

1 The evolution of virtual exchange and assessment practices

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Abstract

This chapter provides a general synopsis of the evolution of Virtual Exchange (VE) as it has progressively become more immersed in the paradigms of language teaching approaches. Inevitably, this transformation unfolds in pace to advances in communication technology as the interactional tools are key for facilitating connection between distanced partners in the exchanges. Coming full circle, these advances have had an impact on the organization of the exchanges as well as the focus, methods, and tools used for assessing VE. We will first foreground seminal authors' work and their impact on VE, next we will review the more commonplace terminology and how these terms have evolved. Through this lens we will then consider how, historically, these concepts have impacted and are now manifested in the different typologies of implementations and assessments in more current VE research and practice, including the chapters in this book. We finish by presenting some of the thornier challenges in assessing VE and examples of how these are being addressed.

Keywords: virtual exchange, assessment, online interaction, intercultural teaching.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly sophisticated technology has become ubiquitous in many households around the world; smartphones are now widely used around the world (although, admittedly there are still glaring socioeconomic gaps in places without electricity that makes the use of technology impossible). However, as technological advances and access to technology becomes more widespread, it is often argued that these events hold the potential to revolutionize teaching and learning. This was made patently palpable during the school lockdowns precipitated by the Covid 19 pandemic. Recent studies show that the situation activated teachers to develop and enhance their techno-pedagogical know-how and gain confidence in their technological abilities as the pandemic led to the shutting down of schools for extended periods and teachers had to pivot almost immediately from in-person teaching to online.

However, there is a need to push beyond these parameters of merely thinking about technical teacher know-how; this does not guarantee true innovation in pedagogy. As [Hodges et al. \(2020\)](#) point out, a distinction is best made between techno-pedagogical competences and *emergency* remote teaching. As the use of technology in education has become more widespread, concomitantly and with increased access to personal digital devices and Internet connection, discussion of preparing the ‘21st century citizen’, capable of functioning in a technology-saturated society, had already become prevalent in discourse on education and educational policies even before the worldwide pandemic. One of the most common features for ‘21st century education’ is that the leading-edge teacher should use student-centered, inquiry-based teaching approaches – the same characteristics asserted by [Dewey \(1916\)](#) 100 years ago in his proposal for a transformative educational model. In his framework, Dewey argued that the role of education is to provide *developmental opportunities* for the individual (guidance and support to knowledge, not transmission from one ‘all-knowing’ to ‘empty vessels’). Significantly, from 2020 to 2021, during the most critical moments of the Covid pandemic, numerous policy support documents for educators in online teaching also tended to highlight student-centered practice. Significantly, this shift from a “transmission mode

of pedagogy” to a more “participative experience” (Thomas, Reinders, & Warschauer, 2013, p. 7) had already been the backbone of learning design for VE for several decades (Belz, 2003; Dooly, 2005, 2009; O’Dowd & Waire, 2009; Warschauer, 1996).

A second major axis of 21st century, participatory education, which is the rejection of the notion of ‘individual cognition’ for a more collaborative process of socially constructed, mutually shared knowledge building has also been increasingly more predominant in VE configurations (Dooly, 2017). Social constructivists view knowing as a social process, manifest not only in the sociocultural construct of what is perceived as ‘knowing’ (Maturana, 1978; Mercer & Sams, 2006), but also within the social interaction among experts-to-non-experts, peer-to-peer that leads to higher levels of reasoning and learning (Sfard & Kieran, 2001). Therein lies another fundamental parallelism to the promotion of VE for learning. It has been well-documented that collaboration in education, whether between, classmates, entire classes or school and even between educational institutions and other entities or communities is not a new activity (Dooly, 2017; Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018; The EVALUATE Group, 2019). However, VE, as a specific type of collaboration that involves distanced partners has become more popular with the advent and easier access to communication technology in the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s, in particular in language education. This is not surprising as “fomenting contact between language communities has always been a principal goal (as witnessed by international programs of exchange, e.g. Erasmus programs)” (Dooly, 2017, p. 169) and with increasingly easier access to speakers of different languages, the use of VE is still growing.

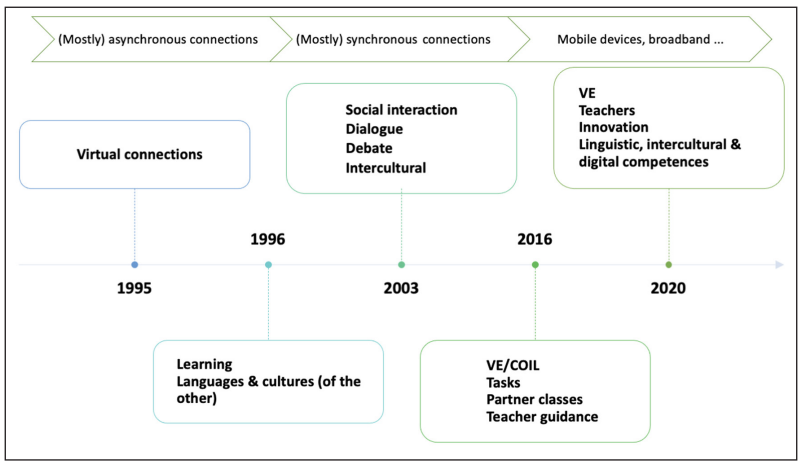
2. Definition(s) of VE

This increment in the use of VE, concurrent with the rise of distanced online learning has led to some debate regarding what exactly comprises a VE. As researchers and practitioners’ interest in VE has grown, several definitions – spanning decades – have been suggested.

“[VE], Telecollaboration, eTandem or Teletandem and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) are some of the more well-known terms that have been used, often interchangeably, to refer to the process of communicating and collaboratively learning with peers from different locations through the use of technology. Admittedly these terms are not considered by everyone to be synonyms and each term has emerged from different epistemologies and contexts. Moreover, the terms, if seen differently (some researchers do claim they are synonymous) are not mutually exclusive, and arguments regarding differences in terminology are often linked to an individual’s dynamics and background references” (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021, pp. 1-2).

Some terminology – and authors most frequently associated with these terms – have had significant impact in *defining and describing* these types of exchanges, as seen in Figure 1. The key words used in the definitions also demonstrate significant evolution in the *focus* of the exchanges.

Figure 1. Evolution of keyword



In 1996, Warschauer referred to technology-enhanced exchanges as ‘virtual connections’. A year later, Little and Brammerts (1996) described tandem

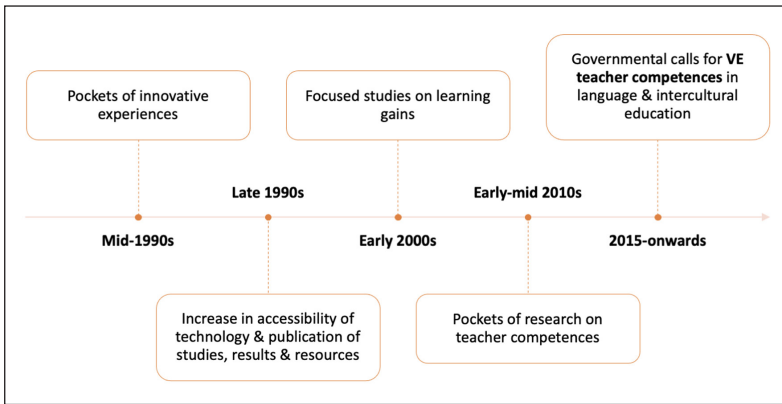
learning as a partnership between people with different mother tongues working together to learn each other's language and learn about each other's character and culture. In 2003, Belz used the term 'telecollaboration' for internationally distanced language classes that use Internet communication tools "to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange" (p. 2). In 2016, O'Dowd and Lewis place telecollaboration, VE, and online intercultural exchange on the same spectrum, explaining that all three terms refer to engaging students in task-based interaction and collaborative exchange projects under the guidance of their teachers. In 2020, the EU Commission stated that VE can help teachers to shift from their accustomed teaching approaches in order to develop new skills to engage in linguistic, intercultural, and digital learning experiences. In 2021, Dooly and Vinagre describe how VE is increasingly used by institutions and governments, arguing that the phrase VE "appears to be set as the most recognizable term, at least in the EU and the USA, although admittedly in South America [...] teletandem is a more predominant term" (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021, pp. 2-3). The evolution of the terminology applied to these contexts, as well as the expansion of overall goals – and subsequent complexity of design of VE – can also be perceived in the chapters in this book. Cavalari and Aranha (2022) use several terms to describe their exchange: teletandem (a common term in South America, in particular in Brazil), telecollaboration, and VE.

Moreover, as interest and research in these types of exchanges has extended from small pockets of pioneering practices to institutionally-based innovation (The EVALUATE Group, 2019), VE is increasingly considered a teaching approach, in particular in language education and under the larger paradigm of the communicative approach (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). Subsequently, the EU (2020) is now calling for 'VE teacher competences'.

With VE progressively acknowledged as a teaching approach, a list of commonalities have been identified: (1) it is a highly flexible teaching practice; (2) it ensures opportunities for social interaction and collaboration with other learners outside formal classroom boundaries (pluricultural); (3) it can be an alternative to physical mobility for students; and (4) it may include some self-directed learning within an array of institutionally planned learning activities

(adapted from Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). It is important to note that neither individual, self-guided learning, nor one-teacher per class distanced, online learning constitute VE because, by default, it comprises teacher-supported collaboration between *at least two* partner classes in different locations.

Figure 2. Toward VE as an established language and intercultural teaching approach



As mentioned in Dooly (2017), the above-described evolution of how VE is conceived also demonstrates that the use of digital exchanges in educational settings has gone from rather simple activities, largely viewed as complementary tasks, to far more complex, embedded, and holistic components of “learning ecologies” (Barron, 2006, p. 195). The main features of these definitions and foci, in particular collaborative learning, are also evident in the ways in which VE has been identified across the span of this book. Vuylsteke (2022, this volume) explains how two international business course students “worked collaboratively in order to develop both their digital and language skills” so that the learners could “keep learning when outside the classroom [... through ...] peer-to-peer learning” (pp. 148-149). Czura and Sendur (2022, this volume) state that “one of the defining features of VE is collaboration, which involves working with other peers both from the home and the partner institutions, toward a common goal” (pp. 93-94).

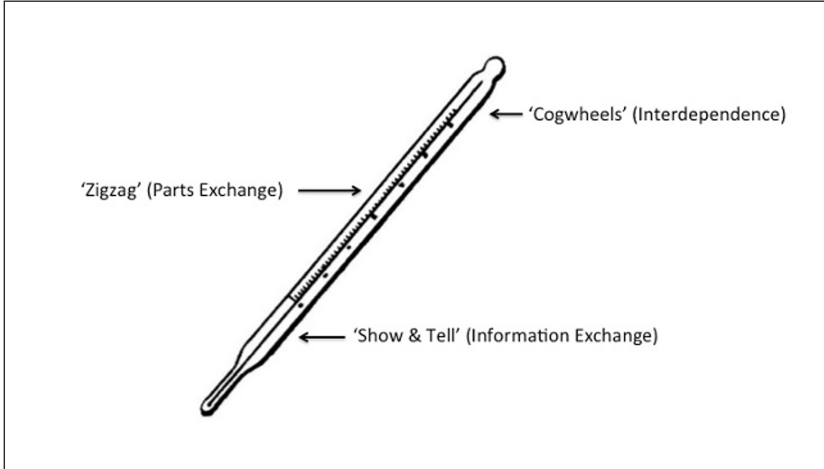
The increasing complexity of VE is also evident in the chapters in this book. Cavalari and Aranha (2022, this volume) foreground both the task design and the relevance of learner interaction: “telecollaboration involves different pedagogical tasks by means of which students should learn and co-construct knowledge” (p. 66). For Rolińska and Czura (2022, this volume) the deployment of project-based learning in VEs can help bring authenticity and hands-on learning to the exchange.

The break from more formal classroom boundaries, in order to bring in a more pluricultural focus of language teaching and learning is also prevalent in the chapters in this book. Izmaylova (2022, this volume) emphasizes the “goal of providing students with an opportunity to analyze their own and target cultures, as well as practice their intercultural communication skills” (p. 136), just as Dolcini and Matthias Phelps (2022, this volume) highlight the relevance of intercultural competence gains that can come about through VE. Similarly, Rolińska and Czura (2022, this volume) describe how the learners “work across borders and cultures on real-life [disciplinary] scenarios and develop a number of soft skills and attributes alongside” (p. 163).

The aforementioned aspect of an incremental focus on self-directed learning is a transversal theme through several of the chapters. Dooly (2022, this volume) focuses principally on the notion of small working groups, meeting outside of class time without teacher presence; accentuating the need for increased learner autonomy in the overall process of VE. Elstermann (2022, this volume) highlights autonomous foreign language learning; self-directed learning can be facilitated through opportunities for working collaboratively with others around the world as key goals for VE.

Nonetheless, the amount, intensity, and format of collaboration in VE is not a settled debate as of yet, in particular if it is a component to be evaluated. The model below, proposed to preservice teachers involved in VE (Dooly & Sadler, 2020), provides a simple yet functional measurement tool for deciding and designing the type of collaboration between VE partners (informally called the ‘Collaborate-o-meter’).

Figure 3. Collaborate-o-meter



<p>Cogwheels (interdependence): This is the hardest type of project to design and implement but it is the most rewarding. It involves complete interdependence between the online partners.</p>	<p>Zig-zag (parts exchange): This type of activity may involve group work in the local classes so that the learners can prepare something (information, key features of the output, etc.) to share with the other class. Each partner is responsible for part of the project output.</p>	<p>Show & Tell (information exchange): Probably one of the more common types of telecollaborative exchanges, this usually involves introductions, information about schools, communities, countries, hobbies, etc. There is language practice, but collaborative learning is minimal.</p>
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3. Shifting paradigms of VE and assessment

As described earlier and seen in the chapters in this book, the general underlying paradigm of VE has moved more and more to embrace and bring to the fore an emphasis on situated, learner-centered social practices, based on influential thinkers like [Vygotsky \(1930-1934/1978\)](#), [Wertsch \(1985\)](#), and [Tharp and Gallimore \(1988\)](#), to name a few of the more celebrated theorists in educational circles in the 1980's. There is now a widely accepted premise of VE that the

teacher is a knowledge facilitator (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Dooly, 2017; Fosnot, 2005; Thomas et al., 2013) who designs and implements an optimal environment for learners to construct knowledge through engagement with ‘artifacts’, aided by expert and peer interaction (Chaiklin, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978).

Inevitably, the heightened focus on learner autonomy, peer assessment, and social interaction for collaborative learning has also had an impact on how assessment is conceptualized and applied to VE. All teachers must make decisions about assessment that acknowledges and appreciates the differences between the teacher’s expectations and beliefs about learning compared with those of the students. For instance, while historically in many cultures cheating has often been understood to mean the illicit use of information or improper access to answers, this idea of cheating needs to be re-examined in the light of the underlying paradigms of VE.

If the focus of the exchange is on collaboration, VE teachers must think about using innovative assessment methods that move away from the notion of individual knowledge and instead focus on multiply-shared knowledge construction that is prevalent in online communities, facilitated through digital communication tools (Dooly & Sadler, 2013).

Assessment design that involves peer feedback and evaluations, as outlined by Czura and Sendur (2022, this volume), Dooly (2022, this volume), and Elstermann (2022, this volume), not only matches the assessment procedures to the learning design, it also explicitly acknowledges and makes visible the value of peer learning to the students involved in the VE.

Communicative competence gains must also be seen as part of the interactional process, and assessed accordingly, rather than as a one-time, decontextualized ‘recall’ of discrete linguistic items. This premise can be identified in the assessment practice outlined in Vuylsteke (2022, this volume), where the learners are assessed at the end of their VE through the use of a ‘realistic online job interview’. Contextualized assessment practices such as these also

advance ideas on how to counteract what [Hall, Cheng, and Carlson \(2006\)](#) have asserted as an underlying theoretical flaw in much second language acquisition research, that is the assumption of homogeneity of language knowledge across *speakers and contexts* (p. 220). As stated in [Dooly \(2011\)](#), these authors contend that speakers' language knowledge should not be considered as homogeneous, nor "composed of a-contextual, stable system components" ([Hall et al., 2006](#), p. 230). In other words, VE assessment should stem from the notion that an individual's use of language is not static, levels of accuracy and fluency will vary according to everyday contexts. A person writing a chapter for a book is far more likely to be punctilious and aim for precise language use in comparison to when she is quickly texting an SMS message to a friend or colleague. Awareness of variants in contextualized language use can be accommodated through formative assessment, as discussed in [Cavalari and Aranha's \(2022, this volume\)](#) use of learner diaries or in [Rolińska and Czura's \(2022, this volume\)](#) description of periodically submitted output and 'bespoke feedback' criteria.

Another commonplace challenge for assessment of VE is how to extricate Intercultural Competences (IC) from technological abilities; 'cyberspace' is not culture-free and technical issues (expertise versus non-expertise) or technological discomfiture (lack of digital know-how) can transfer into attitudes toward the exchange (dislike of the imposition of doing VE as part of the academic work for instance) as well as having an impact on others' interpretation of an individual's response (for instance, out-of-screen distractions in the local environment can give the impression of being disengaged in the task when, in reality, this may not be the case). The use of portfolios, as described in [Izmaylova \(2022, this volume\)](#), can provide detailed insight into each individual's development (process) through analytical snapshots of specific moments (products), while allowing for the non-linear fashion in which IC evolves in each individual. Portfolios also provide more leeway regarding momentary lapses in engagement caused by external factors as well as venues for personal explanations of behaviors seen negatively by peers ([Dooly & Sadler, 2020](#)).

Differing institutional and course demands, unequal access to technology, unsymmetrical command of the language of the exchange and other similar individual aspects can have impact on VE process and outcomes (missed deadlines, quality of the assignments), eventually leading to obstacles in the interpersonal relationships of the participants (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). Dialogic reflection between teacher and learner, based on diary entries like the ones described by Izmaylova (2022, this volume) can help participants comprehend the multi-layered aspects of digital communication and overcome some of these barriers.

4. Conclusions

As in any classroom setting, one of the most difficult tasks for the teacher is designing assessment that reliably reflects what each individual student, each starting from different epistemic status, has gained during the learning activity. It has been argued that the most authentic assessment practices are integral parts of the curriculum and instruction process; that they serve to not only measure what has been learned but also to support the learning during the process while facilitating a gradual increase in learner accountability for the process (Dann, 2014). Along these lines, VE assessment activities will ideally make a positive impact on students beyond certifying their knowledge gains and levels of competence, while advancing their learning capabilities beyond the VE experience. The chapters herein lay the groundwork for pushing forward new ideas for VE practitioners as well providing some useful insights for future research and practice.

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