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Power, Politeness and Liquid Persona: Intercultural Reflection and Virtual Exchange in Teacher Education

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This article explores pre-service English teachers' self-reflections as participants in online intercultural exchange (VE). The aim is twofold: to examine participants' perceptions of intercultural experiences in response to VE; and, to understand whether and how teacher trainees gain pedagogical insights through self-reflection situated in a cross-cultural online project. The study draws upon two iterations of exploratory research in a VE-project carried out with two cohorts of student groups. The first cycle involved students in Indonesia and Sweden, and the second cycle, a three-way collaboration, involved students in Argentina, Poland and Sweden. This article focuses on the Swedish side and examines empirical data incorporating e-diaries and interviews. A qualitative transcript analysis generated three intersecting themes: language and power, politeness, and participation through digital tools. Two theoretical constructs provide the analytical lens: *persona* (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2014) and *liquid interculturality* (Dervin & Dirba, 2006). The findings challenge fixed notions of identity and interculturality, showing how participants engage in negotiations and fluid constructions of persona in response to perceived expectations of their interlocutors. The findings also indicate affordances of VE as a lingua franca contact zone in developing pre-service English teachers' self-awareness and pedagogical competences.

Keywords: interculturality; identity; self-reflection; teacher education; virtual exchange

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Virtual Exchange (VE) is steadily going mainstream as a pedagogical tool in teacher education and foreign language learning. VE broadly describes pedagogical models of engaging students "in online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partner classes from other cultural contexts or geographical locations under the guidance of educators" (O'Dowd and Lewis, 2016, p. 3). Unsurprisingly, this educational approach has gained significant attention in the context of teacher education and language learning. A rapidly changing and interconnected world, and the current situation of remote teaching in a global pandemic, places new demands on tomorrow's teachers, who must be equipped with 21st century knowledge and skills to facilitate learning in culturally diverse, multilingual and increasingly digitalized school contexts. Internationalization and global engagement are key concepts in higher education today, and intercultural competence is a central aspect of second and foreign language education (e.g. Kramsch, 2014). The aim of incorporating VE in teacher and language education is twofold: to promote participants' own communicative, intercultural and critical digital literacies; and, at the same time, to offer teacher trainees 'learning-by-doing' opportunities by experiencing a pedagogical approach highly relevant for their future profession as language teachers. Thus, VE, with "its multiple demands and diverse sociocultural contexts, reflects the complexity of the real world for which we are preparing our students to be actively engaged in" (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 101).

Through exploratory research (Müller-Hartmann, 2012), this study draws upon two iterations of a VE-project carried out as a tandem between student groups from Indonesia and Sweden in the first cycle, and as a three-way collaboration between students in Argentina, Poland, and Sweden in the second cycle. The study shines a spotlight on the Swedish side and examines empirical data incorporating student e-diaries and interviews. The study at hand is part of a larger research project exploring critical literacies in virtual exchange.

Narrowing in on participant perceptions, this study combines two constructs, *persona* (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2014) and *liquid interculturality* (Dervin & Dirba, 2006) as an analytical lens for understanding students' self-reflections on identity and intercultural awareness during VE. Situated

within the broader discussion of 'interculturality' in online collaboration, the study contributes a close reading of students' self-reflections in a Swedish teacher education context. Although considerable research has been devoted to intercultural competence in VE, less attention has been paid to affordances of online exchange in teacher trainees' self-discovery and development towards becoming reflective practitioners. The study seeks to contribute to current conversations on conceptualizations of interculturality and identity in the context of VE, language teaching and teacher education (Dooly, 2020; Helm, 2018).

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to explore whether and how self-reflection might foster pre-service English teachers' critical intercultural awareness through participation in a lingua franca virtual exchange project integrated into a teacher education course in Sweden. Embedded in this aim is the question of how participants perceive of their own and others' identities online, and how 'interculturality' can be understood in the context of online collaboration. The following research questions guide the study:

- What notions about their own identity and intercultural awareness came to the fore in pre-service English teachers' self-reflections as a result of virtual exchange experiences?

- What are the affordances of virtual exchange in fostering participants' development as reflective pedagogical practitioners and future English teachers?

2. Background

Through student self-reflections, this study addresses conceptualizations of identity and intercultural awareness in VE. Recent studies call attention to ways in which computer mediated collaboration (CMC) facilitates different kinds of encounters, requiring alternative ways of understanding identity and intercultural awareness in online spaces (Dervin, 2014; Hauck, 2019; Helm, 2018). As part of a critical shift, scholars are highlighting how "the increased hybridization of learners' identities warrants a fresh look at [intercultural communication]" (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2016, p. 131).

2.1 Revisiting 'intercultural'

Since the emergence of the field, a central question in VE-research concerns how online exchange can promote intercultural awareness (O'Dowd, 2016). However, interculturality is not a static concept. Byram's (1997) model for intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been the dominating framework for evaluating learners' intercultural competence in VE (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). At the most basic premise, ICC refers to "the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language" (Byram, 1997, p. 71). The model has been subject to scrutiny because of its potentially reductionist assumptions of culture, and of language learners as a limited category incompatible with the complexities of a globalized world (Beltz, 2007; Helm & Guth, 2010). The ICC-framework was however developed prior to the technological revolution of the Internet, and as such, was not originally conceived with digital encounters in mind. Helm and Guth (2010, p. 70) propose that, while Byram's comprehensive ICC-model is still useful, it must be re-appraised and expanded to meet the "multifarious goals" of networked learning in a technologically advanced era.

Beyond Virtual Exchange, intercultural education has undergone deep-seated transformation over the past decades (Rings & Rasinger, 2020). Scholars describe a 'critical turn' in intercultural and foreign language education (Dasli & Díaz, 2018). Dasli and Díaz (2018) identify two pivotal turning points, both catapulted by the reconceptualization of culture, and subsequently merging language and intercultural education. Firstly, critique of essentialist concepts of culture prompted a shift away from product-oriented, monolithic perspectives, and towards multifaceted, process-oriented, notions of culture and language; and secondly, this epistemological turn highlighted criticality, both in terms of learners' individual reflexive capacities and regarding pedagogical approaches to sociopolitical structures of inequality and power (Dasli & Diaz, 2018).

The critical turn is also apparent in VE research. In a recent interview, Dooly (2020) calls for a re-examination of interculturality:

> … there is one aspect that … virtual exchange is bringing out that maybe hasn't been discussed much, because it's considered old fashioned … [there is a] need to revisit and interrogate

> interculturality. It's a term a lot of people don't even want to use anymore, they prefer 'global citizenship' … and I don't know what other terms ... that whole aspect needs to be interrogated again … (p. 80)

The view of interculturality as 'old fashioned' relates to dominant patterns in foreign language education of framing content according to monolithic ideas of culture and identity. Critics have unveiled essentialist views of culture as not only reductionist, but prone to perpetuate Eurocentric discourses by disguising complexity and power (Dazli & Diaz, 2018; Dervin 2014). In spite of this widely acknowledged paradigm shift, interculturality has yet to be dislodged from product-oriented representations of culture. Thus, avoiding *interculturality*, as Dooly (2020) notes above, can be a strategy to signpost awareness that to align education with the complexity of real-world sociopolitical issues, the contents of language teaching must push "beyond food, festival, folklore, and fashion" (Meyer and Rhoades, 2006).

Regarding VE practices, scholars have called for a stronger focus on critical reflection (Ware and Kramsch, 2005). For instance, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) underscore that, without systematic reflexivity, cross-cultural collaboration does not automatically foster intercultural understanding. The use of reflection tasks is common in VE practice. Nevertheless, research specifically focused on self-reflection in VE remains limited, and the study at hand seeks to contribute to filling this gap (Lenkaitis, 2020). The focus on reflexivity assumes openness to how participants themselves choose to construe identity and interculturality. This is articulated in Helm's (2018) notion of "emerging identities" which provides a point of departure for understanding VE as a:

> reflective, experiential approach to education which aims to encourage participants to engage with difference, to assess and interrogate information and perspectives, and to explore and negotiate identities, their own as well as those of others, through online, intercultural interactions with distant peers. (Helm, 2018, p. 6.)

Helm's (2018) definition aligns with the more recently emerging research area of critical digital literacies, where intercultural awareness becomes inseparable from dimensions of power, ideology, and abilities "to read the world critically" (Hauck, 2019, p. 191).

The study at hand approaches VE as a computer mediated 'contact zone' where participants construct online identities in relation to their interlocutors and the virtual environment (Dooly, 2011; Dervin, 2014). In a study involving pre-service teachers, Dooly (2011) applies the concept of third space (Bhabha, 1994) and argues that, rather than readily drawing upon national or ethnic identities, participants in her study took on roles primarily on the basis of being *teacher-trainees* acting, for pedagogical purposes, in the situated context of a virtual space. In conjunction with Helm and Guth's (2010) call for a reappraisal of the traditional model of ICC, Dooly (2011) challenges established notions of interculturality in VE by proposing that networked learning entails a different, hybrid experience – one that cannot be adequately understood by applying a framework intended for offline encounters. Furthermore, this entails a widening perspective from "the instrumental to the symbolic dimensions of language that accounts for its awesome power to affect people's view of themselves and the world" (Kramsch, 2020, p. 3).

2.2 Analytical framing

In this study, self-reflection is broadly informed by Schön's (1987) theories about reflection-in-practice and reflection-on-practice. Furthermore, reflection is defined as "a self-critical, exploratory process through which teachers 'consider the effect of their pedagogical decisions on their situated practice with the aim of improving those practices'" (Tripp & Rich, 2012, p. 678 as cited by Lenkaitis, 2020).

Two constructs provide the analytical lens for understanding teacher trainees' self-reflections as participants in VE: *liquid interculturality* (Dervin & Dirba, 2006) and *persona* (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013). Dervin and Dirba (2006) propose that, "the next key in building up a link between educational goals in LTL and the realities of society is *liquid interculturality,* or considering any encounter to be based on *liquid individuals* rather than *solid* representatives of cultures" (p. 260). Hence, the use of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of *liquidity* serves to interrogate fixed notions of culture and identity, and to emphasize interculturality as polysemic, fluid, relational and situated. In underscoring that interculturality does not exist without 'the other,' Dervin (2020) further calls into question the conventional tendency to view intercultural competence as something which is accomplished by the individual, more or less detached from the interlocutor. From a liquid

perspective, interculturality is situated within interaction, emerging from inconsistencies, power-relations, feelings, co-constructions of identity and self-discovery.

In developing a paradigm "beyond orthodoxies," Dervin (2020) challenges widely accepted approaches to interculturality, and questions whether key notions in intercultural discourse such as *competence*, *open-mindedness* and *attitudes* can really be understood – and *measured* – according to progressively linear and hierarchical matrices. The question, moreover, is not only *how* do we measure qualities such as 'openness' or 'empathy,' but also *who* measures? Dervin (2020) problematizes how accepted systems of assessing ICC become implemented in teacher education programs and school curricula within as well as beyond Europe.

In the context of VE, Dervin and Dirba's (2006) approach to intercultural awareness is particularly useful in combination with Hinrichsen and Coomb's (2013) fifth resource *Persona* from their five-resource model for a critical digital literacy curriculum. Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013) propose *Persona* as a construct for understanding identity, performance, and participation in the polysemic context of digital environments. Thus, the methodological meshing of *liquid interculturality* and *persona* provides an analytical tool for understanding ways in which 'interculturality' operates in the virtual contact zone. This approach is further outlined in the analysis section below.

3. Method

This qualitative study is based on practitioner research in an exploratory-oriented research design specifically developed in relation to virtual exchange to study and understand VE participants' experiences through "introspective or emic data" (Müller-Hartmann, 2016, p. 33).

3.1 Research participants and research context

The study incorporates two iterations of a transnational VE-project. The first cycle was carried out as a tandem between student groups from Indonesia and Sweden. The second cycle was designed as a three-way collaboration between students in Argentina, Poland, and Sweden. The participating classes came from different disciplines: 11 students in teacher education in Indonesia; 22 students in teacher education and communication studies in Argentina; 22 students in a tourism program in

Poland; 11 + 22 students in English teacher education in Sweden. One instructor from each country participated in designing and running the project. Students were organized into cross-cultural groups. The project was carried out in English as lingua franca, and English language proficiency ranged from B1 to C1 (which according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR, indicates basic to advanced level).

The study focuses on the participants in Sweden. With two student cohorts, VE was integrated into a course for pre-service English teachers. A total of 33 students from Sweden participated (11+22). The ten-week course, delivered twice, had a blended design. The purpose of integrating VE into the course was to engage teacher trainees in online intercultural communication and collaboration via English as a lingua franca. Thus, pre-service teachers gained first-hand, learning-by-doing, experiences of VE as a pedagogical approach that they might implement with their own learners in the future.

3.2 Virtual learning environment (VLE), tools and tasks

There were three layers of various digital tools used in the project. Firstly, a platform in Canvas provided the collective VLE. Secondly, each cross-cultural group autonomously selected communication tools used throughout the project. Thirdly, each group negotiated the choice of digital tools for the collaborative creation of a multimodal text.

The project design was inspired by the three-stage task sequence as developed by O'Dowd and Ware (2009). However, a fourth stage was added for collaborative meta-reflection in the student groups once the main tasks were completed. In the first stage, students connected in small groups and engaged in introductory activities. The second task-stage focused on critical analysis of websites. In the third task, students co-created multimodal texts in response to a global issue. Finally, the project was concluded through collaborative evaluations. Participants communicated weekly both synchronously through videoconferences and asynchronously through chat messages.

3.3 Data, procedure, and analysis

The study draws upon two types of data: reflective e-diaries and semi-structured interviews with students. The e-diary consisted of a downloadable template with guidelines structured according

to the task sequence and providing a tool for reflective process-writing spanning six weeks. Students were encouraged to include screenshots and multimodal sources to illustrate examples from interaction. All 33 participants submitted extensive e-diaries.

After completing the course, 19 students volunteered for retrospective interviews. Hence, while e-diaries provided *reflection-in-action*, retrospective interviews contributed *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1987). The interviews were conducted via Zoom according to a semi-structured format; that is, informants had access to an interview-guide beforehand, but conversations were intended to be open and flexible. According to Heigham and Croker (2009), the aim should be to allow "the interview to develop naturally so that the respondent does not feel that they are simply replying to questions" (p. 186). The interviews were part of a follow-up process as the conversations functioned as "extension of information from other sources" (Hatch 2002, p. 92). In a double layered refection procedure, the interviews allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the reflective e-diaries and were conducted individually and in pairs via Zoom. The 30-60 minutes conversations were recorded and transcribed in full (Hatch, 2002).

The initial analysis of e-diary documents and interview transcripts was carried out through qualitative content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This entailed, firstly, a close reading and rereading of transcripts, and secondly, preliminary identification of reoccurring and prominent themes emerging from the data. This was followed by a systematic coding process aimed at organizing key themes and identifying patterns across e-diaries and interview transcripts.

The next stage of the analysis combined two constructs: *liquid interculturality* and *persona*. Dervin and Dirba's (2006, p. 261) non-linear model is useful in outlining four descriptors pertaining to critical reflection and liquid intercultural capacities. The descriptors shine a spotlight on whether and how participants: 1) are willing and capable of engaging with interlocutors in a lingua franca, and actively look for strategies to enable communication; 2) attempt to de-center from their own culture and scrutinize that which they take for granted; 3) are able to recognize 'national culture' as an over-simplistic construct in intercultural communication; 4) are able to recognize that all identities, also their own, are multifaceted and shifting according to context and interlocutors.

Hinrichsen and Coomb's (2013) concept of *persona* compliments the above model by providing a tool for understanding participants' reflections as particularly situated within a digital space. The theory stipulates *persona* as follows: "Sensitivity to the issues of reputation, identity and membership within different digital contexts. The purposeful management and calibration of one's online persona. Developing a sense of belonging and a confident participant role." (p. 12). The concept of *persona* thus incorporates three non-linear dimensions characterized as awareness of: 1) different ways in which multiple identity constructions, roles and relationships play out in digital settings; 2) how to manage reputation as an asset in interaction; 3) how to participate and collaborate effectively with interlocutors through different modes, synchronously as well as asynchronously, and how this involves "ethical and cultural challenges" (Hinrichsen and Coombs, 2013, p. 12). Furthermore, the analysis of teacher trainees' self-reflections is informed by Schön's theories on reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as a means to uncover implicit knowledge and develop new insights through exploratory practice (1987).

3.4 Ethical considerations

The study follows the ethical framework for social science research as stipulated by the *Swedish Research Council* (2017). This entails requirements for confidentiality, consent, information and autonomy. Students were informed about research aims, and about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or consequences. All students signed forms indicating their consent to participate in the study by contributing e-diaries and recorded oral interviews. Alphabetical letters are used to refer to individual students in the text. The study was approved by the *Swedish Research Ethics Committee.*

4. Findings and Discussion

The guiding research questions in this study concern how pre-service English teachers reflect on their own identities in the context of online exchange, and whether participation in VE heightened their intercultural awareness and pedagogical understandings as reflective practitioners. The questions are explored and answered through the emergence of a theme related to tensions and dynamics in establishing themselves and gaining a voice online. This theme entailed three

interconnected strands expressed in e-diaries and then subsequently explored further in interviews: (1) Proficiency and power; (2); Politeness and liquid persona; (3) Participating through digital tools.

4.1 Proficiency and power

Unsurprisingly, the participants, as pre-service language teachers, were aware of power-dynamics related to language use prior to the project; nevertheless, this is a common theme in student reflections. As one participant notes, "an important insight was this whole issue about language as power" and how "Swedes are perceived as … high up on the hierarchy of proficient English speakers" (J). This notion of Swedes as fluent English speakers is not uncommon. Says one participant: "if you've travelled at all, you know that this is the way we're often seen abroad" (A). Thus, being viewed as proficient was not necessarily a novelty for students. However as exemplified below, this taken-for-granted assumption often entailed more complex power dynamics in the exchange:

> F: Now as I think about it, I realize something about how we were perceived. I think there was an image – both from Poland and Argentina – about Swedes as being so good at English and therefore *by default being competent* and good at a lot of other stuff as well ... It felt a little as if the others got nervous sometimes when they talked to us … but we didn't think so much about … it does explain a whole lot though, in terms of how people acted ...

This de-centering from assumptions based on national identity fosters self-dialogue as F contemplates how such assumptions might have impacted interaction and power dynamics in her group (Dervin & Dirba, 2006). Furthermore, expectations linked to national identity functions as a type of backdrop in students' reflections on VE. In other words, 'Swedishness' becomes a 'tag' to relate to as individuals establish a persona in relation to their online partners (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013). Some participants describe surprise and unease about finding themselves positioned as an unspoken leader in the transcultural group:

> D: I don't see myself as someone who usually takes on a leadership role – I see myself as … well, of course as one in the group. I have never ever been someone who takes charge as the leader … It's just never been what I do. So, you know, it was very strange to end up in *this*. I don't know what I think about it, but it sure was interesting.

The VE partnerships were deliberately organized as to connect L2 students located in different corners of the world and with varying levels of proficiency. For pre-service teachers in Sweden, this variety of linguistic proficiency resembles the diverse English levels that they are likely to meet as teachers in multilingual classrooms in Sweden today.

The e-diaries and interviews indicate how the pre-service teachers tended to view and present themselves primarily as teachers, or as dual learner/teachers, in the context of the VE-project. As Dooly (2011) has argued, students construct temporary 'membership identities' suitable for the online contact zone. One student confirms this notion and recalls how in the partnership with students from Jakarta, "we ended up taking charge and sort of becoming leaders" (O). She admits that "it was a bit awkward" but "very enlightening from an intercultural perspective, to think about how you take on a particular role in a new group and a new cultural setting" (O). As apparent in the excerpt below, the participants in Sweden express how this entailed conscious efforts at modifying and adapting language use to fit the situation.

> G: We had to adapt communication a lot but that was easy. But it was interesting to discover how the others perceived us Swedes – all the others, both from Argentina and Poland, started by apologizing so much for their 'bad' English … in our first video-meeting! I just kept saying 'What?! No, it's really good English you all have. Don't worry at all about that now.

In accordance with Hinrichsen and Coombs' (2013) fifth resource for critical digital literacies, participants performed an online persona suitable for the particular task and context at hand. Pre-service teachers on the Swedish side tended to draw upon their identities as teacher trainees in the online interaction. In the following example, one trainee grounds her online persona in her role as pre-service English teacher to actively support her interlocutors:

> E: I thought it was valuable to try different strategies in our communication and see what were to happen if I spoke … more clearly in English, with straight questions and more attention to the individual, by for example using names more … will the communication be better between me and, say, someone from Argentina who is a little more insecure about their English? And that was of course the case. It's a really good experience as a teacher! And I might have

> immigrant learners in my future classes, and they might not be that good at English. I mean, it's really valuable to know how to adapt your language and your communication. It's a challenge to find strategies to make others talk if they feel insecure about English.

E actively explores communication strategies, drawing upon previous pedagogical knowledge and experiences and, at the same time, consciously constructing and testing new skills for her future profession. E and many of her peers demonstrate not only willingness and ability to communicate with their transnational partners, but by means of a teacher persona they also show agentive efforts at de-centering from taken-for-granted aspects of their own reality (Dervin & Dirba, 2006; Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013). The process of reflexive de-centering fosters self-discovery, as apparent when the participants, in the position as learners, experience ways in which language use, beyond the mere instrumental level, is negotiated and co-created in online interaction.

Online intercultural communication thus has the potential of bringing aspects of power to the fore. F reflects on how she "got the impression that [our group members] didn't want us to look down on them because of the language level". The comment below indicates growing self-awareness as she grapples with power dynamics emerging in her group:

> F: I gained a lot of insight about language use … I became aware of how much academic English we actually use at the university. And it was obvious how we had to really work on adapting the language in the VE. Especially so as not to act condescending towards anyone – because this obviously had nothing to do with their intellectual level, it was all just simply about language. My Swedish partner and I worked together to explain and clarify what we meant.

Working together through English as a lingua franca placed different kinds of expectations and demands on the participants depending on their level of proficiency. As evident in the data, this process proved both rewarding and frustrating. A few trainees discussed possible benefits of working with native speakers instead, whereas most students, as in the excepts above, appreciated the value of having to negotiate and adapt language as an intrinsic component of intercultural, lingua franca communication. One student expressed ambivalence:

> C: I guess language-wise it might have been better for us to collaborate with native-speakers, since it would have been more challenging. But I also think that in that case many of us would have *taken the position* [author's italics] of the Polish students instead – kind of introvert and inferior … Even if we should not act like that as future teachers of course! [laughter].

On the one hand, C resorts to generalizations of her Polish partners, linking essentialized notions of national identity with expected linguistic skills; however, on the other, her reflection indicates that she perceives online positioning as a persona 'taken on' and calibrated according to, in this perception, an implicit hierarchy where native speakers rank the highest (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013). Again, a 'tagging' of national identity serves as a backdrop for reflection. C acknowledges the gap in-between her interlocutors' image of her, versus her own evaluation of her language skills: "well it was definitely a first time that ***I*** have ever been seen as the best English speaker in a group!" She elaborates:

> C: with power comes responsibility … we ended up in a position that we were not used to – we were expected to take charge, and sort of act like teachers in a way. It was a really successful experience for us as part of our training for the teaching profession. But this was totally unexpected for me. A sort of hidden power-perspective.

Student reflections suggest that working in the third-space contact zone offered unique opportunities for self-discovery in the dual role of learner/future teacher (Dooly, 2011). Lingua franca VE disrupts the "long tradition of teaching culture by introducing the national culture of native speakers of a language being taught/learnt" (Dervin & Dirba, 2006). As Dervin (2020) holds, liquid interculturality is a process of being and becoming, modifying, and adapting ones' speech and performance in the interaction *with* interlocutors. The examples above indicate the potential of systematic in-depth reflection in unveiling 'hidden power' perspectives and fostering intercultural awareness (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Dooly (2011) uses the term 'membership identities' to illustrate how her students constructed themselves first and foremost as teachers in the online setting. This corresponds with how many of the teacher trainees in Sweden described their experiences. Furthermore, the data indicates how lingua franca VE fostered metacognitive perspectives on language and power dynamics in communication; in other words, the project

supported participants in becoming reflective practitioners and developing pedagogical insights (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019). Being perceived as a proficient English speaker prompted trainees, albeit at times reluctantly, to "act like teachers" and to become conscious of their own activities (C). Helm's (2018) notion of 'emerging identities' captures this process, as we shall see in the following section.

4.2 Politeness and liquid persona

Politeness in online lingua franca collaboration is a reoccurring theme in the data. Politeness relates to sociocultural norms or conventions shared by a particular group; whereas "'intercultural norms are norms that are adopted between cultures to govern relations among people when they interact with each other cross-culturally" (Evanoff, 2020, p. 188). A common insight in student reflections concerns how "beyond linguistics, communication is cultural, and a big part of it is, what's polite in different cultures?" (B). One student recalled how she became "very conscious" of adapting her language use to match the politeness of her interlocutors, "because that's not really part of Swedish language …" (H). This is a common idea in the reflections, showing how participants express heightened self-awareness by paying close attention to how social norms manifested in language play out in online interaction. As exemplified by the quote below, many of the participants on the Swedish side discovered that, although they were often perceived as proficient English speakers, *how* they spoke become a new concern for themselves in establishing reputation in the group (Hinrichsen and Coombs, 2013). One student said:

> N: I remember paying attention to the way I speak. Swedes and the Swedish culture is often very direct and can be perceived as rude or unpolite. I had to think about using words like thank you, please and also how I expressed myself. I had to really think about being polite and not so blunt in my speaking.

The excerpt illustrates willingness to actively adapt speech and de-center from a notion of 'Swedishness' which, according to participants' own views, could potentially cause unease or embarrassment in the cross-cultural context (Dervin & Dirba, 2006). This generalization of their own national identity reoccurs as a taken-for-granted trope in student reflections; there is, however,

no indication in the data that the VE-partners in the other cultures actually *did* perceive Swedes as rude.

Nevertheless, the notion of politeness as fostering self-awareness is prominent in the reflections. In what Evanoff (2020, p. 190) refers to as "meta-ethical positions," students express critical awareness of how adaptation operated in the process of establishing persona in relation to group members through intercultural dialogue. In grappling with this, one student highlights how: "you have to listen very carefully to what they say, or even to what they probably intend to say" (N). As Dervin (2020) emphasizes, the process of gaining intercultural competence cannot exist without the 'other' as self-awareness emanates from interaction. Yet, as highlighted by Moloney and Oguro (2018), "most definitions [of ICC] refer only to the one who has 'achieved' the competence and ignore the influence of the interlocutor and the context in which interaction may be taking place" (p. 185). Student reflections underscore the entangled process of learning *with*, rather than *about* VE-partners. Hence, engaging with 'otherness' becomes a locus of self-discovery (Helm, 2018). This is highlighted in the following quote:

> I: I thought a lot about how I adjusted my speaking with them … I tried to be as polite as possible … sort of in a way *trying to mimic them*. I tried to ask a lot of questions, because I noticed how they asked us a lot of questions. I also wanted to do that to make them feel comfortable. (author's emphasis)

The excerpt shows sensitivity and awareness of how online persona is shaped and aligned according to ethical and cultural codes in the group, and how politeness plays a key role in establishing membership and reputation (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013). Such liquid notions of identity reveal "how interlocutors co-construct and negotiate their representations about who they are" (Dervin, 2014, p. 196).

At the same time, the data indicates that distant peers in the VE-groups tended to, in fact, remain *distant*. In other words, most participants did not develop closer friendship bonds; rather, they established friendly working-relationships. One student noted: "I wanted to ask our Indonesian partners about some things … but I didn't because it felt too sensitive" (M). One reason behind

this lack of closeness might be the relatively short time span of the VE-project. Over the course of six weeks students focused on managing time, solving problems and carrying out tasks together. Several students commented on how the group atmosphere suddenly changed and became much more spontaneous and personal in the final week once all the tasks were completed. Another explanation is that the interaction was situated in institutional education. When asked whether she would remain friends with her partners after the project, one student, who was enthusiastic about the VE experience, responded: "some of us might stay in touch on Facebook, but if not, that's ok, you know it's just different when it's part of a course" (A). Moreover, distance could be seen as a benefit:

> E: I think there are advantages to being strangers … you become more conscious of not just pushing your own agenda in the group … you make more of an effort to actually listen to what the others are saying … because you need to learn bits and pieces from other ways of looking at things … you're just not as aware of this in 'regular' group work.

Unsurprisingly however, distanced online politeness is often ambiguous and difficult to interpret. One participant expressed concern when critical questions were "met with silence" in the cross-cultural group:

> O: It's important to emphasize critical aspects in VE. It's the part that gives this kind of project a real intercultural understanding, because if you leave it to the superficial, beautiful parts, then it doesn't so much become part of a real understanding – we might instead get stuck in stereotypes, and that's not the point.

This excerpt echoes scholarly attention to risks of superficiality in online exchange (Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Research shows, however, how task-design, scaffolding and systematically supported reflection can lay the foundation for fostering teacher trainees' metacognitive and professional development (Kurek and Müller-Hartmann, 2019). The excerpt above indicate awareness of how intercultural interaction might unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes, and that this understanding is vital for teachers. This aspect needs to be made visible, and by engaging in VE as part of their own education, future teachers are able to experience pitfalls

first-hand. In a few cases, participants themselves resorted to simplistic and static explanations of interlocutors' behaviors: "I'm really confused about the work ethics in their country" (T). However, in most cases trainees recognized 'national culture' as a misleading source of explanation in intercultural communication. Says one participant: "It's a bit warped to encounter a culture through a single person. I kept reflecting on that throughout the VE … is this something cultural or is it this person?" (B).

In this study, the data reveals transformative aspects of VE. Exemplified in the following extract, retrospective self-reflection can be transformative:

> K: In the VE I think I learned more about myself than about Indonesians. Especially, as I wrote in my reflections, about all these little things like the fact that they always thanked us, and the politeness. They were so grateful ... And it's quite clear as I'm talking about it now … that was something that stuck with me … why aren't we grateful in our culture? … Or just showing appreciation … just a lot of these small things that you noticed through VE and applied to your own culture - it made you reflect back on yourself and your own culture more critically.

Another student realized that: "The people I have encountered during this project proved my preconceived notions wrong and made me more critical of the way I view other cultures" (D). As Kurek and Muller Hartmann (2019) show, experiential learning through VE coupled with in-depth reflection, can promote "participants' epistemic engagement and, with that, the transformation of their teacher identities and the development of new teaching competences" (p. 52-53).

Politeness in VE lingua franca is an intricate part of building reputation and managing a fluid identity in online intercultural communities. In this study, data shows how, through calibration of persona (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013), most participants actively used strategies to engage with interlocutors in the lingua franca, scrutinize that which is taken for granted, and show awareness of their own identity as liquid, multifaceted and adaptable (Dervin and Dirba, 2006). Albeit not referring to VE, Evanoff (2020) emphasizes "third-culture building" as a space involving negotiation of our own as well as others' cultural ethics, "since any cultural norm is simply an idea,

it can be re-evaluated through critical reflection" (p. 197). VE constitutes such a third space contact zone, but politeness remains an underexplored area of research to date.

4.3 Participating through digital tools

Students' self-reflections on proficiency, power and politeness is situated and understood in light of what Dooly (2011) refers to as the 'third space' (Bhaba, 1994) contact zone in VE. Computer mediated communication (CMC) accentuates ways in which participants use verbal and non-verbal language to construct meaning and establish persona (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013). In other words, it matters that collaboration is done digitally. For instance, in this study politeness became augmented online since chat interactions remained visible through writing as well as through memes and emojis. Hauck (2019) emphasizes that "VE can help learners become aware of how operating in digital spaces shapes ways of thinking and doing and how we perceive otherness" (p. 191). In the study at hand, this pertains especially to awareness of how participants perceived and performed *self*. Thus, this final section highlights affordances of digital tools and ways in which some group members were able to help each other in establishing voice in the online contact zone. This also entails pre-service teachers' experiences of synchronous versus asynchronous interaction and reflections on their own dual role as learner and future teacher (Dooly, 2011).

One initial activity in the VE-task design was for participants to choose suitable communication tools for their group. This process prompted reflections concerning ways in which digital tools impact activity (Pangrazio et al., 2020). In the words of one student: "I think different digital tools will bring out different things in people – you need to have options available for learners" (M). One group experienced initial communication breakdown as they had opted for a tool which actually turned out to hinder interaction; once they negotiated a switch to a chat forum, they were able to interact regularly. The following example indicates critical awareness of how *using* digital tools is not a neutral activity (Hinrichsen and Coombs, 2013):

> N: … we had to apply our own critical literacy skills in choosing our own tools .. certain activities demanded different digital tools, so it had like a trial-and-error part … that's the best way you learn. Some tools are good for some things and not for other things, but it was also about what tools you feel most confident with and how you actually negotiate this in the group

> … *language, culture and the digital all come together*. I thought it was really good the way that was all planned out in the tasks, as it demanded different types of tools being used. And I think we should let our own students do that as well. (author's emphasis)

In the quotes above both M and N acknowledge their own growth as learners while simultaneously commenting on their experiences from the meta-perspective of becoming future teachers. VE opened up new ways of understanding and evaluating affordances of digital tools from the inside. As an element of the persona resource, Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013) elaborate on *participating* as "the ability to work with others in a variety of modes (e.g. synchronous and asynchronous) via digital interaction and exchange" (p. 12). This entails awareness of ways in which individuals are able to contribute to activities, and how "ethical and cultural" issues emerge in the process (p. 12). Even agreeing on a chat application could be controversial. One student describes "a digital discovery" as the Argentinian students did not use *Messenger* at all and preferred *Whatsapp,* whereas the European group members insisted on using *Messenger*. "We had to fight pretty hard on both sides for our cause [laughter] and negotiate who was going to listen to who" (D). The issue of choosing an app might seem insignificant, even petty, however the ensuing debate, carried out in a lingua franca and situated in a cross-cultural contact zone, is fertile grounds not only for language development but also for establishing voice through intercultural communicative competence and digital literacies.

In the process of participating, students describe diverse experiences of how synchronous and asynchronous communication influenced performance and persona. Synchronous Zoom meeting could enhance as well as hamper communication. Many students found video meetings essential for group collaboration. One participant whished that her group would have "had more face-to-face meetings, because it was really during Zoom that we were talking more freely … when we used text chat we didn't really discuss" (I). M, on the other hand, said, "Zoom … makes me very nervous, it's just not natural to me." Another student became aware of how tools had a decisive impact on performances in his group. Together with his Swedish partner, they noticed how both of the participants from Poland were intimidated and "really shy in Zoom" (D); however, when actively encouraged, the same interlocutors were able to establish leadership roles in text chats instead. "In texts they became the driving force in the project! And then in Zoom it was us Swedes

and our partner from Buenos Aires who took the lead" (D). In yet another group the reverse scenario was played out and the student in Sweden admits to feeling lost in the project at times, "but with the support of my group we all figured it out" (A). A described herself as "not much of a picture person like the younger generation;" nonetheless, she was able to establish herself in text chats because: "I feel like the Polish girls helped me get a voice using pictures and videos when we were writing to each other … this made everything very special" (A).

In contrast, some students also found the process of digital interaction frustrating and unrewarding. Discovering that his own presence might in fact have a negative impact on interlocutors, one participant experimented to see whether actively removing his own voice would encourage others to find theirs:

> I simply decided to be quiet during a meeting and wrote in our chat that I had my microphone muted because of my neighbours drilling, a complete lie! After some minutes some members of my group that previously hadn't spoken at all were forced to speak and enter the space that had been created. (I)

Another group, experienced repeated misunderstandings, and critical incidents between members, particularly due to language barriers as one participant came across as "rude and aggressive" (F).

> F: she kept texting things like 'I *order* you to do this' and 'I *demand* this' .. This was very negative for us. As Swedes we are not really used to that. We were offended. When we confronted her she felt attacked. When you are stressed and irritated it's easy to take things personally… but then it turned out that she was using a translation app for everything and that made the communication strange and way too direct … We didn't see her as a representative for her culture though – this was more about her personality … and who she became online …

However, F explains that in the very last week, once the task was completed, the group atmosphere suddenly changed entirely as participants started to share memes and speak more freely. F notes that "next time I will try to have faith that through multimodality one can get a message across. If writing seems to be a hindrance … I will incourpurate pictures and sound" (F).

As recent research shows (O'Dowd et al, 2019; Wylie, 2020), the use of paralinguistic features such as emojis and memes is an intricate dimension of online exchange. The virtual contact zone offers multimodal forms of expression, and as noted by one student, "the usage of emojis also becomes part of how the others perceive you" (O). Another student said, "I am an avid user of gifs, and in the first chat we had, I made sure to follow up the chat with a little gif … to show that I had a sense of humor and that they could be relaxed with me" (U). Multimodal participation is hence an essential aspect in the purposeful management of persona (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013).

Although the details of paralinguistic features in VE is beyond the scope of this article, it is clear from the data that intercultural awareness and identity constructions in VE must be situated in the activity of using digital tools. One student described the VE experience as "switching on a light" in terms of his future role as a teacher:

> D: It was quite a discovery for me, this way of seeing the technical advantages, and to communicate with a lot of different digital tools – I mean it was powerful and I realize that I've never had to do this before in an educational context – I am a gamer and of course I've used various programs, but this was a totally different thing. You know, to collaborate online, share files, talk to each other and do work together across cultures and time zones – that's actually incredibly rewarding.

Even as an experienced gamer, or perhaps because of that, D commented specifically on the affordances of digital space and tools for pedagogical development. The discovery was unexpected, however, and unfolded in the, sometimes rather messy and often unpredictable, process of VE collaboration. The following excerpt voices a similar realization:

> K: To summarize, this virtual exchange helped me develop both my intercultural competence, my digital literacy, and a critical perspective on how to apply virtual exchange in my future teaching. The product of the main task might not have been what we intended, but the experience of the exchange led me to much more valuable realisations of, for instance, the power dynamics of different channels of communication.

This quote exemplifies a common student reflection – the realization, through experiential learning, that intercultural communication online is affected in various, and sometimes unexpected ways by digital tools. Initially, K was disappointed in the collaborative text made by her group, however in retrospect she realized that the process of the project was more rewarding than the quality of the deliverable end product For many of the pre-service teachers, active participation in VE brought new insights about how power operates in multimodal digital spaces, not only related to language and communication, but also in perceptions of others and performance of self. Critical digital literacy is hence at the core of liquid interculturality and the construction of persona in VE.

5. Concluding remarks

By focusing on pre-service English teachers' self-reflections as participants in VE, this study examined identity constructions and intercultural awareness in teacher education. The twofold aim was to explore 1) how participants view their own identity and intercultural experiences in response to VE; and 2) to understand affordances of virtual exchange in fostering pre-service English teachers' development as reflective practitioners.

The meshing of the two constructs *persona* (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013) and *liquid interculturality* (Dervin & Dirba, 2006) provides the analytical lens for understanding student experiences at the nexus of the intercultural, digital contact zone of VE. The findings challenge fixed notions of identity and interculturality, showing how pre-service English teachers engage in negotiations and fluid constructions of their own roles in response to perceived expectations and views of their interlocutors. Participants' self-reflections reveal how this process entailed relating to group ethics, establishing voice and looking beyond instrumental levels of both language and digital tools towards more complex understandings of language as symbolic communicative power (Kramsch, 2020).

Subsequently, this study seeks to contribute to current conversations and ongoing re-appraisals of 'interculturality.' Rather than appearing as measurable, bounded competences which students achieved or possessed, intercultural awareness in student reflections emerged as ongoing and fluid capacities to critically engage in the process of questioning and re-negotiating one's identity and

worldviews with, and in relation to, others in situated contexts. In this sense, liquid interculturality is not so much about *what*, but about *how* and *why*.

There are some obvious limitations to this study. By necessity, the focus on participants' perceptions of identity and interculturality overshadowed other interconnected areas of virtual exchange. Shining a spotlight on task-design and pedagogical mentoring, for instance, would yield further understanding of the affordances of VE in fostering critical intercultural awareness and helping pre-service teachers become reflective practitioners. In addition, the focus on pre-service teachers in Sweden limits the study to one side of the collaboration. While this was warranted as part of the initial iterations of the project, a broader scope, incorporating perspectives from all participants in the two- and three-way VEs might generate different results. This will be dealt with through a focus on collaborative dimensions of VE in forthcoming iterations of this study.

Finally, the results of this study reveal potentials of VE coupled with in-depth reflection to support pre-service English teachers in becoming more conscious, not only of their own worldviews but also of their own roles in foreign language teaching and learning, and gaining insight as to how working in intercultural, digital contact zones shapes performance of self and perceptions of otherness. Thus, actively engaging in VE also serves as modelling for pre-service teachers to recognize not only critical aspects of intercultural education, but also opportunities and challenges involved in designing, facilitating and scaffolding online learning for their own future students in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world**.**

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