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The Versatility of Virtual Exchanges in Language Learning and Intercultural Interaction

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the multifaceted benefits and adaptability of Virtual Exchanges (VE) in language learning. VE can be tailored to proficiency levels, content types, technical constraints, and differing time zones. Through a mix of such elements, VE provides learners with a rich, multimodal experience that fosters language, culture and technical skill awareness. One of the primary strengths of VE lies in the potential to support a range of communication genres. Learners can engage with one another in formats such as speech, text, audio and video digital interactions. This exposure enhances their recognition and production of different text types, and it also hones their ability to navigate digital communication platforms. VE also allows for peer and instructor feedback to empower learners. Feedback provides guidance while maintaining the learner agency crucial to fostering a sense of accomplishment and connection to the broader world. Students experience a sense of inclusion as they interact with peers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and thus broaden their global perspectives. The paper will showcase how VEs can be implemented effectively, highlighting previous case studies and practical strategies for overcoming common challenges, and provide a template for student-driven exchanges that not only enhance language proficiency but also promote a deeper understanding of diverse cultures and communication practices.

Introduction

Globalization and technological advancements have expanded the possibilities for the way education can be delivered, particularly in the field of language learning. Traditional classroom settings often fail to provide the authentic, intercultural communication opportunities required for the development of linguistic and cultural competences (Byram, 1997), particularly in an EFL context such as Japan where English language education has long been considered to employ teacher-centred approaches (Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001; Hashimoto & Fukuda, 2011). While travel and study abroad have been traditionally seen as a solution to this problem, physical mobility has only ever been an option for

those with the time and financial wherewithal to take advantage of it (Marsh, Andre & Payton, 2020), and as the recent global pandemic, COVID-19, has shown even that option can be taken away. Virtual exchanges (VE), also known as telecollaboration, have emerged as an initiative which can offer widespread benefits in a range of domains. By leveraging digital tools to connect learners across geographical and cultural boundaries, VE enables authentic interaction, fostering language development and intercultural understanding (O'Dowd, 2018; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012).

Further, in a world increasingly defined by digital communication and global collaboration, and as educational institutions attempt to prepare students for the demands of an interconnected world, VE offers a cost-effective, scalable alternative to physical mobility programs (Helm, 2015). Unlike traditional study-abroad experiences, which often require significant financial and logistical resources, VE democratizes access to intercultural exchanges, making them accessible to a broader range of learners (Lomicka & Lord, 2016). Research suggests that engaging students in intercultural dialogue, project-based learning, and critical thinking about global issues can significantly enhance their intercultural communicative competence (ICC), preparing them for the demands of a globalized society (e.g. Byram & Wagner, 2018; Guadamillas Gómez, 2017).

This paper argues that VE is not just a supplementary tool but has the potential to transform current approaches to language education. Through its adaptability, VE can address the diverse needs of learners, incorporating various communication genres, technical tools, and feedback mechanisms. Moreover, it provides students with a platform to cultivate ICC, digital literacy, and a sense of inclusion, skills that are essential in today's globalized world.

In this paper we illustrate the adaptability of VE, its role in enhancing linguistic and technical skills, and its capacity to foster ICC, through three case studies. We will also discuss practical strategies for effective implementation, drawing on concrete experience to provide educators with actionable insights. By demonstrating the potential of VE, this paper aims to contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for innovative, technology-driven approaches in language learning.

Versatility and Adaptability of Virtual Exchanges

One of the defining characteristics of Virtual Exchanges (VE) is their adaptability, making them a powerful tool in diverse educational contexts. Unlike traditional classroom-based or study-abroad programs, VE can be tailored to meet the varying needs of learners, accommodating differences in proficiency levels, learning objectives, technical resources, and time zones. This flexibility allows VE to create inclusive and meaningful language-learning experiences, even for students who might otherwise face barriers to participation (e.g. Thorne, 2010).

Educational institutions and educators can customize VE programs to align with their specific learning goals, whether these involve developing linguistic competencies, fostering intercultural understanding, or improving digital literacy. For example, programs targeting beginner language learners might emphasize asynchronous text-based interactions to give students more time to process and respond, while programs for advanced learners could include synchronous video calls to simulate real-time communication scenarios (O'Dowd, 2018).

Furthermore, VE can be adapted to fit different educational levels and disciplines. For instance, in contexts where students are less confident in their language skills, VE activities can prioritize scaffolding and guided interactions to build their confidence gradually (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). While it is often associated with language learning, VE has also been successfully implemented in fields such as business, engineering, and healthcare, where students collaborate on projects relevant to their professional aspirations (Helm, 2015). This cross-disciplinary applicability highlights VE's potential to support holistic education, equipping students with transferable skills that extend beyond language proficiency.

VE offers unique opportunities for multimodal learning by incorporating various communication genres, including text, audio, video, and collaborative digital tools. Each mode provides distinct advantages, catering to diverse learner preferences and fostering different aspects of language acquisition (Molek-Kozakowska, 2022). For instance, text-based exchanges help students develop written communication skills and encourage reflection, while video interactions enhance speaking and listening abilities in real-time settings (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012). Asynchronous interactions are particularly beneficial in addressing issues such as time zone differences and unreliable internet connectivity. Students can participate in discussions or complete collaborative tasks at their own pace, alleviating the stress that might arise in being required to make on the spot responses in the language they are learning (Kavaliauskiene & Anusiene, 2009).

VE's adaptability extends beyond technical considerations to those of ICC, allowing learners an opportunity to interact with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds in an authentic and collaborative environment. Through structured activities such as video creation and peer feedback, participants may enhance cultural awareness, critical thinking, and communication skills (Heymans, et al.). This experiential learning model promotes deeper cultural understanding and empathy, aligning with the goals of global education.

In the following section, we will illustrate the versatility of VE through descriptions of three different iterations of VE involving Japanese students with students in the US and China.

Case 1: Video Exchange to Develop Intercultural Communicative Competence

Japan and China share a long, mostly amicable historical relationship which has been characterized by significant tension in the last 150 years. This presents a scenario to test whether Virtual Exchange (VE) could foster mutual understanding and empathy among university students from these nations, and the hypothesis was posited that if Japanese and Chinese students had meaningful contact with each other, attitudes towards the other would improve.

Between 2019-2024, in a series of single semester projects, EFL learners from Japanese and Chinese universities collaborated in small groups to produce short, English language videos on various themes, such as the culture of their own countries, sustainability and cuisine. Peer feedback was provided by means of a specifically designed rubric, fostering intercultural dialogue between the students.

Pre- and post-project surveys assessed changes, if any, in attitudes of Japanese students towards China. The survey items were presented as statements with a five-point Likert scale of responses: Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.

Due to space constraints, we present here graphs only for the statement, "In 20xx, I think Japanese – Chinese relations are good". However, the results for other items reveal a similar trend. Since the number of students participating each year varied, results are presented as percentages of the total number of students in a given year.

Figure 1

In 20xx, I think Japanese – Chinese relations are good
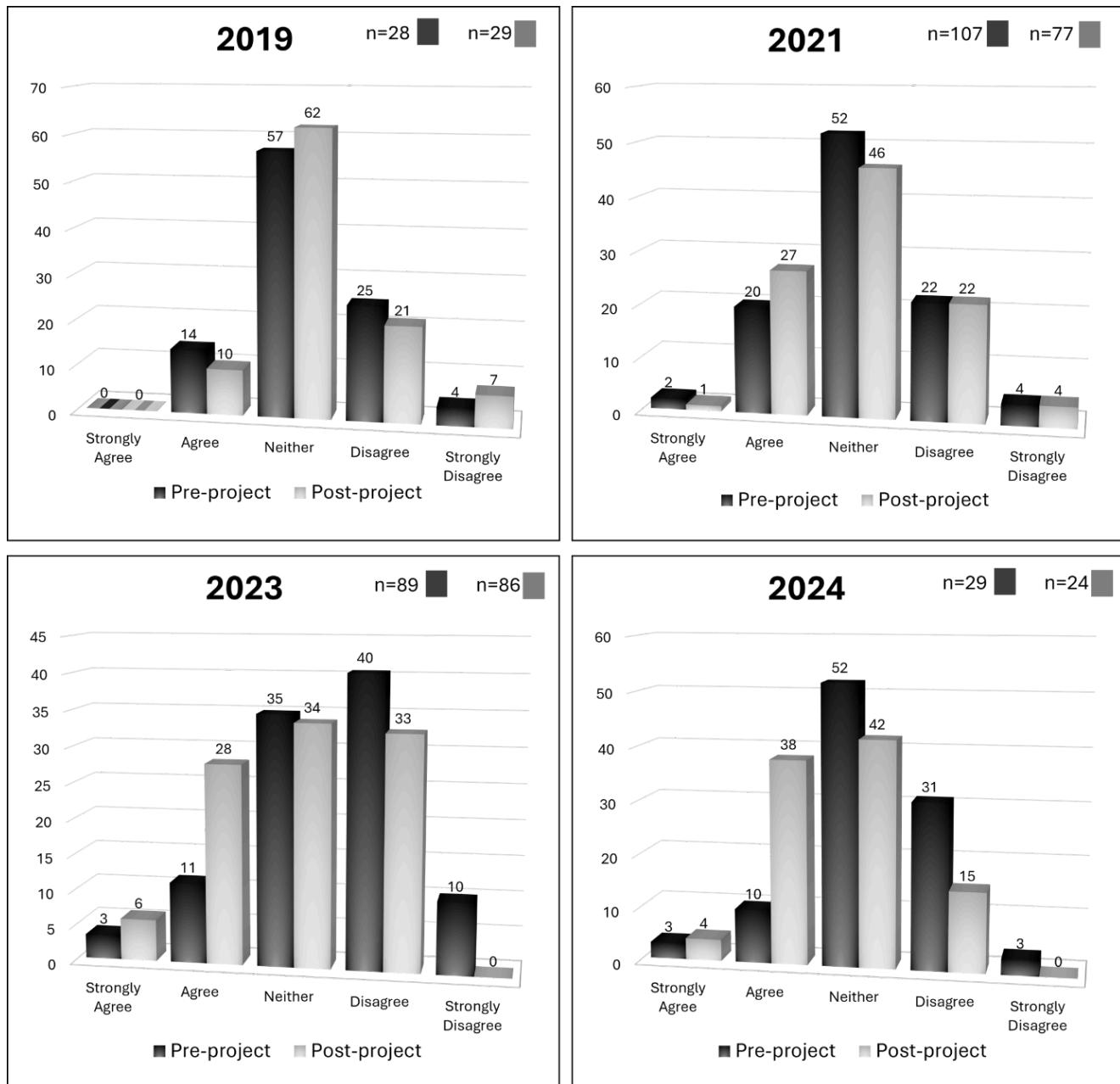
Figure 1 illustrates that although the pandemic year of 2019 marked a dip in positive perceptions—likely influenced by global narratives surrounding COVID-19 which occurred as the project was underway—subsequent years showed a steady upward trajectory. The further away from the pandemic the projects take place, the greater the improvement in attitudes appears to be, suggesting that COVID-19 was in fact the underlying cause of the unexpectedly poor results in 2019.

These results validate the hypothesis that meaningful intercultural contact can enhance mutual understanding.

Case 2: Translation

In this project, an asynchronous language exchange between Japanese and American university students over six class sessions was investigated through a three-phase process and included: 1) draft translations of source texts into the students' second language, 2) feedback from peer counterparts in the exchange country, the source text translated by machine translation and guidance from the instructor, 3) revision of the draft translation based upon the various feedback. Initially it was thought that the students would be at a similar level, but due to a difference in semester start dates, students in Japan, at a higher CEFR B2-C1 level in English, were paired with students in the US at an A2 level in Japanese. In qualitative evaluations, peer feedback was found more trustworthy in the exchange based on a human connection. A perception of the students' limits to evaluate the quality of AI output was also noted. The time difference of 14 hours made it unworkable for the students to converse directly online. However, given time with the written feedback, students were able to discuss the project with their fellow classmates before responding to their peers overseas. Through peer feedback, encouraging comments, class photos and thank-you cards, the students from both countries felt a bond that was described variously as precious, a wonderful experience and one they would gladly try again.

Case 3: Reading Partners

This asynchronous exchange involved students reading aloud a text in the foreign language while focusing on a core of pronunciation features made explicit by their instructors. The US students recorded a dialogue from their Japanese textbook, while the Japanese students recorded an English dialogue prepared by their instructor. The pronunciation was modeled by each instructor before the recordings began. The US students had first learned Hepburn romanization. The IPA symbols employed below are based on broad transcriptions. The core pronunciation features for the students studying Japanese were devoicing the /u/ in common desu and -masu final vowels; a focus on the post-alveolar flap /ɾ/ as in the Hepburn romanization of the ra, ri, ru, re, ro line of syllabary and a clear distinction between short and long vowels, e.g., o and ō. The core pronunciation for the students studying English were the labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/; the dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/; the alveolar lateral approximate /l/; and the voiced alveolar approximate /r/. After the recordings, the work was assessed by the students' peers listening in their first language, who were made aware of the core focus sounds and added additional impressions of their own. This feedback was then exchanged back, reflected on and discussed with their instructor. The semester difference in this term allowed for

only two sessions, one to practice and record, the second to give peer feedback. Within these constraints the students from both countries found the exchange enjoyable and productive according to qualitative post-discussion comments.

Discussion/Conclusion

Virtual Exchange (VE) represents an innovative approach to language learning and intercultural competence development, demonstrating adaptability, inclusivity, and practicality. The case studies presented in this paper showcase VE's ability to cater to diverse learning needs and contexts. Whether through video exchanges fostering intercultural dialogue, translation activities promoting collaboration, or pronunciation-focused reading partnerships, VE helps bridge the gap between theoretical linguistic knowledge and real-world application.

Possibly one of the most compelling aspects of VE is the democratization of access to intercultural experiences. The flexibility in modes of communication it provides allows learners from various backgrounds to participate meaningfully, overcoming traditional barriers such as financial limitations, geographical constraints, and time zone differences. Furthermore, the intentional use of rubrics, peer feedback, and scaffolded activities enhances learner engagement, creating a supportive environment for skill development.

The intercultural competence outcomes highlighted in Case 1 illustrate VE's potential to foster empathy and understanding between groups with historical and cultural tensions. While external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can temporarily disrupt these dynamics, the long-term trend suggests that VE can play an important role in improving attitudes and fostering global citizenship. Similarly, the translation and pronunciation activities underline VE's ability to build technical and linguistic skills while fostering interpersonal bonds, even in asynchronous contexts. As such, VE should be considered not merely as a supplementary tool but as an integral component of a modern, globally-oriented curriculum which offers a promising avenue for enriching language education and intercultural dialogue.

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