

## **Virtual Exchange as a Study Abroad Alternative to Foster Language and Culture Exchange in TESOL Teacher Education**

February 2020 – Volume 23, Number 4

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### **Abstract**

Teachers do not always have the option to study abroad because of coursework and school/teaching obligations. Utilizing virtual exchange is an innovative instructional approach being used in higher education that can mimic a clinical virtual study abroad experience. Accordingly, this study reports on 20 participants that took a course on linguistics for ESL/EFL teachers. Teacher candidates in the U.S. were paired with EFL students at a university in Mexico taking a course to improve their spoken English. Through weekly journaling teacher candidates described student errors and reflected on the ties between what they learned in the linguistics class (theory) and made clinical decisions (practice) to help students improve their spoken English. Connecting teacher candidates with students from around the world via teleconference in this study showed evidence that these TESOL teacher candidates were positively influenced by their participation in this experience. This paper describes four patterns that focus on the ways virtual study abroad supported teacher candidates' learning as they interacted with EFL students: 1. Integration of challenging course material 2. Application of course knowledge 3. Connections made between culture and language 4. Recognition of stereotypes. Each of these four themes is highlighted with example quotes from teachers' journals.

Teacher education programs incorporate a clinical component that place teacher candidates into classrooms to observe and practice the craft of teaching. Various studies have shown the impact of clinical experiences on teacher candidates with various configurations of field work, internships and student teaching (Brown, Lee, & Collins, 2015). Teacher education and study abroad research is focused mostly on preservice teachers' reflection (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), multicultural competencies (Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011), critical awareness (Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012), language proficiency and cultural perspectives (Allen, 2010). Little research has considered how study abroad clinical experiences can impact teacher candidates as they transform the theory and content learned in their coursework into classroom practice. Although one study (Allen, 2010) described the changes practicing teachers made in their classrooms based on participation in study abroad, the research was not situated in teacher preparation programs. Furthermore, no studies have been discovered that describe how candidates in a content course,

like linguistics that focuses on skills rather than cultural competencies, in a language teacher education program can benefit from a study abroad experience. In this paper, virtual exchange as an alternative to study abroad is the focus. Virtual study abroad affords teacher candidates the opportunity to interact with EFL students during their teacher preparation coursework so that they can test the concepts they are learning in class with language learners.

## **Literature Review**

### **Study abroad**

Study abroad in teacher education can provide a clinically rich experience when teacher candidates take part in the teaching and learning process in another country (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009). As the existing literature has suggested since teacher candidate field work is an important piece of a teacher education program, it is worth investigating ways in which teachers can get more clinically rich experiences. Study abroad with a clinical component is an option especially for preservice teachers (Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). In order to socialize teacher candidates to become fully integrated as a practitioner in the education community there must be a bridge between what they learn in their university coursework and their craft as a teacher. Study abroad is one such way clinical experiences have supported teacher candidates as they develop an awareness of different perspectives (Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012; Phillion, Malewski, Sharma & Wang, 2001; Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011).

Recent traditional study abroad research in the field of TESOL has focused on preservice teachers' perceived growth as a result of their experiences (Hyesun & Peter, 2019) and the potential for study abroad to develop the language skills of non-native speaking teachers (Faez & Karas, 2019). Hyesun and Peter (2019) highlighted the importance of both living in another country and participation with peers during a teachers' practical abroad experiences. They pointed to the importance of intentionally choosing the focus of a study abroad program as it can be beneficial in solidifying teacher candidates' consciousness of issues of power relations in English language teaching. Although the authors of this chapter emphasize the importance of students being in country while they learn, it is also possible to learn this content via a virtual study abroad situation through contact with participants from different countries. In another study, a yearlong study abroad program from Chinese teachers studying to get their master's in TESOL teacher candidates highlighted self-recorded change in language proficiency. Faez and Karas (2019) reported an increase of a half of a level of language proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference while the teacher candidates simultaneously learned about language teaching and learning. However, teacher candidates in this study found it difficult to step away from their peers on the same program and connect with individuals abroad. Considering ways to connect teachers virtually can be considered to achieve similar results.

### **Virtual Study Abroad**

Virtual exchange is a viable way to replace or enhance a study abroad experience in teacher education courses while also benefiting the students on the other end of the exchange.

Virtual exchange is "...activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators...combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology" (Erasmus, 2019). Virtual exchange in

language teacher education programs have shown the benefits of collaboration in supporting knowledge of course concepts (Dooley & Sadler, 2013), global awareness and identity (Lenkaitis, Loranc-Paszyk, & Hilliker, 2019), and intercultural competence (Hilliker, Lenkaitis, & Bouhafa, in press; Sanchez-Hernandez & Alcón-Soler, 2018). Also, it has proven beneficial in language teacher development of such skills such as pragmatics (Cunningham, 2017), technological skills (Zhang, Li, Liu, & Miao, 2016), and language competence (Perez Cañado, 2010). In addition to the small number of studies on study abroad experiences for teachers, little research has been done on virtual exchange in teacher education (Lenkaitis, in press; Wach, 2015). Dooly and Sadler (2013) examine the effect a two-year telecollaborative project had on teacher education in an aim to shorten the gap between theory and practice. Participants in this study were student teachers living in Spain and the United States who aspired to become language teachers. Over the course of both years, student teachers worked in small groups consisting of two or three students and communicated with each other online. Results provide evidence of the benefits of telecollaboration in pre-teacher training because it affords unique opportunities and skills that could not be obtained in traditional teacher education (Dooley & Sadler, 2013). Practical experience, which is also a critical aspect of traditional study abroad, is a component of virtual collaboration.

Virtual study abroad in a Spanish as a FL classroom was used in a way that students during their study abroad interacted with students on their home campus to have discussions and show them around parts of Spain virtually via photographs and discussions. This helped those that were not able to study abroad but they still had contact with the country (Pertusa-Seva, & Stewart, 2000). Virtual exchange can mimic virtual study abroad and can provide one solution to extending clinically rich experiences throughout a teacher education program. Teacher candidates having access to diverse learners via virtual exchange, especially when they do not have time in their schedules to study abroad, can provide more field work opportunities across the curriculum.

Investigating how virtual study abroad can support teacher candidates' coursework because of clinical work with EFL students with was the aim of this study. To this end, this current virtual study abroad exchange discovered how teacher candidates benefitted from interaction in a clinical experience tied to their linguistics course for TESOL teachers. This paper answers the research question- From a teacher candidate perspective in what ways does a virtual study abroad support concepts learned in their linguistics class (theory) as they interact with EFL students (practice) to help students improve their spoken English?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Context**

The participants in the study were undergraduate linguistics majors and graduate TESOL teacher candidates. Undergraduates with a major in linguistics brought their background and expertise in the English language while graduate teacher candidates contributed their extensive the classroom experience to the course conversations to strengthen each other's knowledge base of linguistics. The course is offered to undergraduate linguistics majors that are considering a career in education and is specifically required for TESOL teacher candidates. The TESOL program has both native speakers of English that are studying to become certified to teach in NYS public schools as well as non-native speaking international students getting a master's degree to return to their countries to teach EFL. A total of 23 students were enrolled in the class and 20 chose to participate. Ethical IRB guidelines were followed, and all participants provided informed consent. There were 15 native English-speaking teacher candidates and five non-native speakers. The non-native speakers had a

native like command of English and had a TOEFL score of at least an 80 to be admitted to the program.

All participants in the virtual study abroad exchange partnered with EFL students at a university in Mexico. The teacher candidates benefited from interacting with the English Language Learners (ELLs) because they had authentic language to analyze through the five main course topics (pragmatics, semantics, syntax, morphology, and phonology) as they had a clinical virtual study-abroad like experience with their partner over the course of four weeks. Twenty-five percent of the grade for the class was dedicated to interaction with the student(s) in Mexico in real time via video chat using Zoom. They were required to meet four times for at least 20 minutes a week and record their conversations. The teacher candidates did not analyze the language during their conversations. They were tasked with just focusing on being a conversation partner. The virtual environment afforded the teacher candidates the ability to record and replay their interactions in order to go back and analyze their archived conversation. They submitted weekly journals to reflect on their findings and they discussed how they would meet the language needs of their partner.

The EFL partners in Mexico were from Mexico, France, Korea, Columbia, and Chile. They were Beginners (A2-B1) and Intermediate (B1) on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The students in Mexico benefited from this opportunity as they got to chat with someone in English based on the topics covered in their English support courses as they worked on their speaking and listening skills. Their course topics such as the environment, technology and travel were given to the teacher candidates so they could incorporate them into the conversation.

### **Data Collection**

This qualitative study explored the experiences of language teacher candidates' natural context in one of their teacher education courses (McMillan, 2012). This case study approach illuminated the experiences of the teacher candidates in the course by organizing their open-ended responses into meaningful themes (Creswell, 1998). For the purposes of this article, only the teacher candidate journal entries were analyzed (Harland & Wondra, 2011). Teacher candidates were required to submit a journal entry after each of the four virtual study abroad sessions as well as two additional entries and a final reflection on the experience. The journal entries were open ended reflections, but each of the five topics covered in the course (pragmatics, syntax, semantics, phonology and morphology) was a focus. Teacher candidates had to give specific examples of errors of the five linguistic topics in their partners' language production. In addition, they had to provide ways in which they would support language development in their partner in regard to these topics.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher and one research assistant collaboratively analyzed the journals for content (Neuendorf, 2016) keeping in mind the research question. Themes emerged as the journal data was read and coded. Teacher candidates were required to write about the five course topics in all but their final journal. However, it quickly became apparent that teacher candidates wrote about more than the topics in the course. As Patton (2002) suggests, the steps to code qualitative data which include reading the data several times and using color coding were adapted for this study. In the end, four main codes emerged from the teacher candidate journal entries and are explained with direct quotes from teacher candidates.

## Findings

Four themes emerged as the teachers reflected on the ties between what was learned in their linguistics class (theory) and how they made clinical decisions (practice) on how to help students improve their English skills. In their journals, teacher candidates expressed the idea that the course in linguistics was a challenge, they had the opportunity to apply their knowledge in a clinical experience, they learned more about culture and language ties and they were faced with the idea of stereotypes. Although these were not goals of the course or the virtual study abroad exchange, however, when the journal entries were analyzed it became apparent that teacher candidates wanted to express how this exchange and clinical experience impacted their learning and journey to becoming a teacher. The findings section describes the following patterns found from the journals that focus on the ways that a virtual study abroad supports teacher candidates' learning as they interacted with EFL students: 1. Integration of challenging course material 2. Application of course knowledge 3. Connections made between culture and language 4. Recognition of stereotypes. Each of these four themes is highlighted with example quotes from teachers' journals.

### Integration of Challenging Course Material

The first theme is that teacher candidates found the course material a challenge. The challenges primarily stem from the teacher candidates learning about linguistic topics in the English language they do not encounter often and are very different than curriculum development and methodology courses they are used to in a teacher education program. In one example, knowing the course materials is an important aspect and then being able to apply that knowledge to benefit a students' language acquisition is the next step. James<sup>[1]</sup> stated "...recognizing that someone made an error is not difficult, but classifying the error into one of five categories, understanding the errors origin, and then considering how to correct the error was beyond my skills at this point in my career as a new teacher." This exchange gave the teacher candidates practice in error analysis before they step into a classroom with live students where they need to make decisions about error correction during instruction. This participant recognized that knowing the type of linguistic error a student makes is important especially in devising a plan to help the student correct that error, however as an early career teacher that skill has not been developed yet. This virtual study abroad gave James the opportunity to practice error correction that was a part of the course work that was difficult.

Since the teacher candidates had trouble with the concepts learned in class asking them to simply recognize problems and categorize them proved challenging. As Holly mentioned "I found it to be a tough task to distinguish between a pragmatic error and a semantic error. These two linguistic areas are so similar that it was hard for me to categorize them...I feel that it gave me a good idea of specific aspects of language...so I can appropriately adjust my lessons and accommodate for their needs". Because of Holly's participation in this exchange and interaction with students she now knows where she needs to focus in order to understand her students' needs. Even teachers that identify themselves as more experienced had trouble applying the course material to students. This points to the unfamiliarity that these teachers had with the course topics. Lita articulated this in her journal, "As an experienced ESL teacher...I did find it difficult to differentiate between the types of errors he was making...I believe that learning the different types of linguistic topics challenged me and changed my outlook on language learning...language acquisition is not a linear path"... She has noticed that the course material was a challenge in that she had trouble deciphering between specific linguistic skills and this opportunity has changed the way she views the language learning process.

### **Application of Course Knowledge**

The teacher candidates overwhelmingly wrote that this experience helped them as a first step to applying the course material to teaching and learning. The recorded conversations gave the teachers a body of data to analyze and try to pick out the linguistic features and the errors students make. As Linda reflected, “The conversation partner project...allowed me to apply the linguistic knowledge practically...I would have probably concluded all the errors as grammar or accent errors instead if I wasn’t given a more in depth study of the linguistic concepts...over time...I was able to come up with teaching recommendation more easily”. Linda’s learning of the course information was supported by her participation in this virtual study abroad experience. While she was acquiring the course material, she was given the opportunity to reflect on the errors her partner made in the context of the class and determine how she could use this in a practical way in her teaching.

Teachers in the course were able to give detailed analysis of student speech production through this project. They cited complex issues surrounding students’ speech and took time to think about why this is part of the students’ language. As Brigitte stated “I found the conversation pairs activity to be an interesting way of bringing the book and course material to life. Although I am an experienced ESL teacher...the linguistics class and the focus on the different linguistic topics allowed me to view my student’s communicative competences through a new lens.” In this case, Brigitte was able to take the recorded videos of her partner and isolate the linguistic concepts covered in class each week to develop her understanding. As an ESL teacher there are so many aspects of her students’ language acquisition that she must consider. Having one student to converse with and the task to reflect on the course material is an affordance of the virtual study abroad that is not possible in a live classroom. This opportunity allows for a deeper understanding of linguistics and error correction that can then be implemented in the classroom.

Even students that did have some background with the course material benefited from the in-depth analysis of language. Bella remarked, “I was familiar with what phonology meant...from my masters in reading...Reading the chapters on the different parts of linguistics can only take you so far in your learning. Having the opportunity to apply and analyze spoken language helped me understand the topics of linguistic more thoroughly”...Bella’s thoughts highlight the importance of the bridge between theory and practice for teachers. They often spend time in courses that are isolated from the actual practice of the classroom. Language teachers having the opportunity to interact with the students they will eventually teach helped them to understand the course material better and practice implementation.

### **Connections Made Between Culture and Language**

Second language teachers have to consider the language and culture connection with their students. Teacher candidates cited the idea that they learned about Mexico in their exchange. Through the journals it is clear that these teacher candidates see the connection and the importance of culture as they consider the topic of linguistics even at the highest level with their students. As James stated, “I learned that the youth prefers Hollywood cinema over Mexican cinema, which may provide influence for wanting to learn English. Learning about their culture and sharing my own was the most valuable part for me...It is essential for teachers to be responsive to the different cultures represented in their classrooms. The opportunity for a virtual study abroad gave them insight into one culture and the chance to consider how a students’ background can influence their motivation for second language acquisition.

Also Eric could point to the idea that often our culture impacts the language learning that can happen. He said, “They have varied linguistic backgrounds that impact their language learning. Apart from watching his linguistic abilities grow, conversing with [my partner] provided insight into the perspective of an ELL...the struggles students can face...and how they differ from, or are the same as, the societal and cultural norms of students’ native countries”. All of the ideas mentioned by Eric can have an impact on the language acquisition of students. It is important for teachers to find ways to understand their students and this practical experience showed the teachers the individual student experience impacts learning which was beyond the scope of the particular course, but important for teaching and learning.

Teacher candidates reflected in how their personal foreign language learning can help and when they understand where a student is coming from that is beneficial. Chelsea mentioned:

*It was especially interesting to listen to...his cultural experiences because he is from Korea but has lived in a couple different Spanish speaking countries. Through learning about [my partner’s] cultural and linguistic background, and utilizing my background knowledge in Spanish, I was able to piece together that some of his English speaking errors/mistakes could be attributed to Spanish language...I realize now that it is important to know about each student’s cultural and linguistic background as a means of understanding their language.*

Teachers having the virtual study abroad interaction with students learning a language during their course work gave them the opportunity to remember what it was like to be a student and implement the strategies they used as a language learner. In addition, having some empathy for the student and seeing how to negotiate meaning through language proved a valuable as teacher candidates honed their skills.

### **Recognition of Stereotypes**

Giving the teacher candidates an additional practical experience via virtual study abroad also worked to break down stereotypes they may have about language learners. Christy articulated the value of her virtual study abroad when she said:

*I have come to appreciate being multilingual is a very valuable asset which we don’t often appreciate here in America...When we meet someone who is not fluent in English, it is easy to perceive them as unintelligent or different. My impression of ELLs is no longer limited to their language ability, or what they say. Instead, I come to appreciate their immense effort to overcome cultural and language barriers in a country so different from their home.*

This experience gave Christy the opportunity to interact with a student that she would not normally get a chance to meet. In that time, she changed her perspective on language as a barrier and to see skills in multi languages as a positive.

Amy had the idea that it would be hard to interact with non-native speakers as she had not had much experience with them before this course. She said, “I assumed that [my partner] would not understand what I said, and would be incapable of expressing himself in English. I was completely mistaken. [My partner] was not only able to express himself, but to maintain the conversation as we went back-and-forth, talking about our lives, likes and dislikes, and plans for the future”... It is important for those studying to become an ESL teacher to have exposure and time spent with

language learners as often as possible. Virtual study abroad provides an avenue for teacher candidates to have interactions with students across the entire teacher education program.

Similarly, Adam shared his misinformation about non-native speakers when he wrote:

*I thought people in western countries are easier to learn English than people in other places...I thought people who speak Spanish as mother language are easier to learn English ... Because their word formation or phonology are much similar than Chinese, Korean or Japanese. Also, their culture is more related to each other....After this exchange, the fact is a little bit different with my expectation...*

Adam's previous notions of language learners were changed by the course material that drove their exchange. It was an especially important realization that the previous language knowledge that the students have informs their new language acquisition and that it is an asset to have literacy in one language as it helps support learning of a new language.

## **Discussion**

The findings in this study, from a teacher candidate perspective, discussed the ways a virtual study abroad supported concepts learned in linguistics for teachers class (theory) as they interacted with EFL students (practice) to help the students improve their spoken English. Teacher candidates benefited from a clinical virtual study-abroad like experience with their partner (Phillion, Malewski, Sharma & Wang, 2001; Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011). Study abroad, especially for teacher candidates at the master's level is not always possible. Nonetheless, this study showed that virtual study abroad can offer a similar opportunity across the teacher education program.

When teacher candidates' journals were analyzed it was found that they focused on much more than just course content requirements, they acknowledged that this clinical experience was beneficial. Indeed, two of the categories established for this study were geared toward the content of the course and two of them were important to teachers having access to ELLs. In this case study, the TESOL teacher candidates were particularly challenged because of the content as most participants had little background or formal training in linguistics. Most study abroad research on programs in teacher education have shown teachers can transform their ways of thinking through experience in another culture (Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), how they can begin to use study abroad experiences to inform their own multicultural classroom (Phillion, Malewski, Sharma & Wang, 2001; Sharma, Phillion, & Malewski, 2011), and how the concept of school differs in other cultures (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009). Providing a population of students that language teacher candidates can work with was beneficial as they were able to connect with English language learners and have authentic interaction with them (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009; Samimy et al., 2011). Further, they were able to record their interaction and revisit that authentic language later in the course as they learned about each of the five major linguistic topics (semantics, pragmatics, syntax, morphology and phonology). The teachers, through their reflections, highlighted that they struggled with the concepts in linguistics presented in the class (Maclean & White, 2007). Just the in-class lectures and exercises in pairs exploring course topics were not enough for teachers to transfer their knowledge about linguistics to teaching language learners. It is through the authentic interaction with real language learners that teacher candidates were able to gain some experience with the errors learners can make and then think about how they will teach them (Hyesun & Peter, 2019). Teacher education programs should



consider the virtual study abroad option so that language teachers candidates have authentic language to analyze in order to integrate challenging course material with practical applications of the course knowledge, in this case error correction, that can be implemented with language learners (Dooley & Sadler, 2013).

Beyond the course goal to learn linguistics, through the virtual study abroad, the teacher candidates made connections between culture and the language and recognized stereotypes they had about English language learners (Hilliker, Lenkaitis, & Bouhafa, in press; Lenkaitis, Loranc-Paszyk, & Hilliker, 2019; Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012). This is a goal of any language teacher preparation program and although not a stated objective in the course studied, the practical exchange these students had added to the connection of language and culture. In addition, the teachers thought about how the culture that their students are not only from, but also are operating in can impact their learning and specific linguistic features (Helm, Guth, and Farrah, 2012). Recognizing the errors students made was important as a practitioner must consider the individual students' language production in order to move them forward in their acquisition of language. Beyond that the teacher candidates recognized that these students had knowledge that should be considered an asset rather than the focus on the language skills that they might not possess. Teacher preparation programs should be vigilant in the cultural responsiveness of their teacher candidates. Virtual study abroad can be implemented across the curriculum in order for teachers to have access to students from many different cultures as these interactions support the information they are learning in their course work and also inform their own conceptions of language learners, their cultures and abilities (Lenkaitis, in press; Wach, 2015).

## **Implications**

In sum, teacher candidates need practical spaces to apply what they learn in class (Samimy, et al., 2011). When it is not possible to study abroad, virtual study abroad can be a clinically rich experience that can connect teachers to language learners that are geographically separated and ones they may not have the chance to interact with near their place of study for meaningful culture and language exchange (Chaudhuri, 2011; Erasmus, 2019; Lee 2004). Technology also allows for recording of the interaction so teachers can go back and analyze data to look at linguistic features of the language produced (Walshe & Driver, 2019). During the exchange teacher candidates were able to focus on the students and just talk with them without having the pressure to analyze on the spot. They were afforded the opportunity to listen several times as this was needed with new course concepts. These interactions created a ripe venue for teachers to be able to apply course material (theory) and benefit the language learners who can have access to the target language for more practice (Samimy et al., 2011).

## **Conclusion**

More research is needed to describe the benefits of virtual study abroad for practical teacher experiences especially beyond the mandated field work and practicum experiences typically associated with teacher education. In addition, more research needs to be framed in study abroad to mirror the experiences teachers get while they are in other countries or ways in which teacher education programs can use virtual study abroad to enhance study abroad programs especially since they are usually short term. The concept of clinical richness should be considered across the curriculum in teacher education programs (Henning et al., 2016). Adding additional access to language learners so teacher candidates can apply course knowledge right when they are gaining

through participation in sociocultural activities ensures that they can start to implement what they are learning in their future classrooms (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

This study had several limitations including the small number of participants, the time frame and the study was only done for one semester. In the future a study of participants from both sides of the exchange could be included to get a bigger picture of the value of virtual study abroad for teacher candidates and language learners alike. In addition, exchanges that take place over a longer period of time to measure the knowledge growth of the participants would continue to illuminate the benefits of virtual study abroad. This includes replication of the virtual study abroad with the same course over a number of semesters in order to yield more data and generalizable information.

☐ All names have been changed to pseudonyms.

## About the Author

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