

Analysis of Using Virtual Exchange to Develop Intercultural Understanding in EFL Students

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Abstract

This paper details methods teachers can utilize in a Virtual Exchange (VE) project to maximize development of intercultural communication and linguistic competence. The International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject) was born out of a desire to connect students in monocultural classrooms to multiple cultures. The project was started in Japan, a highly monocultural environment, where opportunities to use English as a foreign language (EFL) are highly limited. The project now spans across multiple countries and offers a real setting for students to connect across continents using EFL. It is free for teachers to join with their students and teachers all around the world may participate twice a year by contacting the authors. Research on previous exchanges showed participation in the IVEProject enhances students' knowledge of their own culture and other cultures, increases interactional confidence, and improves intercultural sensitivity – essential for the development of intercultural competence (Hagley, 2020). Research also suggests teacher involvement is essential to the success of VE (Kelsen and Flowers, 2017). The IVEProject encourages teacher as well as student participation and in this paper three areas teachers may focus upon to aid students in the project are discussed: preparation activities, integration of tasks into class activities and reflection activities. It is hoped that these suggested activities will provide a framework which teachers interested in VE, and in particular the IVEProject, may use to maximize the benefits of engaging EFL students in VE.

Keywords: *Virtual Exchange, IVEProject, Intercultural Competence, English Language Education, Blended Learning*

The Need for Virtual Exchange

In a globalized environment, there is an increasing demand for students to be highly competent in communicating in a foreign language, particularly English. Taking Japan as an example, the country's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) now includes

communication skills in a foreign language as well as knowledge on a range of social and cultural issues in its list of *gakushiryoku* (competences expected of university graduates) along with other employability skills (Ito & Kawazoe, 2015). One problem EFL instructors face in developing these communication skills and cultural awareness is the environment of classrooms in Japan. In most EFL classrooms there are only Japanese students. Whilst MEXT has increased the number of foreign instructors in classrooms throughout the country, communication in English remains largely between fellow Japanese students. This situation is one of the reasons Japan was ranked last in international experience in the IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking for 2020 (IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, 2020). It is due to this issue that the IVEProject was born. However, it is by no means only Japan that has such problems. Many other countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe are in similar situations. In many countries, financial limitations as well as other obstacles, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, restrict opportunities for international travel and experience interacting with other cultures. Yet, VE can offer a quick and inexpensive method to virtually travel the world. Indeed, Lee & Song (2019) note that many of the benefits of travel abroad can be attained through VE.

Since its inception in 2004, where one class from Japan and Colombia participated respectively, the IVEProject has expanded and the most recent exchange in 2020 had over 5,000 students from 15 cultures participate. The IVEProject has been sponsored by a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Kaken grant and is free-of-charge for participants (Hagley, 2020). It is open only to educational institutions but all teachers around the world are invited to join with their students. The exchange takes place on a Moodle platform where students use forums to exchange information in text, pictures, audio and/or videos (see Hagley (2016) and Hagley (2020) for more details on how the exchange is carried out). In the 2020 October to December exchange, there were two main forums for students; one was a focused group discussion forum where 20 to 25 students from a range of countries interacted, and the other was an open forum where all 5000 participating students could interact. The focused group discussion topics in that iteration of the IVEProject were “introductions”, “homes in our culture”, “the culture around me” and “what I learned”. In the open forum, students can create their own topics and join any discussions created by other students.

Research on previous exchanges carried out in 2016 and 2017 showed signs that participation in the IVEProject enhances students’ knowledge of their own culture and other cultures, increases confidence in interacting with people from other cultures, and students generally believe that using the exchange improves their English skills (Hagley, 2020). Previous studies in online intercultural exchange have focused on similar benefits. In an extensive review, O’Dowd & Lewis (2016) identified four benefits of VE in language learning; development of linguistic abilities, fostering intercultural communicative competence, promoting learner autonomy and strengthening digital literacies.

However, as O’Dowd, Sauro & Spector-Cohen (2020) note, “simply engaging students in virtual exchange does not guarantee successful intercultural learning outcomes” (p. 147). VE, as defined by the EVOLVE project (2020) “consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programs or 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 or facilitators” (p. 16). A key point here is “the support of educators or facilitators”. Kelsen and Flowers (2017) conducted a cross-cultural exchange using Facebook with students from Japan and Taiwan. Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the experience, but the authors noted the Japanese students were far more active in the exchange than the Taiwanese students. This was largely due to the integration of the exchange in the Japanese students’ classes which included teacher modeling and assistance whereas the Taiwanese students

used the exchange outside of classes. Yet it is not only in facilitating activity where teachers must assist students in VE. A criticism of VE is that students interact on a superficial level and do not engage in differences across social, cultural, political, or religious areas (Kramsch, 2015). To be effective, not all VE require students to participate in such linguistically challenging debates of such topics in the actual exchange. However, a proactive approach from teachers in their use of VE through a number of pedagogical mentoring strategies such as awareness raising activities, integrating students' use of the exchange into class activities and reflecting on the experience may lead to deeper understanding of cultural differences. Even for simple VE, teachers should embed the VE into their syllabus and make it part of their teaching.

For teachers who wish to participate in VE, and in particular the IVEProject, this paper will set out some concrete ways in which teachers can blend VE into their syllabi to achieve the project's aims of linguistic improvements and the development of intercultural communicative competence. Teachers with small classes or large classes can have their students participate in the exchange and immediately those students become a part of a large group where the activities the students participate in become multicultural. The manner in which teachers can utilize this falls under three categories; preparation activities, integration of tasks into class activities and reflection activities.

Preparation Activities

Prior to students using the IVEProject forums, teachers should introduce the site and demonstrate how students can make a post. The IVEProject website contains explicit instructions on how to do this including an instruction video which teachers should show their students and check their understanding. Muller-Hartmann and O'Dowd (2017) also suggest using examples from previous exchanges which may help facilitate effective use of the exchange. One activity to do this is to take two threads from the previous exchange, one which has frequent interaction and one which has little interaction. Teachers may then set these questions for students to discuss:

1. Which thread is more successful?
2. What made this thread more successful?
3. How could you improve the less successful thread?

Ideally, students will have raised some of the features which lead to increased interaction and teachers should reinforce these or highlight the features students did not explicitly raise. Ware (2013) noted a number of interactional features which aided successful interactions in an exchange between Spanish and American students. One of the key points was for students to establish rapport through finding common interests, this was mainly done by displaying alignment, adding personal information and following-up on threads. Building on these findings, O'Dowd, Sauro & Spector-Cohen (2020) introduced seven interactional features to students using VE:

- Topic development (reply quickly and frequently to develop conversations)
- Display alignment (e.g. note when someone has a similar interest)
- Use emotive words and phrases (e.g. strong adjectives such as great and terrible so others can feel your emotion)
- Add emotion with non-verbal cues (e.g. exclamation marks, emoticons)
- Ask questions (e.g. show interest by asking for extra information)
- Use personal forms of address (e.g. add the other person's name when replying to posts)

- Include personal information (e.g. detail your experiences)

An additional two features may further aid students in their ability to use VE successfully:

- Note differences between your culture and others
- Seek clarification of meaning

Though alignment is important in forming and maintaining good relationships, students need to understand clearly the content their peers have posted and examine it from both a critical and analytical perspective. They should try to recognize the cultural aspects of what their peers are communicating and then seek to discover if there is a similarity or difference between that culture and their own. Teachers should also try to encourage this reflection as we shall later discuss.

Additionally, students should not be afraid to ask for clarification if there is any doubt regarding the content. Long (1996) noted the benefits of negotiation of meaning as a tool for language development and VE in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) environment is an excellent place to do this. Students should actively seek clarification to improve their understanding of what has been noted by their international peers as this is a powerful way of both learning about the culture being discussed and also the language being used.

By following these guidelines students are more likely to have successful interactions as it has been noted that the absence of these interactional features often causes conflict and misunderstandings in VE (see O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). However, it should be noted that these interactional features should only be highlighted to students and not made into rules of engagement. Communication styles vary and teachers should be careful not to force their own cultural communication style upon students. Additionally, instances of misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication can provide valuable experiences for students to learn from through reflection as we will go on to discuss.

Integration of the IVEProject to Class Activities

The integration of VE into classes has been shown to enhance engagement and motivation in a number of studies (Lenkaitis, 2019; Kelsen and Flowers, 2017; Nissen, 2016) and it is suggested that teachers integrate use of the project into their classes. For teachers, setting up VE can be a time-consuming process initially but the IVEProject offers an established network of teachers and students which make it simple for new teachers to join. Teachers are saved the time of searching for exchange partner institutions or designing a plan for the format of the VE. The IVEProject, developed with a network of teachers, provides a format for the exchange, and assigns students into multicultural groups. The project thus offers a gentle and easy-to-organize introduction to VE for both teachers and their students. With the framework for the exchange set up, teachers are able to concentrate on designing tasks to complement use of the IVEProject and better meet the needs of their students. Several suggestions on the type of tasks teachers may use are provided below.

Extended Practice

One of the main reasons the IVEProject was started was to give students a setting to use the language they had learned in class. Particularly in monocultural classrooms, providing opportunities for students to practice using language in a real setting is often limited. Nissen (2016) notes online intercultural exchanges are often used for this purpose and that they may become the motivation for learning language in the classroom.

Rather than learning English for a time which may or may not come in the future, students are provided an immediate opportunity to utilize language learned to interact with people from other

countries. For example, in the first group forum on the IVEProject, students are encouraged to find out as much as they can about their group members. Teachers may provide an in-class lesson teaching question formation, follow-up questions and appropriate politeness levels to use with strangers in English. After learning this in class, students can go to the IVEProject forums to practice and unlike in a monocultural classroom, they cannot revert to their native language to resolve any problems. Rather than demonstrating what they have learned by submitting a written piece to the teacher, students have a much wider and more responsive audience in the VE. Teachers can also scan students' forum posts for common mistakes and bring them into the classroom. As a warm up activity to any class, the teacher could put onto the board or projector a list of some of the previous week's common mistakes and ask students to form groups and correct any errors. This activity has the additional benefit of aiding negotiation of meaning as students may be better able to clarify any misunderstandings from the original posts.

Teachers may also use the IVEProject to provide additional meaning to output in class activities. Meaning focused output is one of four strands identified by Nation (2007) as key to a successful language learning program. For example, pair-work drills such as asking a fellow Japanese student "What do you usually have for breakfast?" may not be very interesting but if the teacher makes the drill a role-play where one of the students takes the role of a student they have been interacting with via VE then the question "What do people in ~ usually have for breakfast?" takes on more meaning. If the student has prepared by already asking the questions in the forums, they can answer and if they cannot give an accurate answer they can reply "I'm not sure but I will find out." The wide network of students in the IVEProject provide a range of opportunities and bring the goal of language learning nearer to the classroom even in monocultural settings.

Facilitate Student Research

The open forum section of the IVEProject provides further opportunities for teachers to expand their classroom. In this area of the site, students can create their own discussion topics and all students enrolled may join these discussions. This allows for the exploration of ideas and students may be exposed to a variety of perspectives on topics. Often normal in-class activities focus on interviewing classmates which results in similar responses. With access to thousands of students from a number of diverse cultures, students are able to gain more insight into the topics they are studying in class. Students can use the information they gather from the exchange to produce a report and present their findings to the class. For example, tourism students may create a topic asking the IVEProject members to recommend a place in their country to visit. Students can ask for more information to the responding students and then in groups the students can choose one place and create a campaign poster for this place. Students can then present their poster to the class, detailing the features of the place and why it was recommended. This is just one example, but teachers can customize a task and project to their course and use the IVEProject to gather a range of opinions and information.

The Student-Generated Survey (SGS) in the IVEProject is another way students can carry out research. At the beginning of the project, teachers are invited to submit questions from their students which are made into a survey given to all participants. Encouraging students to think of questions they want to ask students from other cultures promotes higher level thinking and the results can be separated to show how each culture answered. The process, when incorporated into the syllabus, is a PDCA (Planning, Doing, Checking, Acting) cycle that will ensure students can focus on both content and the accuracy of the language they develop. The class, rather than the teacher, can then choose the top three or four questions that are put to the organizers of the SGS (only three or four questions from each class should be submitted).

Monitor Progress and Adapt

Teachers are able to monitor student posts on the IVEProject through a number of tools and it is recommended that any instances of cultural misunderstandings or failed communication are noted and reflected upon in class. Misunderstandings and what O’Dowd and Ritter (2006) describe as “failed communications” may be beneficial to developing students’ intercultural communicative competence. O’Dowd, Sauro & Spector-Cohen (2020) found that students in a VE benefited from focusing on a critical incident where communication broke down between Spanish and Israeli students. Through reflecting on the incident and exploring the causes, students were able to move past the problem and reported learning from this experience. The IVEProject runs for eight weeks through four two-week topics and it is therefore advisable if teachers spend time at the end of each two-week period having the students discuss their experience. One way to do this is for students to be given the task of finding one example of a positive interaction and one example of an unsuccessful interaction then discuss in groups the differences between these, possible reasons for the success and failure and possible solutions to enable more successful interaction. A number of things may be raised by students and the teacher may facilitate the discussion by adding examples of any instances of successful communication or failed communication and encourage students to reflect on these.

It is also important for students to devise strategies for how they can better communicate with others. Ware (2013) noted a frustration of students using VE was that other participants were slow to respond or only responded with short messages. Students were able to somewhat mitigate these issues by composing messages which indicated their disappointment that the others were not responding and encouraged further response. Ware (2013; p. 321) quotes one student’s post,

As much as i loved your response, I would greatly appreciate it if you would write more, because i would love to know more about you and your great, beautiful country. I’m sure that there is lots you have to tell me. I would love to learn about your country and most importantly you.

By having focused discussions on the successes and problems students are experiencing with the exchange, this allows students to critically think of how they may overcome the issues to enjoy more fruitful interactions such as drafting a post similar to the above. The instructor may facilitate this task and make recommendations for the language students can use as well as providing additional insight into how such a message may be perceived.

Reflection Activities

As well as the advised reflective discussions throughout the project outlined above, teachers may find it profitable to integrate post-exchange activities into their classes. One example activity is for students to critically analyze the exchange and suggest ways to improve it. As a starting point, instructors may use the post-exchange survey integrated into the website which asks for students’ feedback and comments. Teachers may use these comments as the basis for in-class discussions to reflect on the experience of using the exchange. Students may also be given a task to complete in groups such as making a presentation to the class about what they learned.

As outlined above, another feature of the IVEProject is the SGS. The results of this survey are revealed in week six and may form the basis for more in-class and in-group final discussions and reflection on cultural similarities and differences. One other possibility is for teachers on the exchange to set up a collaborative project. A teacher’s forum on the IVEProject site allows teachers to post messages to all of the other participating teachers to exchange ideas, collaborate on research and set up further exchanges. The IVEProject includes the first two stages of the Progressive Exchange Model developed by O’Dowd and others (O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016; O’Dowd & Ware,

2009; O’Dowd, 2017) where an initial information exchange occurs and students get to know each other, followed by students comparing and analyzing cultural practices. The final stage of that model involves students completing a collaborative project.

The reason that the final step is not included in the IVEProject is time. As mentioned, the project runs for eight weeks; like many projects outlined in the Stevens Initiative report (2020). Many other VE projects are even shorter in time. To be successful in such a collaborative project, time is required. As the IVEProject includes students from numerous cultures, the time-frame for the exchange to occur is limited to a maximum of eight weeks due to the differing exam timetables and holidays among participating countries. Doing a collaborative project in a half-hearted manner only leads to frustration on the part of participants. This final step is not explicitly part of the eight-week project for this reason but, teachers can initiate such projects through the teachers’ forum. A tool for synchronous communication is also available on the site which allows teachers to interact with each other to develop closer collaboration between students on such projects. In the coming years it is hoped that students who complete the IVEProject will be able to carry on into a more collaboration-based project in the following term and be able to spend more time on the collaboration side of VE. In the meantime, there is still a great deal of benefit from blending the project into EFL syllabi around the world.

Conclusion

In a globalized world there are more ways than ever for people to connect through digital technology, but the unfiltered world of social media and a plethora of applications may not always be useful for learners of second languages to improve their linguistic abilities as well as develop their intercultural communicative competence. VE such as the IVEProject offer a gentle introduction for students into intercultural digital communication in a controlled setting only available to educational institutions. Teachers are required to register their students, hence a safe environment is ensured for students to interact and learn. As laid out in this paper, teacher involvement in the project is essential to maximize its benefits. A number of suggested activities have been described but teachers are also free to develop their own activities to supplement the exchange. As more teachers become involved in the project, the sharing and development of ideas may grow to meet the project’s goals of improving the linguistic and intercultural competency of the participating students. Teachers interested in the project are invited to contact the authors by email to further explore how the IVEProject may be blended into their syllabi.

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