



New Developments in Virtual Exchange in Foreign Language Education

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Introduction

In the context of second language education, virtual exchange (or *telecollaboration*) involves bringing together groups of learners from different cultural contexts for extended periods of online intercultural collaboration and interaction. This is done as an integrated part of the students' educational programmes and under the guidance of educators or expert facilitators with the aim of developing learners' foreign language skills, digital literacies, and intercultural competence (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

Virtual Exchange is an area of online foreign language education that has experienced dramatic growth and change in the past number of years. From the time when initial reports and research studies began to emerge over 20 years ago (e.g., Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Eck, Legenhausen, & Wolff, 1995; Warschauer, 1995), virtual exchange has gone on to become one of the main applications of online technologies in foreign language education. While PhD candidates at the turn of the millennia (e.g., the editors of this special issue) struggled to find many in-depth research publications on this area (with obvious exceptions including Brammerts & Little, 1996; Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen, 1998), researchers today are spoiled with a wide array of monographs and edited collections (e.g., Belz & Thorne, 2006; Dooly, 2008; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012; Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd, 2006, 2007; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Tudini, 2010; Warschauer, 1996), special editions of journals such as *Language Learning & Technology* (e.g., Vol. 7, Num. 2; Vol. 15, Num. 1), and overview articles presenting syntheses of research (e.g., Akiyama & Cunningham, 2018; Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016).

Outside academia, the potential of virtual exchange has been noted as well, evidenced by the emergence of online companies that carry out the service of connecting foreign language learners with native speakers for on-demand language practice and intercultural exchange (e.g., [Conversifi](#) and [TalkAbroad](#)). The recordings of the interactions are then provided to teachers so they can be evaluated as part of course work. This form of outsourcing of the online language learning experience will no doubt be attractive to institutions and teachers who are unfamiliar with the process of setting up and running virtual exchanges. However, to our knowledge, there have been no in-depth studies to date of the particular learning outcomes and learning experiences that this form of virtual exchange has had in comparison to teacher-run exchanges.

Virtual Exchange and Second Language Learning

Not only has there been a gradual growth in awareness of telecollaboration in mainstream foreign language (e.g., Jackson, 2012; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) and bilingual education (e.g., Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008), but there has also been a dramatic growth in interest in the application of online intercultural exchange projects in other academic disciplines. For example, [X-Culture](#) was launched in 2010 as a network for teachers and students of international business studies who wanted to give their students first-hand experience with international virtual teams. By 2015, almost 4,000 students from over 100 universities in 40 countries were participating in the network. The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) network based in the SUNY university network in the US has connected classes of similar course content

in different countries across many academic disciplines (Schultheis Moore & Simon, 2015).

Perhaps these developments represent the desire of educators to look beyond models of educational technology that focus on the individual learner with an electronic device—a belated recognition that online technologies extend not only individual cognition, but also the reach of communication and community. Recent years have seen the emergence of independent non-profit organisations, operating in the online space, with a broader socio-political remit than is usually associated with formal education. The Sharing Perspectives Foundation describes itself as “a non-profit non-governmental organisation dedicated to providing students and academics from across the globe with an opportunity to collaboratively learn about current socio-political issues through virtual exchange” (Sharing Perspectives, 2019), while the mission of non-profit Soliya is “to empower young people to establish more effective, cooperative, and compassionate relations within and between their societies by providing high quality global education that combines the power of dialogue with the reach of new media technologies” (Soliya, 2019). The Sharing Perspectives Foundation and Soliya are among the consortium partners implementing the European Commission’s Erasmus+ [Virtual Exchange](#) project, which aims to enable youth in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to engage in meaningful intercultural experiences online, as part of their formal or non-formal education. The programmes run by organisations such as these place at their centre values which are usually at least implicit in any virtual exchange: the importance of intercultural encounter, dialogue, and openness.

It seems clear that practitioners of virtual exchange have come a long way, in terms of ambition at the very least, from the earliest experiments in keypalships and e-mail tandem exchanges. As a result of the growth of initiatives in online intercultural learning and dialogue, the terminology from other curricular areas has made inroads in the field of foreign language education, and, for this reason, terms such as *COIL*, *virtual teams*, and *virtual exchange* are appearing alongside the more common term *telecollaboration* in the literature. The term *virtual exchange* has particularly gained momentum in the more recent years, perhaps due to its prevalence in many educational policies and by government bodies (e.g., the US-based Stevens Initiative, the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and the European Commission; see European Commission, 2017). In foreign language education, the term *telecollaboration* remains dominant. However, organisations that promote this area of research and practice (e.g., [UNICollaboration](#)) are increasingly adopting *virtual exchange* as an umbrella term to facilitate understanding across different educational contexts. For the purposes of this special issue, we have decided to accept both *telecollaboration* and *virtual exchange*; although for the sake of clarity, we have asked authors to use either one or the other and not to use both interchangeably.

A further development which is receiving quite a lot of attention in the research literature is an apparent preference for videoconferencing over text-based interaction in virtual exchanges. Synchronous communication has become progressively easier and more accessible to students engaging in virtual exchange collaborations, and researchers are beginning to examine the medium’s impact on intercultural communication (Barron & Black, 2015; Canto & Jauregi Ondarra, 2017; Cappellini & Azaoui, 2017; Fernández & Pozzo, 2017; Van der Kroon, Jauregi, & ten Thije, 2015; Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014; Wigham, 2017). Malinowski and Kramsch (2014) highlight the important impact of technological medium on online intercultural encounters and report that the interface can hinder intercultural learning. Kern (2014) also argues that telecollaborative learning needs to draw learners’ attention to how the online medium influences the way communication takes place. He suggests that practitioners should raise students’ awareness of assumptions and genres they bring to online interaction and draw attention to the impact of the computer medium on communicative activity. Again, this is an area that requires more research.

In its text-based form, what comprises synchronous and asynchronous communication is no longer as clear-cut as it once seemed. Instant messaging applications, many of them smartphone based, may be used in more synchronous or more asynchronous modes, and the consequences for interpersonal engagement and learning are not altogether clear (O’Rourke & Stickler, 2017). In addition to the issues of how interfaces affect learning, the normalisation of online communication in daily life poses questions about how or whether platforms used privately by students should be used for virtual exchange. Use of students’ everyday

social media and messaging apps may be perceived as intrusive by students or may be associated with educationally unproductive cultures of use (see Thorne, 2003, 2016; Fuchs, this issue). Research on exchanges that use such platforms may raise issues of privacy and data protection.

In This Special Issue

The large number of submissions to this special issue attests to the vigour of virtual exchange as an educational practice and as a field of research. The proposals and full submissions reported on a wide range of exchange configurations from an equally wide range of theoretical and empirical angles. Our final selection is intended to reflect this variety, with an emphasis on studies that show innovation in practice or research and that contain in-depth empirical analysis.

In *The formative role of teaching presence in blended virtual exchange*, Kurek and Müller-Hartmann focus on telecollaboration in teacher training. Their action-research study draws on three iterations of an exchange between Polish and German EFL student teachers, focusing on the role of teaching presence (TP) within international communities of inquiry. Their analysis suggests that teachers' pedagogical interventions are responsive to the phase of the virtual exchange, and to the local conditions of particular communities of interest at particular points. Kurek and Müller-Hartmann emphasise the impact of TP on learning presence (LP). LP and the modelling-in-action role of TP emerge as key factors in online teacher-training contexts such as the one in this study.

In *Critical incidents and cultures-of-use in a Hong Kong–Germany telecollaboration*, Fuchs looks at the complexities of telecollaborative exchange between Asian and European students, a cultural partnership profile that has been relatively underexplored to date. The study looks at differing cultures-of-use of social media and online collaboration tools in the Hong Kong and German socio-institutional contexts. The author found that the majority of telecollaborative teams demonstrated high levels of interaction and rated their overall experience with tools positively. However, the majority of Hong Kong teams reported barriers and constraints that were related to differences in tool access and use and that hindered communication and negotiation. The author concludes by recommending measures for sensitizing participants to cultural differences in online communication and tool use.

Grau and Turula (*Experiential learning of telecollaborative competences in pre-service teacher education*) make a valuable contribution to the growing body of work on how future foreign language teachers can learn to be competent telecollaborators. The article uses data from a Polish–German exchange that examines how students in pre-service teacher education programmes can learn from their first-hand experiences of being engaged in virtual exchanges during their own studies. The authors find that telecollaborative exchanges have great potential for shaping the attitudes and beliefs of teacher trainees participating in them. The experience can also contribute to the development of various telecollaborative competences that the student teachers are able to operationalise when they go on to become teachers themselves.

The article by Van der Zwaard and Bannink, *Toward a comprehensive model of negotiated interaction in computer-mediated communication*, is based on data from Dutch–Australian telecollaborations using chat and video-conferencing. It brings into focus the fact that partners are concerned at least as much with interpersonal “face” issues as with learning and language issues. The authors' new framework for describing negotiation trajectories identifies five recurring patterns in terms of task-appropriate and face-appropriate responses. They propose a number of variables that may affect the prevalence of observed trajectories. This contribution draws researchers' attention to overlooked interactional patterns and gives them new tools for the analysis of telecollaborative data.

Oskoz and Gimeno Sanz (*Engagement and attitude in telecollaboration: Topic and cultural background effects*) approach their topic using the appraisal framework. Many typical telecollaborative tasks involve discussions of cultural topics. In the view of the authors, the quality of these discussions and individual contributions to them, as revealed by linguistic as distinct from content analysis, has been relatively neglected in the literature. The appraisal framework enables them to analyse the ways participants position

themselves and negotiate stances with respect to potentially sensitive discussion topics. They focus on the variables of group (US-based students or Spain-based students) and topic (e.g., nationalism, patriotism), finding differences in discursive style between the groups that are nonetheless modulated by the topic at hand.

In *Telecollaboration for content and language integrated learning: A genre-based approach*, Cunningham looks at the application of virtual exchange in an area of second language education that has not received adequate attention in the literature until now, namely, language for specific purposes. He examines the intersection of language and content learning in a genre-based German course. The study looks at the extent to which synchronous virtual exchange can support allows language learners to demonstrate content knowledge acquired previously in the course and the extent to which virtual exchange affords language learners opportunities to acquire new content knowledge. The author suggests that his findings provide evidence that genre can provide an important link between content and language learning outcomes in the context of synchronous virtual exchanges.

The contribution by Lee and Song looks at *Developing intercultural competence through study-abroad, telecollaboration, and on-campus language study*. They provide a comparison of telecollaborative and study-abroad environments with on-campus language classes as a control. It is true that these are two significantly different contexts that are neither interchangeable in their goals nor equally accessible to students; comparisons can be fraught with confounds and false parallels. Nonetheless, the authors share the aim of fostering intercultural communicative competence, and this study presupposes that evidence about their relative success in this regard must surely contribute to our understanding of the potential and limits of telecollaboration. This mixed-methods study focuses on study abroad by U.S. students in five different countries and telecollaboration between Korean students of English and American students of Korean. Practitioners of telecollaboration will find their results encouraging.

Conclusion

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. Given that virtual exchange appears to be taking root in education and in other sectors, it is essential that it be scrutinised in all its many aspects and that the theoretical and methodological tools for investigating it be refined. We hope this special issue provides a representative sample of research and practice and offers foundations and inspiration for future work.

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