

# Virtual exchange connecting language learners in online intercultural collaborative learning

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<b>Potential impact</b>	high
<b>Timescale</b>	ongoing
<b>Keywords</b>	virtual exchange, telecollaboration, e-tandem, blended mobility

## What is it?

Virtual exchange is an umbrella term used to refer to the engagement of groups of learners in online language and intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work, and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators (O’Dowd, 2018).

## Examples

The majority of reports in the literature on virtual exchange are based on bilingual-bicultural exchanges which involve two classes are studying each other’s languacultures. Exchanges of this type generally reflect one of two models of virtual exchange: e-tandem or telecollaborative exchange.

In the e-tandem model, students are required to communicate in both languages during their interactions and to act as informal linguistic tutors to their partners,

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providing feedback on their use of the target language. This model has been in practice for over 20 years (O'Rourke, 2007), and it is still common practice today, as evidenced by many reports of practice and the large body of research emerging from the related teletandem networks (Leone & Telles, 2016).

In the telecollaborative model of virtual exchange, exchanges combine foreign language development with an emphasis on intercultural learning. These exchanges typically involve tasks where partners present aspects of their cultures to each other, compare their cultural practices and perspectives, or engage in discussions based on shared texts. Telecollaborative virtual exchanges are usually integrated into students' classes, with teachers supporting learners in their online interactions.

Apart from these two models, there is also a growing interest in foreign language education in *lingua franca* approaches to virtual exchanges, which give learners the opportunity to engage in online collaboration with partner classes who are not necessarily native speakers of the target language. For example, this may involve students from Spain, Sweden, and Israel collaborating together in English as a *lingua franca* (O'Dowd, Sauro, & Spector-Cohen, 2020), or students from France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain using German as a *lingua franca* in their online interactions (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017). These exchanges usually involve tasks which require collaboration on themes that go beyond explicit bicultural comparison. This approach to virtual exchange has gained popularity because teachers often struggle to find partner classes studying their languaculture, and also due to the questioning of the role of native speakers in foreign language education.

In university foreign language education, online platforms that provide 'ready-made' virtual exchange experiences for their students are also gaining in popularity. These platforms (e.g. *Conversifi* and *TalkAbroad*) function in different ways, but the majority connect foreign language students with native speakers in video-conferencing sessions, usually in exchange for a fee, which can be paid by the institution or the students themselves. They then provide the students and/or their teachers with recordings of the conversations, which

can later be used as part of students' course evaluations. This 'outsourcing' of virtual exchange takes a considerable organisational and technical burden off the teachers, who no longer have to look for appropriate partners for their students. There is currently, however, a lack of reliable research as to how learners can develop their linguistic and intercultural competences through such un-mentored virtual conversations with native speakers.

## Benefits

From the point of view of educational institutions, virtual exchange can be an ideal addition to institutions' internationalisation at home programmes, and can act as a useful complement to physical mobility programmes. Virtual exchange offers universities many benefits, including versatility, accessibility, and economic and environmental sustainability.

In the context of foreign language learning, there is no doubt that its greatest attraction is to offer learners an experience of authentic communication and collaboration with international partners. Virtual exchange offers learners the opportunity to develop their communication skills, overcome anxiety, adapt to different communicative situations, and develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the intercultural speaker (Byram, 1997) – all in the context of their formal study programmes. Furthermore, the online modality of exchanges, combined with a formal educational context, offers participants the opportunity to learn media literacy and digital skills to appropriately consume and create content online, and to communicate and collaborate with international partners using diverse technological tools.

## Potential issues

Establishing virtual exchange partnerships can be a demanding task, as it implies looking for suitable partners and then maintaining fluent and effective teacher-to-teacher communication and coordination throughout the entire process. Furthermore, big imbalances between the groups (levels of proficiency, areas of interest), the institutions (goals, expectations, needs, requirements)

or the contexts (time zones, calendars) may negatively affect the success and effectiveness of the project. As far as technology is concerned, having back-up plans in terms of communication tools can be desirable to avoid communication breakdowns.

## Looking to the future

Interest in virtual exchange has increased dramatically in recent years, and there are currently many organisations and initiatives which support the activity and provide training to educators who are interested in engaging their students in online intercultural exchange projects. The UNICollaboration organisation was established in 2016 to promote the research and practice of virtual exchange around the globe. In Europe, the European Commission has done much to promote virtual exchange through the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange programme and the introduction of blended mobility in the new Erasmus+ programme, which combines stages of physical mobility with periods of online collaboration and exchange. In the US, organisations such as Steven's initiative and the COIL network also promote this approach to learning.

Starke-Meyerring and Wilson (2008, p. 222) warn that the success of globally networked initiatives such as virtual exchange depend on three key pillars – robust partnerships, innovative institutional policies, and new pedagogies for globally networked learning. This means that the future of virtual exchange will require the commitment and collaboration of three different groups of stakeholders in university education. First, international mobility officers will be needed to help establish international virtual exchange partnerships and networks. Second, university management will be needed to introduce innovative institutional policies that facilitate the integration of virtual exchange into university curricula and strategy. Finally, teachers will need to explore new pedagogies and classroom

practices which incorporate virtual exchange projects. If these three groups can come together, then there is undoubtedly a bright future for virtual exchange in university education.

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## Resources

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## Chapter 3. Virtual exchange

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COIL global network: <https://coil.suny.edu/global-network/>

Conversifi: <https://www.conversifi.com/>

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange: <https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual>

TalkAbroad: <https://talkabroad.com/>

Teletandem: <http://www.teletandembrasil.org/>

Steven's initiative: <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/>

UNICollaboration: <https://www.unicollaboration.org/>



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