchange that strengthens and adds value to service-learning initiatives or comparable experiences already being implemented in diverse regional, geographical, or cultural contexts (CLAYSS, n.d.). It also aligns with virtual exchange programs, allowing students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to interact via digital platforms (O'Dowd, 2021). These exchanges provide EFL learners with authentic communication opportunities, promoting both linguistic and cultural fluency.

Critical Analysis and Synthesis of Key Findings

Research indicates that the integration of technology in foreign language (FL) education has gained prominence in the 21st century, as educational institutions increasingly emphasize innovation to enhance teaching and learning. González (2008) highlights the transformative role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in language instruction, advocating for its systematic incorporation into pedagogical methodologies. Among these digital tools, eTwinning has emerged as a widely adopted collaborative platform across European schools, allowing teachers and students to engage in virtual exchanges that foster language proficiency, digital literacy, and intercultural competence (Vuorikari et al., 2012).

eTwinning projects take on various collaborative modalities, ranging from partnerships between institutions, educators, and students. Research on eTwinning's application in FL classrooms frequently emphasizes its role in boosting student motivation and social interaction. For instance, Carvalho (2007) and Fernández (2008) observed a significant increase in students' enthusiasm for language learning following their participation in eTwinning projects. Similarly, Pereira and Rocha (2007) conducted a semester-long study involving secondary school students in an eTwinning experience. Their findings revealed that students made notable progress in ICT competencies and intercommunicative skills, reinforcing the idea that digital collaboration enhances both linguistic and technical proficiencies.

Further research suggests that eTwinning can prevent student disengagement and improve motivation in FL learning. Sundqvist and Olin-Scheller (2013) argue that telecollaborative projects help teachers address lack of motivation and learning stagnation among secondary students. Additionally, Martínez (2012) found that the use of eTwinning and telecollaboration facilitated the development of communicative skills and formal linguistic structures. In an empirical study, Angelova and Zhao (2016) analyzed the grammatical development of 26 Chinese university students who engaged with American counterparts via email, Skype, and discussion boards. Their results indicated significant improvement in sentence structure and word order, highlighting the effectiveness of digital exchanges in refining linguistic accuracy. Similarly, Bueno-Alastuey and Kleban (2016) compared Polish and Spanish teacher trainees engaged in a telecollaborative project using English as a lingua franca. Their research found

positive effects on both written and oral language proficiency, supporting the pedagogical value of virtual language exchanges.

The integration of technology in foreign language (FL) education has gained prominence in the 21st century, as educational institutions increasingly emphasize innovation to enhance teaching and learning. Alcaraz-Mármol (2020) underscores the growing reliance on digital tools in FL instruction, emphasizing their role in modern pedagogical frameworks. Similarly, González (2008) highlights the transformative role of ICT in language instruction, advocating for its systematic incorporation into pedagogical methodologies. Among these digital tools, eTwinning has emerged as a widely adopted collaborative platform across European schools, allowing teachers and students to engage in virtual exchanges that foster language proficiency, digital literacy, and intercultural competence (Vuorikari et al., 2012).

According to Valderrama Cabello (2020), the integration of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) with ICT tools and eTwinning offers a comprehensive approach to enhancing foreign language acquisition. The study presents a teaching proposal designed to engage the educational community while prioritizing student motivation as a key component in lesson planning. The proposed didactic unit, titled "The World Around Us", was implemented in a 5th-grade primary education class with 25 students (12 girls and 13 boys) aged 10 to 11 in Andalucía. Over nine 60-minute sessions, students transitioned from exploring their immediate surroundings to developing a deeper understanding of their peers' cultural experiences in Essex, UK.

The Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Metodologie e Tecnologie Didattiche (Teaching Labs), introduced by the University of Verona in the 2017/18 academic year, exemplify an innovative model for preparing foreign language educators (Battisti, Bonadonna, Dalle Pezze, & Vettorel, 2023). These labs are designed to offer introductory training for aspiring teachers specializing in English, French, German, Spanish, and more recently, Russian (added in 2022/23). They form a central part of the Master's Degree in Comparative European and Non-European Languages and Literatures, enhancing its scope and potentially influencing future curricular frameworks in related degree programs. This initiative stands out as an original contribution to teacher education, given its distinctiveness within the region.

A hallmark of the Teaching Labs is their use of blended learning methodologies, which combine interactive teaching simulations, technology-driven strategies, and practical application. The program prioritizes the development of transferable skills, including technological proficiency, cultural awareness, and critical thinking capabilities. With its latest iteration, Teaching Labs: Methodologies, Technologies, and Practicum, the program continues to evolve, reinforcing its commitment to modernizing teacher preparation processes (Battisti et al., 2023). These characteristics position the Teaching Labs as a progressive model that could inspire similar initiatives across diverse educational contexts.

Furthermore, studies remark that out-of-classroom activities contribute significantly to enhancing foreign language speaking skills, particularly in non-English-speaking regions (Márquez Piedra, 2024). Among the three educational institutions examined, only El Baix Llobregat's Official Language School (EOI) currently implements an active eTwinning project for language learning. This project, focused on A1-level German students, is a multilingual and multilevel collaboration involving educational institutions from Spain, Italy, France, and Turkey. Although designed to facilitate language acquisition, its primary focus is on written communication rather than oral interaction.

Previous research on eTwinning-based learning suggests that while these projects encourage collaboration across cultural and linguistic boundaries, their impact on oral proficiency remains inconsistent. The teacher involved in the EOI project noted that earlier initiatives, which incorporated

video introductions, virtual meetings, and written exchanges, were more effective in developing students' spoken fluency. Through multiple recordings and structured interaction, students progressively refined their pronunciation and confidence. However, despite the pedagogical value of these activities, their absence of a final tangible product prevented them from receiving official eTwinning recognition. This finding highlights an institutional bias toward measurable outcomes over language acquisition processes.

The study underscores the importance of ICT resources in foreign language education, as digital tools provide students and teachers with greater access to diverse learning materials and interactive programs. These resources facilitate cross-border collaboration, offering insights into different educational systems and teaching methodologies. This interaction fosters cultural awareness while equipping students with valuable linguistic and digital competencies.

Identification of Knowledge Gaps and Areas for Further Research

Although studies on eTwinning projects in European educational institutions provide valuable insights, there remains a lack of research focused on Latin American EFL learners and regarding its impact on Spanish-speaking university students training to become English teachers. Given the linguistic and pedagogical demands of their profession, it is essential to examine how eTwinning can enhance their oral proficiency, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and teaching methodologies.

Given the socioeconomic and technological disparities in Latin America, further research is needed to assess:

The feasibility of eTwinning projects in Latin American EFL contexts, considering infrastructure limitations and access to technology.

The effectiveness of eTwinning for oral language development in Spanish-speaking EFL learners, particularly in settings where English exposure is minimal.

Alternative pedagogical models that could complement or enhance oral interaction within eTwinning frameworks for non-European EFL learners.

Despite the growing integration of ICT-based language learning in university curricula, studies have yet to explore the specific benefits and challenges of incorporating eTwinning in the training of future English teachers in Spanish-speaking countries. Key areas requiring further research include:

The role of eTwinning in improving oral fluency and teaching confidence: Future English teachers require high levels of spoken proficiency and classroom communication skills. However, there is limited research on how digital language exchanges impact their ability to develop fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and pedagogical communication techniques in real teaching scenarios.

The development of intercultural competence among prospective English teachers: Since eTwinning facilitates cross-cultural interactions, it has the potential to improve future educators' ability to integrate cultural perspectives into their teaching. Research should explore whether these projects contribute to cultural awareness, adaptability, and the integration of intercultural perspectives in lesson planning.

Challenges in implementing eTwinning in teacher education programs: Spanish-speaking university students pursuing an English teaching degree may encounter technological, institutional, or curriculum-related barriers in accessing eTwinning projects. Further research should examine faculty preparedness, digital literacy levels, and university support for virtual language exchanges.

Long-term effects of eTwinning on teaching methodology and classroom practices: While studies have shown that eTwinning improves motivation and ICT skills, there is limited evidence on whether future English teachers apply these skills in their professional careers. Longitudinal studies should track whether participants incorporate digital collaboration techniques and intercultural insights into their teaching methods after graduation.

Addressing these gaps will provide a comprehensive understanding of eTwinning's role in preparing Spanish-speaking university students for their future careers as English teachers. Additionally, it will help universities and language education programs refine their approaches to integrating ICT-based collaborations into teacher training curricula.

This study seeks to contribute to these discussions by analyzing the potential of eTwinning to enhance the linguistic, pedagogical, and intercultural competencies of future English teachers in Spanish-speaking contexts.

A study by Dooly & O'Dowd (2018) found that students' proficiency gaps sometimes lead to passive engagement, where EFL learners hesitate to communicate due to fear of making mistakes. Additionally, technological access remains a barrier in regions with limited internet connectivity and digital infrastructure (Helm, 2020).

DISCUSSION

The reviewed studies suggest that classroom twinning offers an effective approach for improving English proficiency and cultural competence. Interaction with native speakers allows EFL learners to practice authentic language use while gaining cultural insights. However, for successful implementation, institutions must address logistical challenges and ensure equitable participation.

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to the Research Question

Alcaraz-Marmol's (2020) outcomes of the study suggest that while eTwinning provides valuable opportunities for cultural and linguistic exchange, its effectiveness in improving oral proficiency depends largely on project design and implementation. According to Alcaraz-Mármol (2020), intercultural communication plays a crucial role in EFL education, yet most eTwinning projects emphasize written communication over spoken interaction. The literature highlights the motivational and collaborative benefits of eTwinning but also reveals certain limitations, particularly in its capacity to develop real-time spoken fluency. Although students engaged in eTwinning projects demonstrate improvements in digital literacy, grammar, and written communication, the impact on oral proficiency remains inconclusive. This raises questions about the pedagogical structures of eTwinning projects and whether they adequately prioritize oral language development.

The insights derived from Valderrama Cabello (2020) suggest that eTwinning, when integrated with CLIL methodology, significantly enhances students' engagement, digital literacy, and cultural awareness. The didactic unit analyzed in the study demonstrated a progressive approach to language learning, where students gradually expanded their knowledge from their local environment to an international perspective. This aligns with modern communicative approaches in language teaching, which emphasize authentic interaction and contextualized learning.

In addition, the data reported how innovative teaching frameworks, such as the Teaching Labs at the University of Verona, significantly contribute to the professional development of future language educators (Battisti, Bonadonna, Dalle Pezze, & Vettorel, 2023). By integrating interactive learning methods, digital technologies, and experiential training, the program ensures that students acquire practical skills and teaching strategies aligned with contemporary classroom environments. The

inclusion of these labs as a compulsory element within the curriculum highlights their potential to standardize innovative practices in teacher education.

The findings (Márquez Piedra, 2024) suggest that while eTwinning projects offer valuable cross-cultural learning experiences, their effectiveness in improving oral proficiency depends largely on how they are designed and implemented. The lack of a structured speaking component in the current project at EOI limits its potential for enhancing students' fluency. In contrast, the previous project, which incorporated video recordings and real-time interactions, yielded more significant improvements in oral competence. However, the inability to obtain official recognition due to the absence of a tangible final outcome raises concerns about institutional evaluation priorities that may inadvertently discourage speaking-focused initiatives.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study by Valderrama Cabello (2020) highlights the pedagogical value of technology-enhanced language learning, reinforcing the need for ICT-driven approaches in foreign language instruction. The theoretical implications suggest that digital collaboration platforms such as eTwinning support the development of both linguistic and intercultural competence, which are essential for global communication. From a practical perspective, the study emphasizes the importance of structured lesson planning, ensuring that CLIL-based activities promote both language acquisition and cross-cultural exchange.

For Latin American EFL learners, implementing eTwinning could provide greater exposure to authentic English communication, which is often limited due to geographical and linguistic constraints. However, the success of this approach depends on teacher preparedness, institutional support, and the availability of digital infrastructure.

From a theoretical perspective, the program aligns with constructivist learning theories, which emphasize active engagement, reflective practices, and real-world application. Its focus on blended learning and micro-teaching techniques reflects broader trends in educational modernization that advocate for hands-on, technology-mediated approaches.

Practically, the Teaching Labs model (Battisti, Bonadonna, Dalle Pezze, & Vettorel, 2023) demonstrates how institutions can:

Enhance student engagement and instructional adaptability through hybrid teaching models.

Build teachers' confidence and preparedness by providing realistic classroom practice opportunities.

Equip educators with digital and intercultural competencies essential for navigating diverse learning environments.

The findings (Márquez Piedra, 2024) highlight the need for a pedagogical shift in eTwinning projects to balance written and oral communication skills. While written exchanges are valuable, oral interaction is crucial for developing communicative competence. From a theoretical perspective, this supports the argument that task-based language learning (TBLT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be integrated into eTwinning projects to foster meaningful spoken interaction. Practically, institutions should consider:

Incorporating real-time video conferencing sessions to complement written exchanges.

Redefining eTwinning assessment criteria to value language development processes over final deliverables.

Providing teacher training to ensure educators can effectively facilitate oral practice in virtual exchanges.

Limitations of the Reviewed Literature and Their Impact on Understanding the Topic

Limitations of This Literature Review

While the literature highlights the pedagogical benefits of eTwinning and virtual exchange programs, certain limitations must be acknowledged when considering their implementation across diverse educational contexts. One of the most significant challenges is the time zone differences between countries that would participate in classroom twinning initiatives. Virtual exchanges require real-time interaction to maximize their impact on language acquisition, yet students in different regions may struggle to coordinate synchronous meetings due to significant time discrepancies.

Additionally, class schedules vary widely between educational systems, posing another barrier to effective collaboration. School and university calendars differ not only in daily timetables but also in academic year structures, meaning that students in one country might be in an academic break while their counterparts are still engaged in coursework. This discrepancy could hinder project continuity and reduce student engagement, particularly if participation relies heavily on scheduled synchronous interactions.

Moreover, technological disparities may further limit equitable participation. Some institutions may lack the infrastructure needed to facilitate virtual exchanges, particularly in regions where internet connectivity is unreliable or where access to digital devices is inconsistent. As a result, students from less technologically equipped environments might experience difficulty engaging in digital collaborations, potentially widening the gap between participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Another challenge is faculty preparedness for implementing technology-driven language learning. While research emphasizes the benefits of ICT integration in foreign language education, many educators may lack training in managing virtual exchange projects, designing engaging digital assignments, or using interactive online platforms effectively. Without sufficient professional development, eTwinning initiatives may not achieve their full potential in enhancing linguistic and intercultural competence.

Lastly, an overreliance on written communication has been observed in some eTwinning projects. While written exchanges provide valuable opportunities for language practice and intercultural learning, they do not fully address the need for oral proficiency development, which remains a key challenge in non-English-speaking regions. Future studies should explore strategies to increase real-time speaking opportunities in virtual exchange programs, ensuring that students benefit from authentic conversational practice in addition to written collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this literature review highlight the potential of classroom twinning and virtual exchange models in advancing English proficiency in low EF EPI-ranked countries. Research underscores the effectiveness of digital collaboration, particularly through eTwinning, in fostering language development, intercultural competence, and student engagement. Studies indicate that structured virtual interactions between EFL learners and native English speakers enhance linguistic abilities, digital fluency, and cross-cultural awareness. However, several challenges remain in ensuring the successful implementation of classroom twinning initiatives.

One of the primary obstacles is scheduling synchronous interactions due to time zone differences between participating institutions. Additionally, curriculum variations and scheduling conflicts limit

students' availability for real-time discussions. Unequal access to digital resources further exacerbates disparities, particularly in regions with limited technological infrastructure. Another challenge is the dominance of written communication in virtual exchanges, which may not sufficiently address the need for spoken language practice, a crucial element of effective English acquisition.

Addressing the Limitations for Future Research

To mitigate these challenges, future research should explore:

Best practices for scheduling synchronous interactions that accommodate time zone differences while maintaining meaningful engagement.

Blended learning models that combine real-time and asynchronous activities, ensuring flexibility while maintaining immersive language experiences.

The impact of technological disparities on student engagement in eTwinning projects, along with potential solutions for equitable access.

Teacher training programs to equip educators with digital competencies and pedagogical strategies necessary for effective virtual exchange facilitation.

Innovative methods to increase oral interaction within virtual exchanges, ensuring that spoken fluency is prioritized alongside digital literacy and intercultural competence.

By addressing these limitations, future research can enhance the effectiveness of eTwinning as a tool for global language learning, ensuring that students—regardless of their geographic location or technological access—can fully engage in and benefit from virtual exchange programs.

Practical Implications

The results of this study highlight several practical applications for integrating classroom twinning into EFL curricula:

Universities should embed eTwinning-based exchanges within teacher training programs, equipping future educators with digital collaboration skills.

Educators should receive specialized training to facilitate virtual exchange projects, focusing on speaking proficiency and cross-cultural communication.

Institutions must ensure technological support to reduce the digital divide, ensuring equal access to online language learning resources.

By proactively addressing these challenges and leveraging innovative virtual collaboration strategies, classroom twinning can become a transformative tool in English language education, particularly in regions where traditional language instruction remains inadequate. Implementing structured, technology-enhanced learning experiences will not only bridge linguistic and cultural gaps but also prepare students for global academic and professional opportunities.

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