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Addressing Media Literacy through an International Virtual Exchange: A Report of One ESL-EFL Collaboration

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Abstract

This article contributes to the literature on the value of Virtual Exchanges (VEs) in the field of technology-mediated language learning. Specifically, we report on a pilot program for high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Slovakia and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Michigan, USA who engaged in a 10-week, international VE focused on media literacy. Learners in both countries collaborated on a project that involved developing and administering a survey on media literacy beliefs and practices among high schoolers at their institutions and provided feedback on their international peers' survey designs and presentations of survey findings. Learners also worked to raise awareness about misinformation through a media literacy campaign implemented in their social media networks. To guide language educators interested in implementing VEs, we also address the technological tools that enhanced the VE program and discuss several pedagogical issues that are important to consider in VEs for language learners.

Keywords: English Language Education, Media Literacy, Virtual Exchange

The Need to Teach Media Literacy

Traditionally, literacy pedagogy, whether in ESL or EFL contexts, has revolved around teaching students to read and write. With the advances of the internet and other technologies, literacy has increasingly been conceptualized as a much more multifaceted competency. For example, the Framework for 21st Century Learning foregrounds information, media, and ICT (information and communications technology) literacy in addition to the mastery of one's native and world language, as well as career and life skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). New Literacies is another theoretical framework that expands beyond foundational reading and writing skills, and recognizes the evolving nature of literacy and the role of new technologies, online social interactions, and shifts from "offline" to "online" literacy (Leu et al., 2015).

Among the expanded types of literacies is *media literacy* which has been defined as one's ability to "access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" and "encode and decode the symbols transmitted via media and synthesize, analyze and produce mediated messages" (National Association for Media Literacy Education, n.d., p. 1). Pedagogy for media literacy primarily draws upon discussions of credibility and warnings about manipulation (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2019), such as in the case of click baits, sponsored content, photo and video manipulation, and fake news. At the more global level, media literacy is seen as critical in advancing democracy (e.g., Jolls & Johnsen, 2018; Mason et al., 2018), and, at times, even a prerequisite for survival (e.g., in instances where misinformation about pandemics, vaccinations, etc. leads to death of individuals unable to discern the differences between hoax or fake news and legitimate, scientifically-based information).

When educators think about addressing media literacy in the context of their individual countries and/or regions, they are wary of the fact that media literacy is politicized and, at times, even biased—a concern we ourselves grappled with when teaching these skills prior to the VE program. To illustrate, consider a single English language classroom with students whose families may be politically polarized, who themselves may be divided on key issues around politics or religion, who may be suspicious of each other's beliefs and doubtful about each other's sources of information. Students may feel reactionary toward certain topics, texts, or tasks, or even shut down when a teacher attempts to address the topic of misinformation, fake news, etc.

So, how can language teachers begin to address media literacy in ways that do not further divisiveness, but instead, cultivate openness and critical thinking? It is our view that addressing media literacy with an international, rather than regional or national framing, can create more productive instructional spaces. One way to accomplish this is through the use of Virtual Exchanges (VEs) globalized approach that has already shown promise as a vehicle for addressing media literacy (see Hobbs et al., 2018 for a pilot university-level VE project on political propaganda). In the sections that follow, we first briefly describe VEs and then discuss how and why our VE program succeeded in engaging English learners in the United States and Slovakia in a meaningful media literacy project. We demonstrate how the VE facilitated the establishment of a temporary global community wherein learners felt invested in not only practicing English and increasing intercultural awareness, but also in developing a greater sense of global citizenship through playing an active role in promoting media literacy.

The Value of Virtual Exchanges in Language Education

Language educators' interest in and use of VEs has grown rapidly over the past 20 years (O'Dowd, 2021). Whether referred to as telecollaboration (Guth & Helm, 2010), collaborative online international learning, e-tandem learning, or online intercultural exchange (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016), VEs involve two groups of students who communicate and collaborate together in an online environment (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; O'Dowd, 2021). This collaboration can take the form of information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaboration on a common product (Hauck, 2019; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). The information exchange tasks engage participants in sharing information around their personal lives, experiences, interests, and countries. The comparison and analysis VE tasks provide opportunities for learners to determine similarities and differences between their cultures in different contexts, as well as compare and analyze their perspectives on various topics experienced globally. The collaborative tasks engage learners in deep thinking or acquisition of specific skills and/or prompt them to work together toward a common end product, such as an e-magazine, a poster, a presentation, a community-project, etc. Many VEs progress through the tasks or combine them in order to meet their specific goals.

Implementation of VEs in language classrooms has demonstrated benefits for learners related to the development of language skills, intercultural communication, digital literacy, and encouragement of independent learning (Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009)—all of which are important in attaining competences around global citizenship (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2021). These skills are particularly relevant for life in the 21st century—people communicate with each other via the internet on a daily basis. This online communication often involves internet users from all over the world via various online platforms, which proved particularly helpful during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Cohen & Daniel, 2021; O'Dowd, 2021). Undoubtedly, teachers with experience and expertise in implementing VEs and other meaningful, engaging technological tools were better positioned to provide effective online pedagogy. Indeed, VEs can greatly facilitate the improvement of 21st century skills, including competencies in digital literacy as educational activities are increasingly mediated by technology (Hauck, 2019).

An ESL-EFL VE Program on Media Literacy

Building on scholarship that examines the value of VEs in addressing media literacy in the university context (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2018) and our own interest and experiences in this area, we developed a collaborative VE program that engaged a group of Slovak EFL students and a group of U.S.-based ESL learners. Both groups of students attended a high school; eight Slovak EFL students self-selected to participate in the 10-week VE after-school program and 10 ESL learners from Michigan as part of their ESL curriculum. During the 10 weeks, the Slovak students met synchronously via Google Meet for at least 60 minutes once a week. The U.S.-based learners attended their 40-minute Zoom ESL classes twice a week. The Slovak students were homogeneous in terms of their cultural background and their English proficiency ranged between high intermediate (B2 levels) to low advanced (C1 level) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020). The ESL learners came to Michigan from Yemen and Bangladesh and were bilingual in Arabic/Bengali and English. In English, four students tested at WIDA 2 level and six students at WIDA 3 level (A2-B1 according to CEFR).

Similar to Beckett and Slater's Project Framework (2005), our VE was guided by three broad goals that represented our vision for content, language, and skills development in the program (see Table 1). In essence, media literacy was conceptualized as "content" in our program with

the focus on distinguishing fake and real news. Students analyzed examples using a fact-checking strategy of lateral reading (Breakstone et al., 2021; KQED, n.d.).

Table 1. Goals for the ESL-EFL VE Program on Media Literacy

Language Development	Media Literacy Development	21st Century Skills Development
Create a meaningful, authentic learning opportunity to practice English language and intercultural communication skills.	Engage students in critical thinking in the area of media literacy, with a specific focus on recognizing fake news, considering the audience, and exercising agency to promote media literacy awareness.	Involve students in developing key 21st century skills, such as creativity, collaboration, self-direction, and technology skills.

The early sessions of the media literacy program (see Appendix A for a PowerPoint lesson plan of lessons 1 and 2) focused on identifying and verifying fake news (see Appendix B for an overview of the 10 program sessions). The key vocabulary on fake news (e.g., *reliable information, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, clickbait, sponsored content*) was explicitly addressed and the impact of fake news discussed. Learners were introduced to risky media behavior enacted by so-called “media monsters” (National Association for Media Literacy Education, n.d.) and brainstormed ideas on how to protect themselves from becoming a media monster. They considered and practiced the lateral reading strategy and were guided to pose critical questions such as: *Is this real? Is this fake? How do I know?* Once they familiarized themselves with the terms and different techniques to recognize real from fake news, they collaboratively worked on creating a list of strategies. The activities (e.g., Appendix C) in the program were learner-centered, modeled by the teacher when needed, and scaffolded with sentence frames.

Following the above-described lessons on media literacy, we chose to localize the content by having each group of learners create a survey for peers at their respective schools. Although this meant losing some opportunities for mixed-group collaboration on the main projects, it was important to us to center learner agency and possibility for impact in students’ respective local communities. The survey was designed to assess competencies and attitudes related to identifying and processing fake news. Learners drafted questions for their media literacy survey focused on awareness of fake news, provided feedback to each other, and drew inspiration from each other’s drafts as they worked to revise and eventually present their surveys. They wanted to learn how much their school communities know about fake news; hence, both sets of surveys included similar open-ended questions, such as: *What is fake news? Where do you get your information from? How do you check if information is real or fake? How do you recognize fake news?* In their survey, the Slovak learners were interested in respondents’ feelings about fake news, while the U.S.-based learners wanted to know if their respondents were able to recognize click baits and fake news based on the given examples (see Appendix D for the students’ surveys).

After analyzing their survey results, learners created Google Slides based on their findings (see Appendix E for the Slovak EFL learners’ presentation and U.S.-based ESL learners’ presentation) and practiced presentation skills. Next, learners presented results of their survey to their international peers in a synchronous meeting and compared their findings, carefully considering similarities and differences. Finally, learners reflected on key trends in their

surveys and their partners' and used them as a foundation for their online media literacy campaigns (see Appendix F), which consisted of a series of Facebook and Instagram posts that highlighted the key media literacy insights from the surveys and students' research on recognizing fake news. In their posts, students were also expected to apply concepts from a lesson involving the Pathos-Logos-Ethos concepts by making their posts compelling to the specific local audiences (see Appendix G for the full lesson plan). The media literacy campaigns were posted on schools' Facebook and Instagram accounts and received multiple positive responses from students' peers.

Regarding English language development, the VE lessons provided learners with opportunities to:

- learn and use new vocabulary,
- practice listening and speaking skills in an authentic context,
- develop writing and peer review skills while designing and commenting on their international peers' survey questions,
- review English question formation when distinguishing between effective and ineffective survey questions,
- consider the audience through applying the Pathos-Logos-Ethos framework when creating social media posts in their final media literacy campaign project.

Alongside the language and literacy skills, the VE program also aimed to cultivate learners' intercultural communication and awareness through synchronous and asynchronous interactions among international peers. The VE allowed learners to test their assumptions about other cultural and educational experiences and become more open to people from different cultural and educational backgrounds. To illustrate, the U.S.-based learners were fascinated to learn that most Slovak students start studying English at the age of 6. Many said that if they had had the opportunity to start learning English sooner, they would likely have had an easier time once they started their schooling in the U.S. This conversation was eye-opening to the Slovak learners as it led them to realize the benefits of their education. In the words of one learner: "I learned more about the country they came from and how they learned English. I learned that it is difficult for them in the U.S."

Furthermore, the U.S.-based learners, predominantly of Muslim backgrounds, challenged some of the Slovak students' assumptions about Islam and the likely reactions of most Slovak citizens to seeing women wearing a hijab. One Muslim learner also shared her frustration at the media's tendency to focus on Muslims primarily in relation to negative events (e.g., terrorist attacks) rather than providing a more positive view of Muslims: "They show only bad things about Muslims on TV, but we are good people, too." These examples demonstrate VE's potential for furthering students' intercultural competence and fostering a sense of global citizenship.

Use of Technological Tools in the VE Program

In order to enhance teaching and learning in the virtual space, different technological tools were selected to facilitate various tasks in the VE program, including Google Meet, Zoom, Padlet, Jamboard, Google Docs, Google Slides, Google Forms, Instagram, and Facebook. These tools were employed to facilitate communication, collaboration, reflection, and presentation of products. Our selection was informed by both, existing scholarship on effective

e-tools for teaching English learners (e.g., DeCamillis, in press; Zhang & Zou, 2020) and our prior positive experience with using these resources and tools with English learners.

One of the most popular tools used throughout the exchange was Padlet—a tool that enabled learners to post introductions and questions, and comment on them (see Appendix H for an example of Padlet discussion). Most of the questions posted by participants had to do with personal interests, but some questions probed deeper, such as a question about perceptions of Arabs, Muslims, and Americans: “What do you think of us as Arabs and Muslims? What do you think of us as Americans?” Padlet also served as a platform for collaboration on media awareness campaign posts. Learners posted their first drafts of the posts and asynchronously continued improving them based on each other’s comments: “Well done—this post goes straight to the point. However, you could add more details and information.” With Padlet, a social network of our project, we were able to create an international learning community without requiring learners to log in, thus, protecting learners’ privacy. Each Padlet site was scaffolded with simple instructions, model answers as well as sentence frames and sentence starters (e.g., see Figure 1).

Presentation and Feedback Language

To present:
Our post is about...
It says...
It appeals to (emotions/ethics/logic) because....

To give feedback:
I like the post because...
I recommend/suggest (verb+ing)...
The appeal was clear because...
The appeal could be clearer by (verb+ing)...

Figure 1. Language Scaffolding on Padlet

Maybe it would be better to change question: How would you describe clickbait or what do you think clickbait is? I would recommend to make this question open ended

I think you should improve writing. Overall the question is good. You want to find out if people can determine if it's fake or real. The point of this is good.

I think that this question does not need any correction. It's straight forward and simple. Only thing is missing if it's open ended etc.

Figure 2. Slovak Learners’ Google Docs Comments

Google Docs and Google Slides were used to facilitate collaborative activities, such as the development of survey questions and survey presentations. Specifically, learners wrote the first draft of their survey questions in the Google Docs and used the comment features to offer feedback to their international peers. Figure 2 demonstrates how the Slovak learners used various language structures in Lesson 4 to give feedback to their U.S.-based peers.

When creating the final version of the surveys and analyzing the results, the learners worked with Google Forms. For most learners, this was the first opportunity they had to engage in survey development. The U.S.-based ESL teacher and the co-author of this article appreciated that survey design is a critical 21st century skill from both the perspective of a consumer (i.e., knowing whether a survey has been developed appropriately) and a professional (i.e., survey design skills are useful in a variety of professions). The Slovak EFL teacher and the co-author of this article, valued the fact that the kind of critical thinking that goes into survey design (e.g., asking non-leading, bias-free questions) nicely complemented the focus on media literacy. Learners were proud to present their survey findings using effective Google Slides to present their work to their international peers. In the synchronous presentation session, they readily provided feedback on each other’s slides: “What I like about your slides is that you chose good pictures, and you didn’t put too many words there.”

Finally, to help solidify learning and encourage reflection and sharing of key points, after each session learners wrote their takeaways on Jamboard (see Appendix I for an example of Jamboard discussion). In the attached example, learners shared the strategies they used when identifying fake news and websites. After the session, many of them recognized that by searching a website with the use of Google, they implemented the strategy of lateral reading, used by professional fact checkers (Breakstone et al., 2021).

For the final outcome of the VE—posts about fake news as part of the media literacy awareness campaign—Facebook and Instagram were used for publishing. Learners chose these social media platforms after considering the survey respondents' preferences, which allowed for effective community outreach. One of the U.S.-based learners initiated translation of the posts into Arabic and Bengali considering that the targeted population of their media literacy campaign comprised many English learners whose first language is either Arabic or Bengali. This reflected the student's awareness of her audience and her ability to meet the goals of the project while drawing upon her multilingual repertoire. Overall, this student initiative demonstrates how a VE can contribute to global peer teams and simultaneously has a local impact.

Pedagogical Highlights and Considerations

This VE program centered on the idea that media literacy is an increasingly important topic that is best approached with a global framing. Despite its relatively short duration, the program succeeded in engaging English learners in two different continents in building a diverse community that came together to deepen their understanding of media literacy, along with 21st century skills, intercultural communication, and general English language development. Through the use of O'Dowd and Waire's (2009) three-task model, the participating learners engaged with the topic of media literacy, many commenting on their increased ability to recognize fake news. Several learners expressed that prior to the VE program, they were aware that fake news existed, but they had not discussed the topic with their peers or adults. Because the nature of the tasks in the international VE program addressed fake news and misinformation as a global phenomenon, learners felt open to talk about their perspectives and experiences, compare and analyze them, and finally collaborate on a media literacy awareness campaign.

Considering the VE learning outcomes (Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009; O'Dowd, 2021), the learners learned terminology associated with fake news and strategies for distinguishing fake news from real news. They could easily relate to the topic and in many cases, they identified themselves as the target audience of particular fake news and online fraud. They recognized the importance of learning to recognize fake news and were surprised to find out that it spreads six times faster than news about actual events or reports (Vosoughi et al., 2018). For these reasons, the learners embraced the online media literacy awareness campaign as a way to build their own knowledge and contribute to their local and global communities. In line with research pointing to the varied skills development resulting from VE participation (O'Dowd, 2021; Hauck, 2019; Hobbs et al., 2018), the learners in our project also felt that they were able to hone in various 21st century skills. Several students commented on the value of the academic and digital skills involved in this VE's survey development and survey data analysis—a unique experience for both groups of learners. In their final reflection, the learners stated that they learned how to create “good” and “straight-to-the-point” questions—a skill they viewed as important in their future studies. After searching the internet for examples of effective survey questions, the Slovak learners worked to compile a useful checklist in Figure 3.

Our questions:

- Relate to what we want to find out;
- Are short and simple;
- Include one idea in a question;
- Stay clear of leading and/or bias;
- Can take different forms (e.g., Y/N, multiple choice, open-ended);
- Specify what answer we expect (check one box, more boxes, scale options).

Figure 3. Slovak Learners' Checklist for the Survey Questions

Based on the final reflection, the learners in our program identified authentic communication with international partners as one of their most considerable benefits of the project—a conclusion echoed in other VE scholarship (e.g., Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Grau & Turula, 2019). One of the Slovak learners made the following comment: “The best thing about the project was that we met with our partners and shared information in Padlet. We could learn something about their life.” Another Slovak learner commented on the value of being exposed to accents with which they were not familiar: “The first time I heard the students from Michigan, I barely understood them, but already after the second meeting, I found their accent much easier to understand.” A U.S.-based learner added: “What I liked the most about the project was that we did [it] with the Slovak students.” The fact that these learners enjoyed meeting one another was reflected in their request to have more synchronous meetings and collaboration with the partner school in future programs.

Virtual Exchanges not only benefit learners, but also language educators (Lehotska, 2021; Yang, 2020). Indeed, as teachers involved in the VE, we have experienced two highlights of the exchange—the opportunity to experiment with various technological tools and to design a technologically-enhanced VE program that would take into consideration language, content, skills, and student agency. Integrating technology throughout the whole program enabled the teachers to get acquainted with the new tools. Padlet appeared to be particularly engaging to all learners. Margita, the U.S.-based ESL teacher and co-author of this article described her reflection on the program: “My students felt particularly engaged and comfortable using Padlet with their international peers, whether discussing fake news, creating drafts of media literacy campaign posts, sharing thoughts about their culture and interests.” Padlet has been found to be an effective tool for collaborative language learning (Ellis, 2015; Rashid et al., 2019) in that it provides opportunities for students to learn from each other, creates an environment of collaboration (Rashid et al., 2019), and enhances overall learning by expanding opportunities for contributing to discussions (Ellis, 2015).

Working in a “mini-community of practice,” the three educators and co-authors of this article also appreciated collaborating on the overall design of the project from brainstorming the project themes to the final reflection and project evaluation. Nikola, the Slovak EFL teacher and the first author of this article underscored the importance of such professional experience as she reflected on the VE: “It was really interesting to design a project from start to end, to propose a theme, general goals, and then develop each lesson’s objectives with activities and outcomes while including the perspectives of the partner teacher and all learners. In addition, planning a lesson with not only a language and content objective but also one dedicated to skills enhanced by technology turned out to be an enriching experience.” Zuzana, the TESOL teacher educator and co-author involved in the VE project, appreciated how agentive the learners, and especially the two collaborating teachers were throughout the exchange. Indeed,

VEs naturally create collaborative space for educators whose different strengths and skill sets can be tapped into in the process of creating powerful international initiatives (e.g., Dooly & Sandler, 2020; Waldman et al., 2019).

Despite the aforementioned benefits, virtual exchange in general has its challenges (e.g., Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Yang, 2020). Although we are very proud of our VE program, we grappled with a few pedagogical issues too. Three in particular merit further discussion—the timing of the culminating project, the nature of the VE collaboration activities, and adaptation strategies for addressing possible differences between the participating VE students' language proficiency. As we engaged with the learners during the final project activity which involved creating social media posts, we noted that the learners did not seem as excited about the VE as they had been earlier in the project. Their enthusiasm peaked during the engaging survey presentations but working with local peers on their respective media literacy campaigns did not inspire quite the same energy. We believe that the decreased engagement was a result of the fully asynchronous nature of the media literacy campaign project. Unlike the survey tasks that brought the two groups of learners together during several synchronous meetings and presentations, the two groups worked separately and asynchronously on the media campaign project. This realization—the importance of the timing and structuring of the culminating VE project—is our most important pedagogical takeaway from this experience. If we were to repeat this VE again in the future, we would cultivate student enthusiasm following the survey presentations by having the learners work on the media literacy campaign posts in international mixed groups that include ESL and EFL representatives. Alternatively, we would consider switching the order of the media literacy campaign and the survey development and presentations. This alternative VE could unfold as follows:

- 1) Learners participate in synchronous information exchange activities using Padlet.
- 2) Learners engage in media literacy activities (e.g., understanding the problem, distinguishing fake news from real news).
- 3) Learners consider pathos-logos-ethos (or similar audience awareness framework) as they work (in international teams) to create social media posts about fake news and vote on their favorite media literacy campaigns.
- 4) Learners work with local peers to design and deliver a survey for students at their schools, providing feedback on the survey of their international partners.
- 5) Learners present their survey results in a professional presentation and work with international peers to compare their findings.
- 6) Learners work in local or international teams to write up a school newsletter article, report on the project, develop a presentation for their school staff, or even a conference presentation with their teachers.

Regardless of the order of the two main project activities, in future renditions of this VE, we would aim to increase the opportunities for the learners to collaborate on VE projects in mixed groups after sufficient rapport has been established. In our program, learners were in mixed groups in the initial introductory activities and several smaller-scale discussion activities in the breakout rooms while the two main VE projects largely maintained the separation of EFL and ESL learners. To put it differently, the two distinct groups collaborated by offering feedback and presenting survey results and media campaigns to each other, but not working in mixed teams on the projects themselves. We had three reasons for structuring the collaboration in this

way. First, the logistics around time constrained our ability to reach the full collaborative potential on larger projects in mixed teams. The Slovak time zone is six hours ahead of Michigan, making it too late in the evening to collaborate during the weeks when the U.S.-based learners were unable to meet until later in the afternoon. Second, we wanted to make the learners feel like they could have a local impact; naturally the learners had more stakes in influencing media literacy in their respective online communities. Third, although the U.S.-based learners enjoyed participating in lower stakes collaborative tasks, we anticipated considerable hesitance to fully embrace mixed-team (including mixed-gender) collaboration on the main projects in this pilot program. However, in follow-up VE projects with the same groups of students or VE projects involving more similar proficiency levels, we plan to use mixed-group structure in the main projects, thus likely further increasing students' communicative opportunities and intercultural competency.

Teachers wishing to implement mixed, collaborative VE projects with students at differing language proficiencies can implement accommodation strategies into their lessons. For instance, the U.S.-based learners in our VE program met more frequently (twice a week) than the Slovak learners (once a week), and thus interacted more with the material in order to keep up with their Slovak counterparts. Furthermore, during the synchronous meetings we utilized the services of a bilingual teacher employed by the U.S. high school who provided language support to learners in need. Despite implementing multiple accommodations, when it came to the synchronous meetings, the U.S.-based learners immediately noticed the difference in language proficiencies and felt somewhat intimidated to communicate in English. Sensing their international peers' uneasiness around the use of English, one Slovak learner expressed: "Thank you for your participation in this meeting and please don't be shy. We all make mistakes because we're all human." Navigating these interactions was a reminder of how sensitive English language teachers have to be when it comes to language related expectations and scaffolding. Teachers of mixed proficiency level learners involved in VEs can prompt students to reflect about their status as multilingual language users and find ways to elevate them throughout the program, thus increasing their confidence to use all their available languages to achieve their communicative and learning goals.

Conclusion

Navigating the internet and constant decision-making about what to share, what to believe, and how to respond can make young people feel reactionary, confused and, at times, insensitive to the people around them. Although it is true that media literacy can help students become more discerning consumers of news and other media (NAMLE, n.d.), language teachers can feel tentative about engaging their learners in media literacy due to the inherent divisiveness around what constitutes "real" and "fake" news and information. As we have argued in this article, explicit instruction on media literacy can broaden learners' understanding of this important topic and the use of VE can help guide students to consider these issues more globally.

Our case study echoed many benefits associated with participating in VEs summarized by O'Dowd (2021): meaningful language practice opportunities, development of intercultural competency, communication, collaboration, and digital skills. Learners in our VE were able to not only create an international learning community in which participants collaborated to learn specific content related to media literacy, practice the English language, and gain literacy skills and 21st century skills, but also to become aware of the realities of peers in another country. Additionally, for several of the participating EFL learners, VEs may offer the first opportunity to meet and interact with someone from another culture.

Although the formats and benefits of implementing VEs are fairly well-established, they also offer space for language teachers to bring out their own individuality, innovation, and passions. Sample published case studies involving VE programs describe how English language teachers can implement VEs in ways that are aligned with their goals or aspirations (e.g., Koris et al., 2020; Vinagre et al., 2020). In our VE program, it was important to us to place an emphasis on the topic of media literacy in ways that are engaging and agentive, which we accomplished by engaging students in designing, conducting, and analyzing original media literacy surveys at their schools and encouraging students to be proactive in their local communities. By actively promoting agency, self-initiative, and self-identity throughout the VE, our learners felt a greater commitment to the projects, often contributing their time outside of the VE lessons to work on tasks. In sum, the ESL-EFL VE enabled us to create a collaborative community of invested global citizens who appeared to thrive on the opportunity to engage each other and their local communities in developing media literacy awareness campaigns.

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Appendices

Note: All the names were changed to pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality of the VE participants.

Appendix A: Lesson plan 1 and 2: Verifying Fake News/Identifying Media Monsters

Appendix B: Lesson Plan Breakdown

Appendix C: Learner-Centered activities

Appendix D: Surveys

Appendix E: Presentations

- Slovak EFL Learners
- U.S.-Based ESL Learners

Appendix F: Media Literacy Awareness Campaign

Appendix G: Lesson Plan 7: Creating Social Media Campaign

Appendix H: Example of a Padlet Discussion

Appendix I: Example of a Jamboard Reflection

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