TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH PROJECT

Virtual Exchange in

foreign language learning

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Background

From the beginnings of the Internet in the early 1990s, foreign language educators have seen the potential of connecting language learners with counterparts in other countries in order to engage them in interaction with native speakers of other languages and to give them semi-authentic experiences of communicating in these languages. (O'Dowd, R., 2017)

Virtual exchange has been implemented for at least three decades now. During the COVID-19 crisis, virtual exchange has caught more attention as a strategy to sustain access to quality education, inclusion, and achievement of intercultural goals in the curriculum. With its role in language and skills development, intercultural competence and digital literacy continue to stand as core soft skills in future careers. Virtual exchange has gone on to become one of the main applications of online technologies in foreign language education. (O'Dowd, R., & O'Rourke, B., 2019) The recent expansion of virtual exchange (VE) in lieu of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing advance of technology has resulted in considerably larger numbers of VE participants for those in certain areas and contexts. (Alami., N. et. al., 2022)

In virtual exchange programs, teachers are provided with sufficient space to develop their viewpoints, unlike face-to-face classes where this opportunity is limited. Virtual exchange programs offer more time to assess what and how to respond and compare their views with peers and facilitate the development of teachers' digital, intercultural, and teaching skills. (Mohammadi, G., & Tafazoli D., 2022) This report will explain how this technology can deepen intercultural awareness and can explore one's self and capabilities. Having taught culturally and linguistically diverse students, I can see that this technology will allow more students to make international connections

What is Virtual Exchange (VE)?

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a technology-based, classroom-to-classroom, or people-to-people education programs that connects geographically separated students to develop intercultural and project-based learning. In the field of foreign language education, it has been referred to as 'telecollaboration', 'online intercultural exchange', 'globally networked learning', and 'collaborative online international learning'.

However, 'virtual exchange' is not to be confused with 'virtual mobility' as it may involve students using the internet to follow lectures and accessing course materials at a university in another geographical location, but with no intentional inclusion of intercultural learning or development of soft skills in the curriculum. (Helm, F., & O'Dowd, R., 2020) Virtual mobility does not necessarily include student-to-student dialogue, and usually refers to distance and eLearning courses. For example, students taking one course at another university without actually going there, and having these international credits recognized through a learning agreement between universities. It is also helpful to understand that virtual exchange is not Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). VE methodologies are only added to existing MOOCS, whereas delivery methods of MOOCs clearly fail to meet the criteria of people-to-people interaction and being learner-led. Proper virtual exchange always includes this holistic attention to the relationships between learners, cultural contexts and curriculum.

Virtual Exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology. It is designed and guided by educators and expert facilitators for students to collaborate on various tasks or projects. It is based on students, who are from different cultural backgrounds, engaging in structured online dialogue with other learners as part of their regular courses in their home institutions.

Current Trends

VE initiatives are generally integrated in some way into students' formal learning or, at least, students' participation in the activity is provided with some form of academic recognition, whether it be in the form of grades, credit or badges. It varies in length as some last for a few weeks and others for a semester or longer in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups.

Participants can create videos, narratives, or photos of various aspects of everyday life/interaction, share them with their peers, and comment on each other's submissions. These cultural artefacts can be used within different forms of VE and will form some kind of discourse among all participants, which might serve as a constant frame of reference for the entire period of the project. Platforms that can be used for VEs include but are not limited to Padlet, FlipGrid, Google Drive, and Blogger. Examples of online chats and video technologies are Zoom, Facetime, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Google Hangout, WeChat, Discord, and Skype. Examples of shared workspaces are Blackboard, Google Docs, Google Slides, YouTube, and Adobe Spark, and examples of social media are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Final projects can consist of videos, blogs, wikis, and digital storytelling. (Lanhama, C., & Voskuilb, C., 2022)

VE uses broadly available technological tools aimed at providing low-cost access to global learning opportunities to students. Simply put, VE projects pair professors from classrooms in different countries and bring students together using internet access to learning platforms via computers and mobile phones. Through these widely available tools, students meet and interact with their partners from other countries through discussions and synchronous and asynchronous meetings in which they exchange experiences and ideas, and work together in teams to complete projects that are graded by their respective professors.

Features

Virtual Exchange is technology-enabled using new media, digital, and/or mobile technologies. Some of the types of technologies dominating virtual exchange practice are asynchronous text-based communication and videoconferencing.

VE is generally envisioned as an ideal opportunity to engage students in social interaction and collaboration with other participants whom they would be less likely to meet in 'normal' educational circumstances. It is a highly flexible practice that can be incorporated into one's teaching in a variety of manners such as in-class or hybrid learning environments. It is preferably based on regular synchronous or near-synchronous meetings using high social presence media. (Dooly, M., & Vinagre, M., 2021)

Videoconferencing

It was seen to develop students' ability to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and to elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their partners' behavior and their opinions.

Asynchronous text-based communication

It can effectively support second language development by providing increased opportunities for authentic interaction in the target language outside the normal constraints of the classroom and regardless of geographical location.

However, more recent reports also underline the need to combine videoconferencing with stages of asynchronous communication. The 2020 Steven's Initiative report found that educators had noted the benefit of incorporating asynchronous activities into a VE as they were in many ways less demanding on students. (O'Dowd, R., 2021)

Benefits in Teaching and Learning

Virtual Exchange opens a lot of opportunities for students and educators to explore ways to engage and collaborate effectively with peers from different socio-cultural contexts with the use of technological tools. The focus is primarily on people-to-people interaction and dialogue to develop intercultural and language competencies, build digital and technological literacy, and connect to faculty internationally.

Intercultural Awareness and Understanding

VE allows an increasing number of people to have a meaningful intercultural experience as part of their formal and/or non-formal education. It helps participants to engage in constructive conversations in the face of ontological and epistemological differences. It involves inclusive and intercultural collaboration that bridges differences and distances and inspire action with a long-term positive impact on relationships.

That's why participating in VE encourages our students to be global citizens, developing intercultural skills, valuing cultural similarities, and respecting differences. (Lanhama, C., & Voskuilb, C., 2022) Through a virtual exchange, the development of intercultural competence can be fostered. It provides an opportunity for learning through diverse perspectives and ability to negotiate and collaborate across borders. It can develop students' ability to recognize diversities in the partners' cultural groups.

VE makes participants realize the variety of thinking processes and sets of beliefs and values of individuals and subgroups, their different perspectives on everyday practices and sociocultural issues. It fosters mutual understanding through covering topics related to identity, empathy, perspective taking, and critical reflection.

Foreign Language Competency and Digital Literacy

Through virtual interactions (e.g. LinguaMeeting), students can receive language coaching from native speakers. Some may include use of self-directed online language learning platforms (e.g. busuu, italki) as part of a wider array of planned learning activities or guided language learning that takes place in instructed formal settings with partner teachers. (Dooly, M., & Vinagre, M., 2021)

VE fosters the development of what have been recognized as employability skills such as foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy, digital competence, which is the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively online, and the ability to work in a diverse cultural context. It emphasizes participants as the main recipients and the main drivers of knowledge and encourages higher productivity and efficiency among students as they perform best in their personal spaces and can control every aspect the way they want to.

In the analysis of the exchanges, the completed activities and the participation and the involvement of the learners, we noted some improvement in students' oral and written English language skills, students' mastery of new digital tools for sharing, collaboration, and communicating. (Machwate, S., et. al. 2021)

International Faculty Networks

Virtual Exchange also trains youth workers and university professors to develop virtual exchange projects with partners of other countries, putting in contact young people from different cultures. (Laurea, T. 2019) It emphasizes how to build networks for faculty across international institutions, how educators and facilitators can support the interaction and constructive communication that takes place and seek mutual understanding and co-creating knowledge based on their own experiences.

Issues in Teaching and Learning

As much as virtual exchange has potential for enhancing students' learning development, it is not flawless. Using technologies and connecting interculturally are all experiences that do not exempt from challenges due to technical issues, intercultural misunderstanding, stereotyping, and language-related challenges.

Intercultural Misunderstanding

It is not an exaggeration to say that the ultimate ambition of virtual exchange practitioners is to promote understanding across national and cultural divides, a goal which is more pressing than ever. (O'Dowd, R., & O'Rourke, B., 2019) A key tenet of VE is that intercultural understanding and awareness are not automatic outcomes of contact between different groups/cultures and virtual exchange programmes explicitly address intercultural understanding and engaging with difference. (Laurea, T., 2019) Mediating intercultural miscommunication is one of the most stressful issues observed in virtual exchange discussions.

Communication and Technical Challenges

The reports from 2018 and early 2019 underline the importance of introducing videoconferencing into exchanges as this form of communication is helpful for relationship building and overcoming the depersonalized nature of text-based discussions. For example, in the EVALUATE study (2019), the authors reported that students had regularly pointed out that the task-based focus of the exchanges and the text-based nature of the communication had led to a feeling that their collaborations were depersonalized and that they lacked the feeling of interacting with 'real people'. (O'Dowd, R., 2021) Virtual Exchange has been integrated at all levels of education from kindergarten through university and is distinctive in its use of new media platforms to enable deep, interactive social learning. (Laurea, T., 2019) But poor wifi

connections, outdated devices, and other technological challenges can make participation in a VE difficult if not impossible. (Lanhama, C., & Voskuilb, C., 2022)

Lack of Staff Support to Facilitate the Exchange

Despite the benefits of VEs for both students and faculty, VE training reflects a general lack of pedagogical and instructional support, and ongoing technological professional development for faculty who teach online. The financial challenges posed by the pandemic may have exacerbated preexisting funding constraints related to professional development in this field. One of the many lessons learned in the COVID-19 pandemic is that effective online teaching requires more than simply taking an existing face-to-face course and teaching it remotely. Training programmes for teachers need to develop teachers' team-teaching skills and develop their ability to collaborate and communicate regularly with their partner teacher. (O'Dowd, R., et al. 2019)

Implications for Current Education

During the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions of higher learning made VE a larger part of their curriculum, leading to greater access to global education for many students. (Lanhama, C., & Voskuilb, C., 2022) In the current situation, VE has encouraged education practitioners to acknowledge this technology more. It can be integrated into any subject area course. With the support of trained facilitators and/or educators, virtual exchange is integrated into formal and/or non-formal educational programmes and activities to develop measurable increases in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster pro-social behaviors.

"Virtual exchange is the 'toe in the water' that gives those hesitant students the courage to leave home, to travel abroad, and to benefit from full immersion in another culture," observes Professor Sterne. "And in today's restricted travel environment, virtual exchange may be the

only opportunity some students have to make friends overseas, to chat with other students in other lands, to compare notes about life, politics, sports, dating, diet, holidays, and lifestyles."

(Lanhama, C., & Voskuilb, C., 2022)

Alternative to Physical Mobility

It has been considered an alternative to physical mobility for students with disabilities or economic difficulties as well as facilitating inclusion, language practice, and internationalization for all. (Dooly, M., & Vinagre, M., 2021) The new international learning context brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that physical mobility numbers are likely to drop significantly in the coming years. Virtual Exchange can help to compensate for this by providing students with international learning experiences as part of their studies at their home institution.

Alternative to Study Abroad

VE is a technology-enabled, collaborative international pedagogy that has been growing over the past two decades as an alternative to traditional study abroad. Instead of students travelling to another country to experience a different culture, they can engage in intercultural learning by collaborating on an online project with their peers around the world. Since study abroad is a privilege that is not afforded by most students, VE has encouraged more administrators and practitioners in different academic disciplines to build online global partnerships.

Virtual Exchange serves as a steppingstone to physical mobility and provide an alternative for those who cannot afford to study abroad. Putting all these benefits into practice, no doubt led to participants developing their intercultural awareness and digital literacies, and gaining language, digital, and cultural competencies.

Recommendations for Future Education

Virtual Exchange is not an 'emergency tool' to be considered only in times of pandemics and limited international travel. Educational institutions, especially university stakeholders, should explore how VE can most effectively be applied in foreign language education. There should be innovative institutional policies that facilitate the integration of VE into curricula and universities' internationalization strategies. Educators should explore new pedagogies and classroom practices which incorporate VE projects.

In addition, VE needs to be recognized and publicized as a legitimate and valuable form of international learning either independent of traditional student mobility programs or as a suitable complementary educational intervention.VE is typically conceptualized as a partnership with a Western university (preferably an English-speaking one). All other types of VE are often not perceived as critical for comprehensive internationalization. This can be addressed by explicitly training institutional international cooperation officers and holding more conferences on VE pedagogies in a variety of disciplines and contexts. (Alami., N., et. al., 2022)

A further recommendation includes providing training for participants in how to interact successfully online with members of other cultures. Greater knowledge of VE should lead to greater support for instructors and students, in the form of small grants for project preparation or the awarding of credit for the time-intensive work required for this pedagogical practice. (O'Dowd, R., 2021)

Conclusion

Virtual Exchange acts as a catalyst for internationalization of teaching and learning in home curricula. This paper presented a clear body of evidence that demonstrates its value for developing students' foreign language skills, intercultural understanding, soft skills, and digital competency. We should not forget the many other opportunities that the local environment provides for engagement with international and intercultural actors and should be careful not to assume that a single VE activity can internationalize an entire curriculum. With this in mind, for virtual exchange to be a more effective educational tool, greater attention must be paid to how teachers can actively integrate the exchanges into their classes and mentor their students as they negotiate the linguistic, cultural, and digital hurdles of online intercultural collaboration.

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