

# Virtual Exchange: Providing International Communication Opportunities for Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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## バーチャルエクスチェンジ：英語学習者にとって実践 的、国際コミュニケーション場の提供

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**Abstract:** Virtual Exchange enables language learners to communicate via the Internet with learners from other regions and countries. This paper will describe a virtual exchange where over 800 students from Japan, Colombia and one class from Taiwan; used English to communicate asynchronously with each other over a nine week period. Participants exchanged information in English about their lives and cultures through text and video using discussion forums on Moodle. A survey of participants after the conclusion of the exchange revealed that participants found the exchange useful for practicing English and motivating for improving their English language skills. They also felt that they had learnt about the partner country and that their interest in the partner country had increased. The Moodle site used for the Virtual Exchange was found to be relatively easy to use and the exchange was not overly time consuming. This study also identifies some areas to improve future exchanges, while recommending Virtual Exchange as a real communication and language practice platform for students of foreign languages around the world.

**Keywords:** Virtual Exchange (VE); Inter-cultural Communication; English language education; International exchange

### 1. Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE) empowers students to communicate with learners in geographically distant places using the Internet. This paper will outline a project in which over 800 students from Japan, Colombia and some from Taiwan, participated in a Single Language VE (SLVE) over a nine-week period. The language used during the exchange was English. Moodle was used as the platform on which students exchanged information about their lives and cultures. The SLVE was asynchronous, with both text and video produced

by students being exchanged via Moodle forums. After describing the project, results of site statistics and a participant survey administered at the end of the exchange will be shown to demonstrate that such exchanges increase access to real world communicative events, improving the chances of language learning and intercultural exchange occurring. We will also identify areas for improvement, and outline how others wanting to participate in such an exchange can do so.

The European Commission sponsored INTENT group (2015) defines VE as “technology-enabled, sustained, people to people education programs ... entailing the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural exchange, interaction and collaboration with peers from partner classes in geographically distant locations, under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators.” VE is becoming increasingly popular in Europe with the INTENT project increasing the number of VE throughout the EU, where they are increasingly being seen as a new type of mobility. VE is also growing in the U.S. The J. Christopher Stevens VE fund set up by the U.S. government is just one example of this. There are many other examples of VE in the U.S. with the Soliya project being particularly well regarded. Students no longer have to physically visit another country to learn from people in that country about their culture and lifestyle. They attain what Lewis and Collis (1995) termed “Virtual Mobility”. Teachers of EFL around the world aim to give their learners the necessary tools to use the language they are being taught. In many cases though, the ability of the students to use English in real communicative events is limited, as the students have no interlocutors from outside their culture to interact with. This is where VE can be particularly useful. Both Europe and the U.S. are promoting VE because it offers learners the chance to interact and develop contacts with learners from different countries, without the enormous cost of travel. Students attain the opportunity to use the language, and develop the intercultural skills they learn in class to participate in real world communicative events via the VE. Unlike using English in the classroom with peers, students cannot fall back on their L1 to explain themselves. They must find the words in English to explain their ideas or experiences. Though not to the extent of Europe or the U.S., examples of VE in the Asian context are increasing in number, but their scale is relatively small (Chun, 2014; Helm, 2015). Reasons for this include: less access to suitable platforms, inter-operability issues between institutions, fewer links between faculty within and between different institutions, costs, lack of teacher training and difficulty in assessing such interactions. The benefits of VE in the Asian context are also perhaps not as well documented as in Europe and the U.S.

However there are a number of examples of VE in the Asian context. Bower and Kawaguchi’s (2011) Dual Language VE (DLVE) examined improvements in accuracy via peer correction of emails; where both English and Japanese were used by students in Australia studying Japanese, and students in Japan studying English. Harashima et. al. (2014) carried out VE in a domestic context between students in different universities within Japan, with survey results suggesting that, overall, participants felt their English improved because of the project. Having access to VE should be one goal of EFL practitioners, as they have been proven to increase the level and amount of participation in communicative events (Pais Marden and Herrington, 2011; Sotillo, 2000); increase the amount of interaction for students in lower power positions (Kern and Warschauer, 2000); and improve peer feedback (Bower and Kawaguchi, 2011; Ware and O’Dowd, 2008) as well as increase opportunities to participate in, and learn from and about other cultures (Chen and Yang, 2014; Thorne and Black, 2007). It is for these reasons that VE can be a valuable asset in a communicative foreign language

class. Students then have the opportunity to interact meaningfully with other speakers of the target language on a regular basis – something that is not available to the majority of EFL students, but is extremely useful. Long (1996) notes that interaction enhances learning, or is even a prerequisite for real acquisition. We learn language through language use; if we make a mistake that impedes understanding, an interlocutor can indicate to us that something needs rectifying or adjusting in order to get our message across. This is the idea behind negotiation of meaning. Thus, experiences using language with others are much more memorable and meaningful than simply doing language focused exercises in class.

## **2. Structure of the virtual exchange**

The VE that this paper describes is ongoing. This pilot project was based out of a regional university in the north of Japan, with seven other universities throughout Japan also participating. The students at the base university are studying to be engineers of varying ilk, and they are cognizant that English is generally regarded as both the language of science and important as an international language in trade and commerce, though they themselves are generally timid when it comes to using English. There are very few opportunities for the students to use English outside of the classroom in such a regional setting. Previously, the only chance they had to use English was with other Japanese in the classroom – a method that does not have real-world feeling nor does it encourage students to attain intercultural communicative competence. A few of the very motivated students were already using the Internet to interact with people from other countries, but generally students did not know how to create contacts abroad, nor how to effectively employ their interaction as part of their language study. None of the students in the other seven universities were English majors and the same can be said of them.

In 2004, the first author decided to incorporate VE into his syllabus. He sent emails to a number of international teacher mailing lists asking for like-minded teachers in other countries to join him. He received a number of replies, of which two in particular have continued to work with him ever since. One of the teachers worked for The National Service of Learning (SENA in Spanish: Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje) in Colombia. This contact became the basis for the SLVE. The other was a teacher in California teaching Japanese. Her students worked with the author's students in a Dual Language VE (DLVE) where Japanese and English were both used. The DLVE is still ongoing but is of a much smaller scale and will not be outlined here.

The SLVE that began in 2005 was a very small project involving only 10 students from Japan and the same number in Colombia. Using Moodle forums, the students from both countries were encouraged to post their writing in English for the students from the other country to read and respond to with reply posts. Though there were many positives, it was plagued with technical problems as the infrastructure in Colombia was still very limited. Over the years it grew to the point that in 2011 there were about 50 students from each country involved and often students from other countries (including Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, China, Vietnam and Malaysia). The infrastructure in these countries has continued to improve and the quality of the VE has too. As mentioned above, the virtual exchange between Japan and Colombia has been developing over many years. The exchange was presented to leaders of the SENA in mid-2015, and they decided to pilot an expanded course involving over 400 students from Colombia and the same number from Japan with the aim

of offering it to even greater numbers if the pilot succeeded. The first author approached a number of teachers around Japan who had expressed a desire to participate and the 400 students from Japan were quickly organized. A teacher in Taiwan heard about the pilot and asked if her students could join so one class had 3 countries' students in it whilst the other 17 classes had 2. The pilot began in October 2015 and finished in the first week of December the same year.

With funding from a Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) grant, the first author set up a server with Moodle on it. Moodle is a very popular free Learning Management System (LMS) used in educational and business institutions around the world. Teachers can set up Moodle courses and enroll their students in them. Discussion forums can be created in a Moodle course whereby participants can interact with each other; posting and replying to posts. The learning environment is secure and private as only those enrolled have access to it. It was on this server that the project was carried out.

### **3. Teacher actions**

For the expanded pilot, participating teachers sent the first author a CSV file including their students' numbers and school email addresses. These were subsequently uploaded into the VE Moodle course such that when students logged in, they could access the Moodle forums and participate in the exchange. Each teacher and class in Colombia was paired with a teacher and class in Japan. The Moodle groups function was used so that all classes were working on the same forums but could only see their paired class' posts. Basic online tutorials were included on the course page so that students could learn how to use the site.

Teachers were asked to assign at least 10% of the students' final assessment to their students' participation in the VE. We encouraged teachers to assess student participation in the virtual exchange, because we found assessment was a strong motivator for participation in such exchanges previously. Therefore, a rubric was created and offered as a means for assessment, but as this was a pilot, it was optional. Some teachers chose to use the rubric to grade their students, and made it clear for students to see. Others incorporated different means of assessment, whilst a few teachers offered it on a volunteer optional basis.

### **4. Student actions**

Students exchanged information through writing posts and replies in English over two to three week periods for each of the four specified discussion forums. Forum posts could include multimedia and links to further share information on the students' lifestyles and culture. The assigned forum topics were: introductions, my home town, events in our lives and future plans. There was also an open forum where any topic could be discussed at any time. Students could access the VE via any Internet enabled device. Some teachers used the virtual exchange forums as part of classroom learning, while others assigned participation for homework. Participants were, in most cases, actively encouraged by their classroom teachers to log in, post and reply to the students in the other countries during the allocated time for each forum. However the level of participation varied due to the various circumstances these teachers and students were operating in.

### **5. Research Questions**

As this was a pilot intended to lead into a larger scale virtual exchange, there were several research questions we decided to investigate.

1. How often do participants view and post on the exchange?
2. Is the exchange meaningful and useful for language learning?
3. Are participants able to experience intercultural exchange through the virtual exchange?
4. Is the Moodle platform for the Virtual Exchange easy to use?

## 6. Method

In order to investigate these questions, we utilised the site statistics for participation and we also asked participants to respond to a survey at the end of the virtual exchange period. The survey was created in English and then translated into both Spanish and Japanese to ensure that students could give feedback freely. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements via a four point Likert scale. A link to the anonymous survey was posted on the VE course page and most teachers encouraged students to respond. Participation was voluntary, but as many of the Colombian students had already begun exam preparation at the time of the survey, there were lower participation rates on the Colombian side.

## 7. Results

### 7.1 Participation rates

Moodle site statistics showed that the exchange course page was visited 101122 times. This means that with 800 participants, each person clicked on the various activities in the course on average 126 times. Of course, there would have been those who visited much more than this average, and many who visited less. There were 15492 student posts in total, thus each student posted on average 20 times. However there were many more student views (70291), so we can deduce that students were reading much more text than they were producing, though the amount of output, for non-English majors, was pleasing from a teacher's perspective.

It seems that while the virtual exchange started with great enthusiasm with the first self-introduction forum receiving 30951 views, participation dropped off over the course of the exchange with the second forum 'My place' receiving 17332 views, the third forum 'Life events' only 12133 views and the final forum 'My future plans' 10641 views. The open forum, which could be used at any stage for any topic only received 1728 views. We can only speculate as to the reasons for this, and it will be interesting to see if this continues as a trend in future exchanges.

### 7.2 Survey results

Table 1 shows the results from the survey conducted after 9 weeks of participating in the virtual exchange. The survey was completed voluntarily by 106 Colombian students and 254 Japanese students. Each item was presented as a statement with a 4 point Likert scale. The survey responses from the Colombian students appear to be more strongly positive overall about the exchange than their Japanese counterparts. However

there is a tendency in Japan for people to avoid extreme responses which may go some way to understanding this difference in answering style (c.f. Wang, Hempton, Dugan, & Komives, 2008).

*Table 1: Survey results*

Statement	Colombian students	Japanese students (JS)
	(CS) ( <i>n</i> =106)	( <i>n</i> =254)
	Strongly agree/agree	Strongly agree/agree
I think the virtual exchange was beneficial to learning English.	91%	85%
I learnt about the partner country.	79%	73%
The exchange didn't take too much time.	60%	45%
The web site was easy to use.	86%	56%
I wanted to learn English more because of the virtual exchange.	84%	60%
I wanted to exchange information with students in the other countries.	85%	81%
I am more interested in the partner country because of the exchange.	87%	66%
I changed my view of the partner country because of the exchange.	81%	52%
I want to do another exchange.	86%	66%

The results in Table 1 can be summarized into three sections which will be elaborated further below: 1) Students see the virtual exchange as useful for practicing English. The exchange can also be seen as a motivator for participants to improve their English language skills. 2) Students felt that intercultural exchange was able to take place over the VE, and wanted to exchange information with students in other countries. 3) The platform used was generally well regarded and overall it did not take an excessive amount of time.

## **8. Discussion**

### **8.1 Virtual Exchange: Useful for practicing English and a motivator for improving English language skills**

In Japan, English is a compulsory subject in secondary school, but students have little opportunity to use it in genuine communication with another who does not share Japanese as a first language. This is also the case for most university students in Japan, where a compulsory English component is usually part of the requirement to graduate. Learning in such an environment is often not easy and extra motivation to communicate in the foreign language being taught is usually required. When English is used as the only means of communication with another, motivation to learn the foreign language can be attained. If you can revert to a more comfortable shared language, then why would you struggle in a foreign language to communicate? Using the foreign language as your medium for communication is more natural if it is the best or only way to share messages due to a lack of mutual L1. For these reasons we have found VE to be a powerful motivator in our relatively isolated EFL context. Though a more detailed questionnaire would need to be carried out for conclusive evidence regarding motivation, students seem to agree, as is borne out in the survey results. Both groups of students were extremely positive toward the VE and its perceived benefits for language learning (CS 91% and JS 85%). The majority of students also seemed to have an increase in their motivation to learn English due to the VE as can be seen with 84% of CS and 60% of JS wanting to learn more English.

### **8.2 Intercultural exchange was able to take place over the virtual exchange**

A large percentage of students felt they both learnt about the country they were interacting with (CS 79%, JS 73%), and wanted to exchange information with students in the partner country (CS 85%, JS 81%). These factors are important in promoting positive attitudes toward language learning and improving intercultural competence with Mendelson (2009) finding that forums help students prepare to speak in the foreign language, and improve their competency in doing so. Kongrith and Maddux (2005) also found that VE improves the attitudes of the participants toward both the target language, and the target culture. The results here also show that students became more interested in the partner country (CS 87%, JS 66%), and changed their view of the other country (CS 81%, JS 52%). How their views were changed is something that will need to be researched in coming studies, but it is clear that development of their understanding of the partner culture took place.

### **8.3 Virtual Exchange: Easy to use and not too time consuming**

Common fears educators have with technology is "will it be difficult to use?" and "will it take too much time?" In this pilot VE, the majority of students believed that the platform was easy to use (CS 86% and JS 56%). It is interesting that the Japanese students agreed less. The free comment section suggested that this was possibly due to the fact that students would have liked to access the site on their mobile phones. The site was fully accessible via such devices, and though some information was supplied on how to access the site via mobile devices, it was obviously not enough. Future exchanges might benefit from teachers demonstrating how to access and post on the VE using a mobile device.

Many Japanese students commented that the VE took a lot of time. The pilot VE was demanding for non-English major students because the basic premise was that students would access the site at least twice a

week, to post and reply on the forums. This is one area that teachers will have to discuss as the program develops, and perhaps agree on ways to reduce the work load.

### **9. Ways to improve this type of Virtual Exchange**

This pilot VE has revealed some issues that will need to be addressed going forward, such as; teacher training, the need to incorporate assessment and the need for teacher to teacher communication. Firstly, obviously teacher training is essential. In this pilot there were unfortunately a number of instances where teachers on both sides did not carry out the basics in explaining the course to their students, and therefore the students were not able to participate fully. This is being addressed as teacher and student training is ongoing for the Colombian side. Training for teachers in Japan is also continuing. More tutorials are also being created and teachers encouraged to make use of them.\*

Assessment is another key area that needs to be addressed. As the teachers are asking students to do a great deal via the exchange, assessment of that is important. In the pilot, a rubric was created by the first author and offered up for discussion, but none eventuated. However, several teachers shared various alternative ways they had devised to assess the exchange. The tools for assessment will perhaps depend on each teacher, however, as noted above, assessment is a major form of extrinsic motivation and as such teachers should apply it to the exchange. Assessing participation is likely to have a positive flow on effect to participation in the forums. Participation statistics showed that students posted on average almost 20 times and viewed other student posts on average over 90 times over the nine weeks. For both real language input and output that students otherwise could not access, this is a positive outcome. However, these numbers could have been much greater. The most common comment from the Japanese students, which was also clear in follow-up discussions with teachers, was that they were disappointed in the number of replies and posts from the Colombian students. For a number of reasons (lack of access to Internet enabled devices, limited teacher training hence limited explanation to students, lack of assessment etc.), the Colombian students did not participate as much as the Japanese and Taiwanese students.

Teacher to teacher communication is another factor that is essential to ensure a positive outcome. The exchanges that went well all included a lot of teacher-to-teacher interaction. The exchanges that had less activity had no teacher-to-teacher contact or only one way interaction. Simple messages between teachers that outline the plans for the coming week and observations or suggestions regarding the previous week's content would be helpful. Through simple communication, teachers can develop relationships with each other and share information that will ensure the exchange continues smoothly. Simple things, such as students needing to be told when the partner class will be on holiday in order to be prepared for a drop off in the number of replies during such times, are important. Teachers can also learn from their peers about how they are incorporating the exchange into their classrooms. Access to such discussions via a teacher only forum, would be ideal. This type of forum was started, but little discussion actually eventuated. This is another area that needs to be developed. When considering such an exchange, teachers must also share information about the different semester starting and ending dates, along with public holidays. These vary between countries and have to be considered when planning forum time frames.

## 10. Conclusion

The SLVE outlined in this paper is a simple way language teachers can bring authentic communicative opportunities into the EFL classroom. The research methods were not as robust as they could have been, and further research needs to be carried out to conclusively show these outcomes to be accurate, however the initial results seem quite positive. This study suggests that participants see the VE as a meaningful way of learning and using a language, it also shows that participants seem to be able to experience intercultural exchange via VE. The Moodle platform has been shown to be quite easy for participants to use, and though participation does require some time investment, overall it provides a positive language learning experience. This VE will continue to develop and grow in scale as the participating teachers work together to employ the improvements outlined above and discover more about what it means to participate in virtual exchange.

## NOTE

\*If teachers wish their students to join the free exchange outlined here, they can send an email to the first author.

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