



V:InD:O:W Inclusion from an international perspective

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Abstract

The dropout rate of students with various learning disabilities is increasing across European higher-education institutions, and the reasons vary among individual or institutional characteristics, or interactions within colleges [1] [2]. In this context, the European project V:InD:O:W (Virtual - Inclusive - Diversity focused - Open educational - Work Modules) (KA203-34ECD999) has been granted by the European Commission on the basis that the design of digital resources can assist teachers in the integration and academic progress of students with different abilities. Thus, V:InD:O:W aims at creating digital learning modules for tertiary foreign language teacher education, which demonstrate how the principles of inclusion –in their broad, diversity-oriented interpretation– can be applied in the field of foreign language education. Specifically, the project has developed virtual digital courses that include theoretical, empirical and evidence-based knowledge, insights from language teaching practice and educational policy guidelines about different topics, among which multilingual/multicultural challenges in the foreign language classrooms is included (together with autism, dyslexia, or neurodiversity, among others). V:InD:O:W modules offer an interdisciplinary foundation of the topic. In addition, these digital and virtual modules also address the question to what extent and in what ways digitalization of learning materials can prove an asset in inclusive learning environments. The primary target group of V:InD:O:W is foreign language teacher educators, who would use these modules in the teaching of pre- and in-service foreign language teachers (secondary target group). V:InD:O:W has already designed and piloted the first set of modules during the academic year 2021-2022. This research will analyse the data from the implementation of the multilingual/multicultural module with one group of participants: A group of Master language teacher students from the University of Parma (n=17), which was delivered online during the month of February 2022. A validated questionnaire through the Delphi method has been used as the instrument for the analysis of data, which are both quantitative and qualitative. A mixed-methods research will be conducted to scrutinize such data, whose results indicate that teachers highly value as positive both the contents and the competences obtained through this module, and they mostly find it innovative and revealing. Discussion will be focused on the fact that teacher educators should be equipped with innovative tools in order to promote an inclusive and holistic approach to foreign language learning, which can demonstrate that the principles of inclusion –in their broad, diversity-oriented interpretation– can be applied in the field of foreign language education.

Keywords: *Second Language Teaching, International European Project KA203, Inclusion, Mixed-Methods Research.*

1. Theoretical background

Learning disabilities are identified as one of the main causes of school dropout by the literature [1] [2]. Moreover, social justice and democratic values have been in the foreground of second language education for a long time [3]. Learning a foreign language can often prove challenging, especially to learners with special educational needs, as they experience pedagogical disadvantages because of a range of conditions stemming from biological, environmental, and psychosocial causes which have an impact on their cognitive development and educational attainment [4]. International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD have already acknowledged this risk, so they promote the implementation



of inclusive education systems that enable all learners to actively engage in learning and reach their potential. However, on a practical level, neither all educational systems nor all stakeholders within them are truly ready for such task on a daily basis. Some foreign language teachers even report strong feelings of being overwhelmed and disillusioned with the prospect of offering equal opportunities to all their students [5].

In this context, V:InD:O:W (Virtual - Inclusive - Diversity focused - Open educational - Work Modules) (KA203-34ECD999) has been granted by the European Commission (German National Agency) on the basis that the design of digital resources can assist teachers in the integration and academic progress of students with different abilities. Thus, V:InD:O:W aims at creating digital learning modules for tertiary foreign language teacher education, which demonstrate how the principles of inclusion –in their broad, diversity-oriented interpretation– can be applied in the field of foreign language education. Specifically, the project has already developed five virtual digital courses that include theoretical, empirical and evidence-based knowledge, insights from language teaching practice and educational policy guidelines about different topics, among which multilingual/multicultural challenges in the foreign language classrooms is included (together with autism, dyslexia, or neurodiversity, among others). V:InD:O:W modules offer an interdisciplinary foundation of the topic. In addition, these digital and virtual modules also address the question to what extent and in what ways digitalization of learning materials can prove an asset in inclusive learning environments. The primary target group of V:InD:O:W is foreign language teacher educators, who would use these modules in the teaching of pre- and in-service foreign language teachers (secondary target group).

2. Methodology

The methodological procedure of this study has followed the next steps: (i) Design of V:InD:O:W modules by the research members of the project. (ii) Peer-review of the modules (2 rounds) along one academic year (2021-2022). (iii) Piloting of the V:InD:O:W multilingual/multicultural module among a group of Master language students (University of Parma). (iv) Distribution of the survey (instrument of this research) to collect data on participants' opinion on V:InD:O:W modules. (v). Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

2.1. Description of the context and the participants

V:InD:O:W modules have been specifically designed to assist language teachers on inclusive learning environments. This study will analyse the data from the implementation of the multilingual/multicultural V:InD:O:W module. The population is a group of 17 language teachers doing a Master programme at the University of Parma. Piloting was carried out as online teaching during the month of February 2022. In terms of gender, 70,59% were women ($n = 12$) and 29,41% were men ($n = 5$).

2.2. Instrument

The questionnaire of V:InD:O:W consists of 6 questions, out of which 2 (i.e., questions no. 2 and 3) contain both quantitative and qualitative data on the content of the modules, and the other 4 (i.e., questions 1, 4, 5 and 6) contain only qualitative data on the skills obtained by participants, and their opinions on the module. Quantitative data were ranged in a 1-5 Likert scale, where 1 means 'Not at all' and 5 means 'Very much'. This research will analyse quantitative and qualitative data from questions 2 and 3.

This instrument obtained a Cronbach alpha of 0.871, showing high reliability according to Oviedo and Campo-Arias (2005) [6].

Scale Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's α	
scale	0.871

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha of the V:InD:O:W instrument.

2.3. Procedure

An exhaustive scrutiny of the data has been carried out through Jamovi (v. 1.2.5.) for quantitative data and through content analysis for qualitative data. As a result, 17 students' questionnaires were considered for further analysis. Qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaire items underwent a two-step coding process. Firstly, open coding was carried out to identify all the topics responded by



the participants answering a given question. Secondly, the frequency of each code was counted and categorized according to their recurrence.

3. Results

Our analysis yields the following results, which can be found herein into two different sets for quantitative and qualitative data.

3.1. Quantitative data

Data on participants' answers to the two quantitative questions of the questionnaire can be found at Table 2:

Questions	1 Not at all	2	3	4	5 Very much
Q2. How interesting was this set of activities for you?	-	-	-	23,53%	76,47%
Q3. How informative/helpful was this set of activities?	-	-	-	52,94%	47,06%

Table 2. Quantitative data of V:InD:O:W piloting of the multilingual/multicultural module.

3.2. Qualitative data

The qualitative answers of V:InD:O:W participants can be summarized in the following two sets of content:

3.2.1. Interest and understanding of the content: Participants showed high level of interest in the V:InD:O:W multilingual/multicultural module, as they mostly declared not to be familiar with the contents delivered by these modules before this implementation. These are some representative quotations:

P. 5: *"I found every aspect of the lesson very interesting. As a student of foreign languages, I found it really helpful because it made me learn some new things that I didn't know but at the same time it helped me to improve my knowledge with some concepts I had already studied. For example, the concept of culture..."*

P. 12: *"The unit is very interesting because it offered new content for me. Also, I found that it will be important for most language teachers, who often deal with learners of different countries."*

P. 14: *"I felt very interested and excited to learn new topics."*

3.2.2. Helpful and informative activities:

P. 2: *"The activities, in my opinion, weren't difficult. They helped me to understand the concepts and, for sure, I think I will use some of them for my teaching with my diverse Secondary Education students. It is crucial to be aware of diversity in the 21st century, and I think teachers must be specifically trained to do so in a proper and sensible way."*

P. 9: *"In my opinion activities weren't that much difficult; everything was very simple and well explained. I think I will use some of the concepts with my students when I become a teacher, though I will have to adapt them to the level of my pupils (Primary Education)."*

P. 15: *"I was familiar with some of the concepts because I'm attending a course where the main topic is the culture, as well as the connection and communication among different cultures. During this class I have found a lot of themes that can help me understand better all the ideas behind this subject. I think that I will be able to implement many of them in a near future. This module has helped me to be aware of how important it is to cope with diversity from languages and cultures in a not-so globalised world."*



4. Discussion and Conclusions

The first piloting of V:InD:O:W multilingual/multicultural module among Italian language teachers can be assessed as satisfactory by researchers of this project in some different and at the same time complementary ways.

On the one hand, the hot topic contents covered by V:InD:O:W multilingual/multicultural module on both language teaching - such as the concept of culture and how difficult it is to grasp - have been valued by participants as either interesting or very interesting (values 4 and 5 of the Likert scale for question no. 2 are 100%). Participant number 5 declared that the knowledge acquired though the session “helped me to improve my knowledge with some concepts I had already studied”. The qualitative data of this analysis confirm quantitative results, as participants have mostly stated their satisfaction with the contents because they were either new for them or because the module helped students to improve their already-existing knowledge on the content. The theory of Funds of Knowledge / Identity (FoK/I) “makes a plea for teaching that draws on students’ knowledge, skills and experiences” [7, p. 1]. Although some of the concepts were new for participants in this module, the general frame and contents dealt with were known by students. So, our data concord the study by Volman and Gilde [7], who state that “Drawing on students’ FoK/I was initially mainly related to the domains of qualification. It was argued that it yields academic outcomes and improves students’ learning” (p. 1). Following Piccardo et al. [8]: “The theoretical construct of funds of knowledge is explicitly incorporated into the approach as a way of integrating linguistic and cultural diversity and culturally-specific ways of knowing into the design of language education.” (p. x). In this line, the results of our research indicate that participating language teachers can envisage the usefulness of V:InD:O:W multilingual/multicultural module to cope with diversity of students who come from different nationalities (participant no. 12). Finally, motivation towards new learning can also be observed among participants of this module (e.g., participant number 14).

On the other hand, the helpfulness of activities proposed by this module has also been positively rated by participants, as quantitative data yields 100% for values 4 and 5 for question no. 3. Qualitative data support this idea, as most participants explain that they will be able to use the knowledge acquired in their (future) teaching. Students have acknowledged the possibilities that this module has opened for language teaching in a world where diversity is the key. Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes towards language learners and diversity seem to be positively changing in the last decades [9], so the declarations of this group conform to this new stance of language teachers.

Successful design of V:InD:O:W modules has entailed transnational dialogue between various agents engaged in foreign language education (e.g., teacher educators, researchers, applied linguists, neurolinguists, engineers, experts on digitalization as well as pre-/in-service teachers and students), who have combined knowledge and experience to deliver solutions for a more sustainable implementation of the inclusive approach to foreign language education that can be generalized to many contexts. The unique experiences with inclusive education through the piloting of this V:InD:O:W multilingual/multicultural module has brought to the table interesting insights, such as participants’ acknowledgement of the need of coping with diversity, as well as the new conceptualization of the diverse language learner in the 21st century.

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