

Virtual exchange supporting language and intercultural development: students' perceptions

Eric Hagley¹ and Matthew Cotter²

Abstract. Foreign Language (FL) classrooms should be places where, at a minimum, communication is taking place in the foreign language being taught and intercultural understanding is also being developed. However, in countries where the majority of students are from a single cultural background, it is often difficult to keep students on-task if they do not have to use the language they are studying. Virtual Exchange (VE) ensures students interact with their online peers in the FL, as it becomes the lingua-franca. However, student attitudes toward such VE in the FL classroom are still not fully understood. This paper researches students' attitudes toward one VE, the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject). Each iteration of the IVEProject is for eight weeks. Students interact asynchronously on Moodle forums in text, audio, and video. More than 15,000 students from 15 countries have participated in at least one of the VE carried out since 2016. Online surveys are carried out at the end of each exchange. Results suggest students have an overall positive attitude toward incorporating VE into FL and intercultural classes.

Keywords: virtual exchange, FL, IVEProject, intercultural understanding.

1. Introduction

VE has many forms and is used in many fields. It is of particular importance to FL and intercultural communication classes, as students see more relevance and need to apply what they are studying immediately. The importance of studying the FL becomes apparent when the FL needs to be used in real-world communicative activities and/or tasks where authentic communication and collaboration processes are at the very heart of the exchanges. O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) note that VE has

1. Muroran Institute of Technology, Muroran, Japan; hagley@mmm.muroran-it.ac.jp; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4795-8043>
2. Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College, Sapporo, Japan; m-cotter@hokusei.ac.jp; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0906-1400>

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many benefits and research in the field is continuing to grow. However, in the same volume, O'Dowd (2016, p. 275) also notes there are some criticisms that need to be addressed, in particular: authenticity; creation of a false impression of universality, where students see other cultures through a prism of common humanity rather than appreciating the subtle and not so subtle differences therein; and a lack of opportunity to reflect on interactions.

Carrell and West (2010) noted that sometimes students are not the best judges of what is best for them. However, it is still important to discover if what they are studying is of interest to them. Helm (2015) noted research suggesting VE positively affects students' motivations, which leads to better learning outcomes. For this reason, we need to analyze participants' attitudes toward their participation in the IVEProject.

2. Method

2.1. The IVEProject

Hagley (2016) outlines the IVEProject in detail. Participating students from one country are partnered with students from at least one other country. The students interact asynchronously via Moodle forums using text, audio, and video. Interaction takes place in the focused discussion forum, run over an eight-week period, on four different assigned topics. The last of the assigned topics is a reflection task. Separate to the focused discussion forum is an open forum where students can interact on any topic they choose with students from multiple countries in the exchange (some 3,200 most recently).

One requisite is that teachers be involved and assist students with their interactions. Teachers and facilitators are important in all VE (INTENT, 2014). Participation is free-of-charge as the project is sponsored by a Japanese government Kaken grant.

2.2. Data from the project

At the end of each exchange, we survey students about their participation. In this paper, we concentrate on anonymous, optional replies from Japanese and Colombian students, the biggest participating groups in the most recent exchange. We used the Moodle questionnaire and groups function so only students from Japan answered

the Japan-based questionnaire and the same for Colombian students. Questions were translated into Japanese and Spanish respectively. A series of questions, with answers on a six-point Likert scale, were asked in section one. Some statements related to technical aspects of the exchange. Only questions relating to this research are included here, with results outlined in Table 1. The percentages of students that answered positively 4-5-6 are noted with the means and standard deviation. Both Japanese and Colombian responses are shown there, but for the other two sections only Japanese students' responses are included as questions were open-ended and the authors cannot read Spanish. Colombian researchers will publish results at a later date.

3. Results and discussion

As shown in Table 1, students from both countries have a favorable view of their participation in the IVEProject. They clearly see it as being beneficial to the development of both their language learning and understanding of other cultures. Participation has also piqued the interest of participants in foreign countries and cultures and, as interactions were between students from different cultures, the use of English was necessary. This is a more authentic use of English than, for example, Japanese students in an English as an FL (EFL) class using English to carry out communicative tasks. Students appreciate this increase in the level of authenticity. In addition, students strongly state that they have changed their view of their partner countries, something that suggests they do not have a 'false impression of universality', emphasized by almost half of the respondents noting that their change in understanding of other cultures was a positive outcome.

Table 1. Students' attitudes toward the IVEProject

	Japan 2019 n=594			Colombia 2019 n=402		
	% of students' positive attitudes	Mean	SD	% of students' positive attitudes	Mean	SD
I think this online exchange is beneficial to learning English.	81	4.5	1.3	90	5.3	1.1
I didn't learn anything about the other country.	13	2.1	1.2	16	2.0	1.4
Compared to before starting the exchange, I now think English is an important language.	79	4.5	1.3	96	5.6	0.9

I'm more interested in the other country(ies) now because of the VE.	77	4.3	1.2	86	4.8	1.2
I changed my view of the other country because of the VE.	70	4.1	1.3	89	4.7	1.2

The second section addressed the following open question: “What were positive areas of the exchange?”. The answers were separated into common themes and are outlined in [Table 2](#). When more than two themes were covered in a response, they were added to both, hence the total number is greater than the number of respondents.

Table 2. Positive aspects of the exchange (n=594)

Sense of improving intercultural understanding	264
Sense of participation in a global community	227
Sense of linguistic improvement	171
Other (system ease of use, ‘fun’, could be done anywhere, etc.)	42
Motivation increase	31
No comment	12
Negative comment	1

In section two, one can see that close to half of the Japanese students started to ‘feel’ like they were part of a global community. This would suggest they see themselves as separate to, but part of that community, and hence not taking on feelings of universality. That many also believe it has improved their intercultural understanding is also positive; however, a better tool is required to check if their understanding really has improved. A large number believe the exchange has improved their language ability, though, again, this would need to be proven.

The final section included an open-ended question about the problems encountered and/or the parts of the exchange students disliked. Results are shown in [Table 3](#) with common themes grouped.

Table 3. Type of problem or dislike (n=594)

‘Nothing’ or ‘no problem’	257
System problems (such as difficulty in uploading pictures, etc.)	216
Dissatisfaction with other students’ efforts	57
Time consuming	11
Topic choice	10
Demotivating	3
‘Other’ (slow reply time, assessment style, difficulty in understanding English, lack of synchronous exchange, etc.)	51

The results in [Table 3](#) show that almost half of them had no negative comment and that most negative comments involved technical problems with the system we used such as having trouble uploading photos or other multimedia. Only three respondents (0.5%), stated the exchange was demotivating. Another area of dissatisfaction was that partner students did not reply often enough or fast enough. This shows students wanted to receive more replies and exchange with their partners in greater detail, which could actually be considered a positive outcome.

There were some comments of particular note. One student wrote “other students in my university didn’t have to do this so, at first, I thought it was unfair that we had to do more work than them. However, after finishing the exchange, I thought it was unfair that the other classes couldn’t participate in it too”. Another wrote “I have always wanted to communicate with foreigners but have never been able to because I live in a regional area. This exchange was a great opportunity to do so”.

4. Conclusions

Participating students appreciate this VE. It is a more authentic use of English than standard EFL communication in the Asian context. The results here suggest that when VE is done well, students do not acquire a false impression of universality nor lack opportunities to reflect on their interactions and can, in fact, learn from them. This would suggest that VE should become a part of EFL classes in general.

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