Developing transferable skills in virtual exchange

Robert O’Dowd

1. Introduction

As students are prepared to become not only global citizens but also effective members of the global workplace, educators are putting increasing emphasis on the importance of the transferable skills, also known as soft skills or transversal skills, which will enable them to operate effectively in highly globalised and digitalised work contexts. The OECD (2018) suggest that

Educating for global competence can boost employability. Effective communication and appropriate behaviour within diverse teams are keys to success in many jobs and will remain so as technology continues to make it easier for people to connect across the globe. Employers increasingly seek to attract learners who easily adapt and are able to apply and transfer their skills and knowledge to new contexts. (p. 5)

In a similar vein, the Erasmus mobility impact report (2019) quotes European Commissioner Tibor Navracsics: “Skills such as flexibility, creativity, problem-solving, communication and critical thinking are all part of the blend of competences employers look for – and that enable people to stand on their own feet and take control of their lives” (p. 12).

Various studies have looked in detail at what transferable skills actually involve. For example, Diamond et al. (2011) discovered, in their study of Global Graduates, a growing demand among employers for global employability skills that incorporate an international perspective. When they consulted with employers about what they considered to be the most important global competencies which graduates should have, they found that the four most mentioned competencies were the ability to work collaboratively, communication skills (both speaking and listening), drive and resilience,

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and embracing multiple perspectives (2011, p. 7). Similarly, the 2015 World Economic Forum (WEF) report ‘New Vision for Education’ defined 16 critical 21st-century skills that prepare young people to operate successfully in the labour market. These included foundational literacies (i.e., literacy, numeracy, scientific, ICT, financial and cultural/civic literacies), competencies required to approach complex challenges (i.e., critical thinking and problem solving, creativity, communication and collaboration) and character qualities to effectively operate in a changing environment (i.e., curiosity, initiative, persistence, adaptability, leadership and social/cultural awareness) (2015, p. 23). The LinkedIn 2018 Workplace Learning Report found in their survey of executives, managers and talent developers, ‘training for soft skills’ was identified as the main priority for talent development. The report states: “In the age of automation, maintaining technical fluency across roles will be critical, but the pace of change is fueling demand for adaptable, critical thinkers, communicators, and leaders. As technology accelerates, soft skills are in high demand to fuel people and business growth” (2018, p. 5).

While there is no questioning the importance of developing students’ transferable skills, it is often not clear how teachers can integrate a focus on these skills in their classes. In this opening article, I discuss how Virtual Exchange (VE) can be a tool for developing transferable skills, and I also consider how an action-oriented approach to VE could be employed to achieve this in foreign language learning contexts.

2. From study abroad to virtual and blended approaches to international learning

Study abroad programmes such as Erasmus+ have been considered for many years as a key opportunity for the development of students’ foreign language and intercultural competences and transferable skills (European Commission, 2019). However, while the OECD (2018) informs that study abroad programmes grown steadily over the past years and that the figure has doubled between 2005 and 2018, the percentage of students who engage in international mobility in the European Union remains at a relatively modest 13.5% (European Commission, 2020). The European Commission’s publications on the European Higher Education area no longer state the aim of achieving 20% student mobility – an aim that had been established in the early 2010’s. Instead, in the publication “European Higher Education in the World” (2013), the Commission observes that “internationalisation should ensure that the large majority of learners who are not mobile... are nonetheless able to acquire the international skills required in a globalised world” (p. 6).
These low levels of participation in Erasmus+, combined with well-documented limitations of such study abroad programmes (Richardson, 2016) and the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Hudzik, 2020; Partridge, 2021) have led universities to consider alternative or complementary options for giving students international learning experiences and developing transferable skills. The new Erasmus+ programme (2021) calls for the development of a more comprehensive European approach to international education which is sensitive to issues such as inclusion and diversity (i.e., considering disabilities, health problems, economic barriers), digital transformation, climate change and participation in democratic life. One way this can be achieved is by the introduction of VE into learning programmes. VE refers to the different online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage learners in sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes and under the guidance of teachers or trained facilitators (O’Dowd, 2023, p. 11). VE has grown in importance in recent years and is now being employed in universities and schools around the globe.

Although it has not been a main area of research, there is considerable evidence in VE research studies that online collaborative learning projects can contribute to the development of numerous transferable skills which are relevant for the global workplace. Helm and van der Velden (2021), for example, found that learners had felt that taking part in their Erasmus+ VE programme led them to improve different transferrable skills including the ability to listen actively, to think critically, as well as developing digital competences, teamwork and collaborative problem-solving (p. 56). Guth and Helm (2017) also confirmed that the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) exchanges had enabled learners to improve their digital competences. In my own research (O’Dowd, 2019), I saw how students developed numerous transferable skills as they worked with their online international partners to organise meetings, overcome problems and complete project work.

However, in order for VE to most effectively develop transferable skills, I would argue that it should be employed in a form which focuses on the development of a final outcome or product, and which requires intense teamwork and collaboration. A pedagogical basis for such an approach to VE can be found in the ‘action-oriented approach’ which is outlined in the companion volume of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). This will be looked at in the following section.
3. An action-oriented approach

The ‘action-oriented approach’ is outlined in detail in the second volume of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) and builds on the work of Piccardo & North (2019) and Piccardo (2014). Essentially, this approach can be seen as a ‘strong’ version of task-based learning. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has become one of the most dominant methodologies in foreign language education over the past three decades, but the definitions and interpretations of what TBLT is have varied radically. Bygate et al. (2001) provide a broad definition of a task in the context of foreign language teaching: “A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to obtain an objective” (p. 61) while Willis (2021) describes TBLT as “a meaning-focused approach and starts with a goal-oriented communication activity (a task) where learners exchange real meanings in order to achieve the outcome of the task” (p. 64). However, while there may be general agreement that TBLT involves engaging learners in ‘real’ use of language to achieve concrete objectives or outcomes, there is much debate on what type of outcomes constitute a ‘task’.

Many different categorisations and interpretations of ‘task’ exist. Prabhu (1987) provided one of the first typologies of tasks when he differentiated between information gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap tasks, while Willis (1996) distinguished six types of tasks based on the cognitive operations they involve – listing, ordering, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences and creative tasks. However, Long (2016) goes much further and defines tasks as “real-world communicative uses to which learners will put the L2 beyond the classroom – the things they will do in and through the L2” (p. 6). He mentions examples such as writing a lab report, attending a lecture, checking in guests at a hotel or leading a guided tour as examples of these real-world ‘target’ tasks.

This debate as to how close the tasks of the foreign language classroom should be connected to the ‘real world’ needs of learners are key to the underlying principles of an action-oriented approach to VE. The CEFR’s action-oriented approach is described as “a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures, or a pre-determined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 28, my italics added).

This definition highlights a move away from traditional approaches to foreign language education (including weaker approaches to TBLT) which based their syllabuses on the gradual introduction of language structures towards language programmes – based on the academic and professional needs and their related tasks which a group of learners may have. It also is quite clear how this approach may be easily linked to the transferable skills that students need to develop for their future
employment. North (one of the lead authors of the CEFR) is clear on the differences between the action-oriented approach to tasks and many of the other well-known TBLT models:

Most types of tasks described by Ellis (2003), Nunan (2004), Skehan (1998), and Willis and Willis (2007) are far narrower than those used in the action-oriented approach. In TBLT, the tasks are often simple role plays or very structured activities in which learners only choose from a list of options provided. ...There is also a tendency to design tasks to use particular language – related to the target real-life situation that the task simulates – that the learner is expected to rehearse and learn through performing the task, in preparation to some future ‘real life.’ (North, 2023, p. 13)

Tasks, as viewed within the CEFR and an action-oriented approach, are radically different and are much more complex than tasks as they are usually interpreted. First of all, the CEFR companion volume states clearly that “the primary focus of the tasks is not language. If the primary focus of a task is not language, then there must be some other product or outcome (such as planning an outing, making a poster, creating a blog, designing a festival or choosing a candidate)” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 30). This makes a clear distinction to more linguistically-driven TBLT syllabuses. Also, the proponents of action-oriented learning claim that the approach “takes task-based learning to a higher level where the class and the outside world are integrated in genuine, situated communicative practices” (Piccardo & North, 2019). They go on:

[A]ction-oriented tasks give users/learners the opportunity to engage in action – to come up with a well-defined outcome, to create an artefact: a visible product. It is during the process of developing the product that the learners mediate and (pluri)language i.e., exploit different linguistic and semiotic resources to communicate and (co)construct meaning, and so acquire new language. This is why action-oriented tasks can be equated with projects. (pp. 278-279)

How is action-oriented learning put into practice? North (2023) explains that action-oriented tasks are usually spread over a number of lessons in a didactic sequence which is framed as a scenario. The students are presented with a summary of the scenario which explains to them their ultimate goal and how they may achieve it (p. 15). Scenarios in the university contexts which we are developing might include applying for a position in a hotel, or as a foreign language assistant abroad, giving a guided tour of a city to an international group of tourists, or working online with an international
partner class to create a video proposing solutions to a social problem. These scenarios are broken down into smaller steps or sub-tasks which may be led by teachers or involve group work, and which are based on the communicative activities of reception, production, interaction, and the mediation of concepts. For example, a scenario based on a job application would have sub-tasks related to CV writing, application letters, job interviews etc. Ideally, such a scenario would lead to students actually submitting an application for a position. This would reflect Piccardo & North’s (2019) assertion that “the class and the outside world are integrated in genuine, situated communicative practices” (p. 2). In any case, the scenarios should at least be relevant to students’ current or future needs and objectives.

An approach to VE which reflects action-oriented learning, and which has potential for the development of transferable skills is the Transnational Model of VE (O’Dowd, 2019). This form of VE involves engaging students in online collaborative projects with other groups of learners and using English or another language as the lingua franca of communication. Such exchanges focus on themes related to global citizenship and the tasks require students to work together to complete a collaborative task together, rather than merely exchanging information about different cultural practices or perspectives. This approach to online collaboration shifts the focus of VE away from a comparison of cultural practices and instead encourages students to use transferable skills to organise meetings, develop work plans and come up with their final product or presentation.

In a recent exchange between my students in Spain with classes in the USA and Israel, I asked students to reflect on what they had learned from taking part in a VE with these characteristics. Their responses included “…I have learnt how to be patient working in groups and to adapt to tricky situations” and “The fact of working with people from other countries prepares us for the future problems that we may have. That is to say, we learnt how to face problems of timing or agreement. I have also learnt that we have to understand and respect other people’s thoughts” (O’Dowd, 2023, pp. 110-111). These comments illustrate how VE can lead to the development of transferable skills.

4. Conclusion

In this opening article I have sought to link VE with the development of transferable skills and have argued that an action-oriented approach may be an effective tool for bringing together these two areas – particularly when VE is employed in the context of foreign language education. Other approaches will of course also help to develop transferable skills through VE, but I would argue that
it will always be vital that these approaches involve periods of intensive collaboration and team work as opposed to the mere exchange of information between partners.

References


