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IMPLEMENTING VIRTUAL EXCHANGE: A PROVEN APPROACH TO DEVELOPING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND GLOBAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract: This thesis supports Virtual Exchange (VE) as a revolutionary instrument of foreign language education. It shows how VE eliminates the discrepancy between learning in the class and using the language in the real world through interaction being authentic. Various models of VE are discussed in the paper, along with a considerable body of evidence pointing to the positive effects of VE on oral skills and intercultural competence. The article also discusses difficulties in the implementation of the program. To prepare students to acquire the necessary global skills, the curriculum-intended global skills acquisition, a customized plan proposal for the incorporation of VE into the curriculum, is the main idea.

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Keywords: Virtual Exchange, Foreign Language Learning, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Speaking Skills, Telecollaboration, COIL, Educational Innovation.

Introduction: According to the Council of Europe (2018), the students are socially competent and confident individuals, and they should be able to perform in real-life intercultural communication scenarios. However, a traditional class frequently fails to deliver genuine and substantial interaction with native speakers of the target language. Therefore, this leads to a considerable difference between the language skills learned in the classroom and the practical, intercultural skills required for real communication. Although physical study abroad programs have been for a long time recognized as the best way for such immersion, they are unavailable to many students due to financial, academic, and personal constraints (Kinginger, 2009). To address these issues, the "internationalization at home" (IaH) paradigm has come to the fore, aiming to combine international and intercultural aspects in the local learning environment for all students (Beelen & Jones, 2015). A potent pedagogical practice that is closely linked to IaH is Virtual Exchange (VE). VE, a term that is interchangeable with telecollaboration or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), is a part of the educational program in which groups of students are engaged in sustained, online intercultural collaboration with peers from different cultural and geographical backgrounds (O'Dowd, 2018). The main argument of this paper is that the intentional use of virtual exchange in the usual classroom sessions at UWED is a significant way of enhancing the quality of foreign language learning. It will be maintained that through a structured, pedagogically sound framework, VE goes beyond traditional methods and opens up new opportunities not only for language skills but also for the development of essential intercultural communicative competence (ICC), digital literacy, and learner autonomy. By reviewing different models, providing the success evidence, and presenting a detailed

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implementation plan, UWED intends to convince that VE is not an optional activity but a core, indispensable part of a modern, efficient foreign language curriculum fully compatible with the university's strategic mission.

Theoretical Foundations and Models of Virtual Exchange

VE is more than just a video call; it is an educational practice that involves various layers and is based on social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and communicative language teaching (CLT) theories. CLT believes that interaction is both the method and the end of language learning; thus, it is the main focus of the language practice, with authenticity, collaboration, and learner autonomy being emphasized (Gijsen et al., 2022). VE brings these concepts to life by forming a "third space" (Kramsch, 2009) where learners collaboratively negotiate meaning and co-construct knowledge with peers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The major approaches commonly used in VE design are illustrated in *Figure 1*, which summarizes three foundational VE models frequently applied in higher education contexts. Five major models of VE have been identified in the last 30 years, each differing in their features:

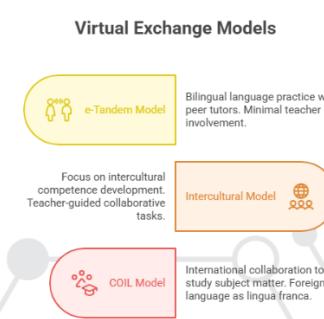


Figure 1. Models of Virtual Exchange

1. The e-Tandem Model: This is among the earliest models, and its main emphasis is bilingual language practice of two native speakers of different languages. The language

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used is usually split 50/50, and learners are to function as peer tutors, thus giving each other corrective feedback (O'Rourke, 2007). The teacher's involvement is minimal, and emphasis is put on developing learner independence and language proficiency.

2. The Intercultural Model (Telecollaboration): The main idea of this model is to shift the language use focus from a mere exchange to a language that is integrated with the development of intercultural competence. It has a close relationship with the formal curriculum, and teachers are responsible for the design and guidance of the collaborative tasks in which students are required to analyze the cultural products, practices, and perspectives (Belz, 2003). Some of the activities might be the comparison of the parallel texts, interviewing ethnographic people over a videoconference, or taking part in social issues joint projects (O'Dowd, 2005).

3. The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Model: The model is especially important for UWED's discipline-focused curriculum. It requires a common syllabus module in which two or more classes from different countries discuss the same course content. The major difference is that the international collaboration is employed to study the subject matter from different cultural perspectives, and the foreign language is used as the lingua franca for this exploration (Rubin & Guth, 2015).

Empirical Evidence and Direct Benefits for Students

The effectiveness of virtual exchange (VE) is far from being just a theoretical one; it is backed by a substantial number of international studies. The European project EVOLVE (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange) provides a powerful example of its successful application. This ambitious project, which spanned from 2018 to 2020, involved various universities from all over Europe, and through a very detailed approach, it examined the effects of VE. Among other findings, the research confirms

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that students engaged in VE develop their intercultural communicative competence significantly as they become more capable of understanding issues from a variety of viewpoints and stereotyping decreases in them (EVOLVE Impact Report, 2020). Besides language development, the initiative reported foreign language learners' visible progress made especially in oral proficiency, vocabulary, and pragmatic competence as the learners were encouraged to perform real language tasks. Context-specific research, e.g., Canto and Jauregi-Ondarra (2017), argues that virtual exchange interaction can be more effective than traditional in-class face-to-face interaction, which is due to the unique opportunities for negotiated meaning and authentic language use in a low-anxiety environment provided by VE. For example, English as a lingua franca communication among non-native speakers in virtual exchange leads to less anxiety and more willingness to express themselves (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016). This corpus of research leaves no room for doubt that VE is a sound pedagogy with proven measurable outcomes in real educational settings. Virtual Exchange (VE) is among the major methods to help learners improve their speaking skills in a language. The upgrading comes through the mechanisms that a traditional classroom cannot provide. Actually, students in a live online communication session have to negotiate meanings by paraphrasing, clarifying, and checking comprehension—activities which, according to the authors, correspond to strategic competence, which is a must for fluency (Canto, de Graaff, & Jauregi-Ondarra, 2014). Furthermore, a virtual exchange is indispensable for spontaneous, unrehearsed speech, as opposed to rehearsed classroom dialogues, and therefore, it automatically facilitates fluency and communicative confidence (Canto & Jauregi-Ondarra, 2017). Moreover, communication via video is not limited to the oral signals, as the listeners can also look at the speakers' gestures or facial expressions, which can be their pronunciation and listening comprehension helpers (Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Besides that, anxiety diminishes together with the desire to communicate, which increases when learners interact with international peers, thus

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becoming both linguistically and psychologically prepared for real-life communication (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016).

Limitations and Challenges of Virtual Exchange

Therefore, despite Virtual Exchange (VE) being a progressive and efficient educational instrument, it still possesses a number of problems that must be carefully addressed before it can be put into practice without a hitch. Among the major problems is the digital divide, that is to say, obstacles in technology and access. Good internet connectivity and access to suitable hardware are certainly part of the requirements for a participant; however, differences between the institutions in technological resources or even among students within the same class can lead to a situation where some have better learning experiences than others (Hinshaw et al., 2022).

Moreover, a limitation that hinders this method of teaching is the considerable amount of work, both logistical and pedagogical, that instructors get burdened with. As stated by O'Dowd and Ritter (2006), the creation of a VE project entails the negotiation of objectives, timelines, tools, and standards for assessment with international partners—assignments that require a lot of intercultural sensitivity, time, and flexibility. Due to this, the implementation of VE is usually a few highly motivated "champion" educators who carry the load far beyond their formal duties and thus run the risk of experiencing burnout as well as sustainability issues, respectively (Hinshaw et al., 2022).

The third issue concerning VE interactions is the danger of shallow conversations. Without a proper structure and guidance from the teacher, such interactions may become casual talks that do not actually support genuine learning of different cultures. In addition, if communication is poorly facilitated, participants might receive and even

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internalize stereotypes, which is the opposite of what the program aims at, thus undermining it as a whole (O'Dowd, 2005).

Lastly, the presence of institutional resistance together with a lack of structural support may be major impediments to the conservative integration of VE over time. According to O'Dowd (2021), the neglect of VE in formal recognitions such as workload calculations, budgeting, or quality assurance frameworks is usually what leads to its being marginalized as an informal, grassroots initiative with very little room for expansion. Therefore, solving these systemic and pedagogical issues is not only necessary but also a prerequisite for implementing virtual exchange and achieving its vast potential to transform higher education.

A Tailored Implementation Strategy for UWED

An organized, multi-stage implementation plan is suggested to the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) to ensure that the integration of Virtual Exchange (VE) into the academic environment will not only be effective but also sustainable and in harmony with the institution. The first phase is about building an institutional framework that is strong enough to support future changes. In order to manage the VE Coordination, the Virtual Exchange Working Group must be created under the university administration; the group, among others, should consist of a VE Coordinator and representatives (International Relations, International Economics, Foreign Languages) of the faculties as well as the International Office and the IT Department. At the same time, a pilot VE project can be initiated using the COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) model in a course like Professional English for Diplomats. For example, UWED students may form virtual teams with international peers to work on a simulated international negotiation around the issues of digital trade or climate policy, with the final product being a jointly created online presentation

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followed by an individual reflective report. Capacity Building and Expansion (Semesters 2–3).

After the pilot experiment, faculty members at UWED should take part in professional development workshops to upgrade their knowledge of the VE pedagogy, intercultural facilitation, and digital tool usage. The creation of a VE Module Bank—a collection of easily modifiable project template sources—will facilitate their integration from different departments. Integration and Institutionalization (Ongoing). To ensure the effects of VE are long-lasting, it can be considered one of the graded components of the course formally included in the curriculum. Moreover, UWED can provide digital badges or micro-credentials in Global Virtual Collaboration as a formal representation of students' intercultural, linguistic, and digital skills, and hence, enhance their employability as a global workforce.

Conclusion and Vision for the Future at UWED

In brief, virtual exchange represents a groundbreaking idea in the area of foreign language teaching that fits well with the strategic mission of UWED. Being a potent, research-based teaching tool, it really challenges the limitations of the local traditional classroom by supplying real, learner-engaged, and cross-disciplinary learning opportunities. The evidenced benefits, such as better language and intercultural skills, as well as digital literacy and student motivation, form a solid basis for its implementation. The fruitful execution of VE at UWED is not merely a possibility but a necessity for the institution to update its language programs and raise the quality of the education we get. UWED can become the leader of pedagogical innovation in Uzbekistan and Central Asia by initially launching a supported pilot project, using international platforms and partnerships for collaboration, and creating a solid institutional support system. Such a program would equip us, the students, with exactly

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the skills required to be successful as diplomats, economists, and leaders of the globalized world: effective communication, profound intercultural understanding, and skillful digital collaboration. Far from being a mere replacement of other forms of internationalization, virtual exchange is a potent and easily reachable complement capable of democratizing international experiences for all students. Through the implementation of such a revolutionary practice, UWED will be able to maintain its status as a modern, innovative, and globally connected university and also become the institution of the future wherein the generation of graduates will be the one truly ready to confront the 21st-century challenges. The moment for the step is here.

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