![TESOL Connections — Keeping English language professionals connected](logo)

Virtual Exchange: Collaborating to Create
by [Margita Vojtkulakova](#)

Online language teaching has challenged English language educators to be creative and flexible in what many have found to be a difficult learning environment. Though inferior in many ways, in others, online learning brought about several benefits. The most evident one is the flexibility inherent in online communication—communication at any time and from almost anywhere.

Drawing upon this benefit, I organized a virtual exchange (VE; see O'Dowd, 2021; Tomaš et al., 2021) that brought together two groups of students: English as a second language learners from Michigan and English as a foreign language learners from Slovakia.

Together, these two groups of students developed an e-book project that we called "This Is Us" (click here to see the book). According to Lewis & O'Dowd (2016), there are three main types of VEs (also known as online intercultural exchanges):

1. information exchange tasks
2. comparison and analysis tasks
3. collaborative tasks

For my e-book project, we incorporated both information exchange and collaborative tasks that included writing about ELs' cultures and countries of origin, writing about their experience living in different countries, and creating the actual e-book. The following approaches guided the project:

1. Promoting an asset-based view of English learners (ELs) as multilingual and multicultural citizens. The entire project built on an approach through which learners were positioned to be assets to the created collaborating community.

2. Creating meaningful opportunities to produce multimodal writing, practice descriptive and informative writing, offer peer feedback, and improve editing skills.
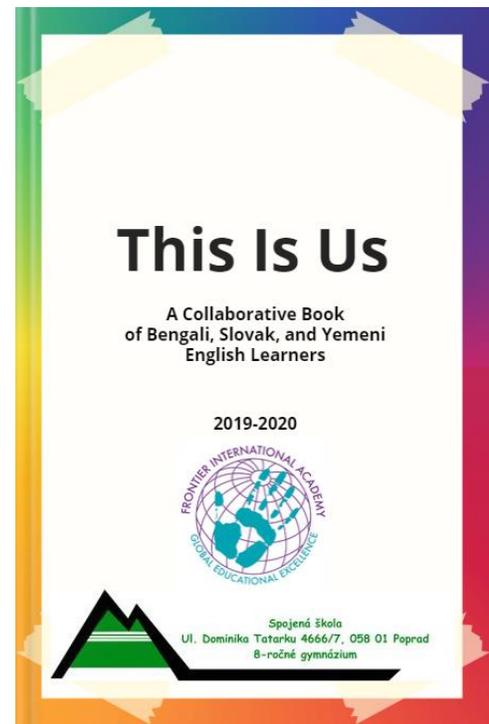
Steps to Develop a Virtual Exchange E-Book Project

1. Find an International Collaborator

To initiate a VE project, you'll need an international partner. In my case, I reached out to an English as a foreign language teacher in Slovakia I knew from my college studies who works with learners of the same age as my students.

Here are some places where you could find collaborating parties:

- Visit iEARN.org - Global Project Collaboration website. To connect with the iEARN community, click here. Some ideas for VE can be found on their iEARN Project Space page.
- Visit different platforms that provide opportunities for networking. Some of those platforms are:
    - TESOL International Discussion Board (e.g., "Nonnative" English Speaker Teachers Interest Section, English as a Foreign Language Interest Section)
    - Social media pages (e.g., English as a Foreign Language or Teaching English on Facebook)
- If you are located in an English as a second language community, reach out to your local English language teacher colleagues. They probably have students from different backgrounds than you have.

Reach out to someone you think would make a good partner and explain the project, including your preliminary timeline and your goals for your students, to see if they are interested and able to work with you.

2. Collaborate to Develop the Exchange

After finding a collaborator, it's helpful to discuss the interests of the collaborating students, language proficiency, their assets, and the possibility of synchronous meetings. In addition, I recommend discussing what kind of platform you would be using for your VE and how often you would update each other on the project.

It's also advantageous to have some concrete ideas for projects that may be engaging and feasible, and to discuss pros and cons of different approaches with your partner(s). You can discuss which of the three main types of VEs may be the best fit for your students and goals, and then brainstorm some potential VE projects.

Once you have a few solid ideas, you can introduce them to the students and let them choose, or ideally, a project idea comes from the students after mutual introductions. The introduction can be done via a short video or a written bio of the class or of each student (using, e.g., Google Docs, Google Slides, Jamboard, or Padlet).

3. Create an Invested Online Community

Regardless of what type of task you choose, be sure to spend some time initially on creating a positive and respectful collaborative community. First, our students got to know each other asynchronously by introducing themselves on Padlet. Then, we had synchronous meetings—in the beginning all together, and after a couple of meetings in breakout rooms. After a few meetings, students felt comfortable working in small international teams on a set of challenges prepared by the teachers. Challenges should offer space for all the team members to contribute (see Challenge 1; Appendix A) and have students build on their assets rather than on their language skills (see Challenge 2; Appendix B).

4. Guide Students to Create an E-Book

After brainstorming about what they would like to know about each other, students dove into informative, descriptive, or personal writing based on the questions posed from the collaborating party. They were writing about something that they considered "theirs," and they had their own background knowledge as an asset to achieve it. In addition, students had in mind that there was an authentic audience—someone who was truly interested in their writing.

> "I want to write about hijab because I want to show people who think that Muslims are not good and get scared of a woman because she wears a hijab. I want to tell them about how a hijab protects a woman and show that we are not terrorists because we are Muslims."
>
> –Muna

Once they finished the first drafts, students provided feedback to and received feedback from their international peers. At this stage, learners served as assets to each other. As language learners from various learning environments, they had different experiences with English language acquisition. For example, on one hand, whereas Slovak ELs tend to excel in English grammar and spelling because these are often viewed as instructional priorities in that context, they often lack fluency and struggle to use common collocations. On the other hand, Michigan ELs are exposed to English every day and are generally more fluent, but many lack experience in structuring paragraphs, using grammar structures correctly, or spelling accurately.

Using prompts provided in Google Docs, students provided a compliment ("What do you like

> "It was amazing! I found my name! I feel like I'm a writer. And I liked writing about Yemen because I could show people where I come from."
>
> –Reem

about this writing?") and then a suggestion ("How can the writer make this writing better?") to their international peers. After addressing the feedback, the process of creating an e-book began. This included students making decisions about pictures, format, and design while developing their creative and collaborative skills. Instead of pointing out mistakes, the focus was on giving students a voice and a feeling of authorship. Students enjoyed practicing these digital skills that contributed to their skillset of global learners.

Online Tools for Creating an E-Book

For our e-book, we used Book Creator, which offers a free account for individual users and provides a link, which can easily be shared, for collaboration. Following are a few other resources that can be drawn upon in creating e-books:

- Google Slides: A template by SlidesMania can be found here. If learners do not have regular access to the internet, the slides can be printed and used as book pages, and then scanned and shared via Google Drive by the project facilitators. Another option is to exchange hard copies of the book.
- Canva: Canva offers numerous templates for posters, newsletters, infographics, invitations, magazines, and so on.
- Newlywords: Newlywords is a resource similar to Book Creator. For free, users can collaborate on an e-book and can download their final product in a pdf format.

Concluding Thoughts

Once our e-book was finished, students took pride in sharing the final product with their peers, friends, and family. The e-book project was followed up by reflection and continuous international synchronous meetings.

This international project approached all students through an asset-oriented lens and capitalized on the advantages of virtual learning. Students were engaged in interactive tasks, inter- and intra-cultural discussions, and developing a set of 21st-century skills (global citizenship, creativity, communication). Through this unique virtual collaborative experience, we increased student engagement and positive identity while challenging ourselves as teachers to grow into global educators.

> "I liked that it was international. We learned about other students' lives, what it looks like in other countries. We could ask them what we wanted to know. I am really happy that I learned something more about them than just wearing a hijab."
> – Alica

References

Lewis, T., & O'Dowd, R. (2016). Introduction to online intercultural exchange and this volume. In R. O'Dowd & T. Lewis (Eds.), *Online intercultural exchange: Policy, pedagogy, practice* (pp. 3–20). Routledge.

O'Dowd, R. (2021). Virtual exchange: Moving forward into the next decade. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1902201

Tomaš, Z., Vojtkulakova, M., Lehotska, N., & Schottin, M. (2021). Examining the value of online intercultural exchange (OIE) in cultivating agency-focused, (inter)culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy: A story of one collaborative international project for English learners. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 36*(1), 51–64. https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2267

_____

Margita Vojtkulakova *has TESOL graduate credentials from Matej Bel University in Slovakia and Eastern Michigan University in the United States. She is currently working as an ESL teacher at Frontier International Academy in Detroit, Michigan, USA. She is a published author and a frequent presenter at MITESOL and TESOL conferences.*