11 Musings on virtual exchange in the Asia-Pacific and beyond

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Abstract

As Virtual Exchanges (VEs) become more common in foreign language classrooms around the world, teachers are rightly asking 'what will my students be getting from this'? If their students are advanced, they can enter into in-depth interactions thus attaining broader and deeper intercultural knowledge as a minimum, from participation in VE. However, for beginner students, VE also has much to offer. Whether they are simple intercultural interactions that have a profound effect on students who have never interacted with people from other countries and cultures or advanced interactions, VEs have the potential to improve the lives of all who participate in them. The question then is 'why are there not more of them'? This chapter will reflect on the situation in the Asia-Pacific region noting some of the problems associated with incorporating VEs there. It will also try to show the importance of a more international approach for the incorporation of VE into education systems.

Keywords: virtual exchange, intercultural understanding, ICC.

1. Introduction

The chapters preceding this one have, along with much other research elsewhere, made the case that VE is important, particularly in the fields of

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language and culture education. There remains many issues that need to be overcome to ensure it becomes a standard part of classes in these fields. O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) give in-depth coverage of what has already been written on the history of VE. There is not much that can be added to their detailed history. What their work shows, however, is that the terminology used throughout the history, and the present, of VE is varied, and because of that, can be confusing. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), eTandem, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange, and many more terms have been used to label VE. Later in this chapter I hope to address this. The confusion caused by the disparate terminology is one area that holds back the adoption of VE particularly in Asia. If the field cannot agree on basic terminology, how can the core ideas be disseminated and taken up?

Another area that can be problematic when VE is incorporated into classes is assessment. As in other parts of the world assessment is important, but for educators in Asia a numerical grade is often crucial. VE is generally not seen to lend itself to numerical grading, however, with modern assessment methods, this should not be a problem that cannot be overcome. Integrating valid and reliable grading into VE is essential for it to become standard in language classrooms everywhere. Some ideas on this aspect will also be offered later in this chapter.

More than anything else, better collaboration between education departments at the institution and government level in Asia is essential to foster VE in the region. Students and educators see VE as an incredible means of building bridges, connecting societies, and developing better understanding between individuals and across cultures. Research shows the benefit of VE to language learning (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) and intercultural understanding (Chen & Yang, 2014; Thorne & Black, 2007), yet in the Asia-Pacific region, as with many other regions around the world, there are few inter-government projects that are promoting this incredibly powerful educational practice. A discussion needs to be started on how best to systematically incorporate VE into curricula throughout the region and the world.

2. Terminology

The early days of online communication saw Turoff and Hiltz (1978) use the term CMC and thereafter many language teachers also used the term (Chun, 1994; Warshauer, 1996). This was fine until other devices became available. Now not only computers are used – modes of communication have changed dramatically as too the different kinds of exchange. We now see single language exchanges (English as Lingua Franca (ELF), Spanish as lingua franca), dual-language exchanges (presently called eTandem, twinning, and others), and multi-lingual exchanges. Some exchanges are synchronous while others are asynchronous or combinations thereof. There are text only, voice only, and video only exchanges and combinations thereof too. There have been exchanges that were email-based, Learning Management System (LMS)-based, Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)-based, and combinations thereof too. Some exchanges have been simple language-based ones, others have been cultural. Some have involved collaboration and been task-based, while others were just exchanges of information for language learning. Many others have involved academic fields outside of language learning. Rather than give individual references to each of these, the reader should look at the recently created VE research database at the UniCollaboration's site[2]. Here you will find all the examples listed above and more.

Therefore, it is a challenge to find a single term to cover this variety of activities. Recently the Steven's Initiative (2020) has created a useful typology to try and clarify many of the terms used. The document states "this effort represents an important and necessary first step towards improving discourse around virtual exchange and making progress toward a mature field" (Steven's Initiative, 2020, p. 16). It is a very major 'first step' that goes a long way to creating a better understanding of the field. However it is still not particularly clear and it is suggested here that all exchange types should come under the umbrella term VE. How might this look?

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2. https://www.zotero.org/groups/2434739/virtual_exchange_and_telecollaboration

At the moment eTandem is a commonly used term in this field but this could become 'Dual Language Virtual Exchange' (DLVE). The word 'tandem' implies a tight unity in direction and movement. Tandem diving, a tandem bicycle, tandem kayaks – these all have people doing the same thing, going in the same direction and speed. This is not always the case with DLVE as students can be, and often are, at different levels of language attainment. When participating in DLVE, the things students do and the speed they do them at can also be different yet the relationship can still be very beneficial. The DLVE model is more like dual carriageways where different vehicles are going in different directions and at different speeds but still using the same carriageway. "eTandem" is an often used model within the VE field and should therefore not have a different name but instead be one type of VE. Multi-lingual VE would be the obvious title given to VEs with more than two languages being used. The semantics is essential as people who hear the term know more clearly what it is referring to.

Telecollaboration is another term used, often interchangeably, in the VE context. After a particularly fruitful conference at her institution in Barcelona, I was talking at the post-conference function with Melinda Dooley, one of the prominent people who has moved the field forward through incredibly hard work, enthusiasm, and total belief in its benefits. She was passionate when talking about the difference between VE and telecollaboration. I agreed at the time that indeed there is a difference, but also believe that if collaboration is the main objective of a particular VE then 'Collaborative VE' (CVE) would be a better term than telecollaboration as it encapsulates the collaborative side of 'telecollaboration' while maintaining the crucial VE terminology. This same logic applies to COIL.

The disparate terminology is holding back VE particularly in Asia due to the confusion it creates. Without more consistent terminology there is a greater chance of misunderstanding. Once the term VE is settled on it can be properly expounded and its application in various fields developed. The US government and European groups have settled on the term and it would now be wise for educators and researchers to also ensure that we use it in all future research.

The UniCollaboration group named its journal the *Journal of Virtual Exchange* and there are other areas where the push for standard terminology is gaining momentum. It is crucial that it continues and the terminology becomes standard across the field. Once that happens, those wanting to support VE development and promote it in Asia can do so with more confidence.

3.   Assessment

Another major issue VE has in Asia is assessment. Most of the skills that students use in VE are soft skills. These are usually more difficult to assess numerically compared to other basic skills, and it is much more difficult to separate students by one percentage point or less when assessing their soft skills. This, unfortunately, is often required by educators in Asia who also need specific reasons as to why there is a difference between particular students' grades. Byram (1997, 2008) and others have made great strides in outlining what is needed to assess Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) which has resulted in excellent materials being published recently such as Lázár et al.'s (2020) work. However, as noted in the methods of assessment section of the ICCinTE project[3], "there will always be some subjectivity in assessing ICC" (n.p.). It is unfortunate indeed that this statement alone will often preclude VE from being incorporated in some Asian contexts at present. All education systems need to trust their educators to assess students' work impartially even if there is some subjectivity. Still, ICC assessment also needs to continue to develop even better tools that ensure assessment can be both formative and summative.

Training is an essential part of the process. Over the period 2015 to 2020, the EU-sponsored Erasmus+ project included Asia, though only 15% of the mobility budget was aimed there. Part of this project was the RICH-Ed program in China which has provided many excellent opportunities for educators to develop better understanding of interculturality and many resources have been made available through that program. However, unlike the EU, there is yet to be a concerted push

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3. http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/Iccinte/results/en/assessing-competence.htm

from Asian governments' education departments to coordinate the development of intercultural programs for intercultural training and VE implementation in an Asian context. Several language and culture associations such as GLoCALL, AsiaCALL, and APVEA work to improve this situation but more needs to be done at a government level. At present the development of VE is being led by European educators but there is much that educators and researchers in Asia can offer. Indeed, the cultural influences of Europe on who is and who is not interculturally competent according to CEFR[4] ratings, and therefore receiving a higher grade, need to be investigated by researchers and educators from Asia and other regions as they may well hold different beliefs. Japan has developed their own CEFR-based descriptors but these do not touch on ICC. Much more needs to be done throughout the region.

In the meantime, educators need to make use of the descriptors and rubrics that are available and that have been tested for validity and reliability such as those developed for the CEFR (2018) companion model and outlined in the sections 'facilitating pluricultural space' and 'sociolinguistic appropriateness'. Also there is Bennett's (2008) intercultural knowledge competency rubric. These and others can be adapted to our students' classroom environments and be used to assess how students' ICC develops.

4.   Internationalization of VE

VE is an exceptional way of allowing your students to access an international audience and be interculturally acclimatized in a safe and secure environment. However, many of the larger VEs that are in the international sphere at the moment are not truly neutral. Nowadays it is almost impossible to find a truly 'neutral' project as funding for these is usually tied to a specific outcome. The goals of the Soliya project[5] for example, while noble, are not linked to a truly free exchange of ideas. The purpose of the project is specific and participants are also limited

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4. Common European Framework of Reference for languages

5. https://www.soliya.net/

to particular cultures. There is no doubt that it is an incredible project and the results speak for themselves but there are power and culture imbalances within it. The project exists due to the wealth of the participating Western institutions and their ability to fund it. This is the reality even though it is a non-profit, and while the institutions deserve kudos for their efforts, wouldn't it be better to make the exchanges more global in both makeup and application? There would be obvious hurdles to overcome but being more inclusive of non-Islamic Asia, South and Central America, as well as other parts of Africa, to name just a few regions, would bring deeper insights that should enable a broader view of the world for participants.

Initiatives sponsored by the UniCollaboration group share similar problems. Funding for many of these is supplied by the EU so obviously the projects should have a benefit for EU-based countries and institutions. This is understandable but there needs to be a truly international exchange with "no strings attached". The International VE Project (IVE Project) attempts to be that yet its funding from the Japanese Kaken program means it is not fully neutral, even though students from any culture can join it freely. If that model could become self-funded it would be a big step toward becoming more neutral. The world is a big place so the logistics of creating a truly international, yet neutral, exchange are complicated but that should not stop people attempting to create one.

There are probably many more students involved in individual teacher-organized class-to-class exchanges than in all the major VEs put together. These smaller-scale VEs usually involve just two or maybe three cultures. The teachers involved have probably met at conferences or in some other way and decided to pair their classes. There is more freedom to do what you want in these types of VE and much of the research on VE to date has come from them. At present there is no way to know the actual numbers involved in such exchanges. To boost the standing of VE within research and education circles, a database of all such VE would be very beneficial. The Steven's Initiative is, at the time of writing, trying to make one for VE where US classes/institutions are involved but this is clearly not enough. To truly appreciate the variety and depth of VE around the world an international organization would also be beneficial.

5.   VE for future language classes

For those teachers who want their students to interact with others from around the world, but do not have the time or know-how to make that happen, the large-scale VEs outlined above are an option. UniCollaboration also has VE partnering fairs and there are other options available as outlined on the Steven's Initiative website. Sister school partnerships are another option. Asian governments, however need to do more to promote VE throughout Asia and could learn much from the UniCollaboration and Steven's Initiative projects. Many countries within Asia face numerous problems and there is a lot of misunderstanding between the cultures therein; thus, it is of paramount importance that better mutual understanding between the many cultures and people of this region occurs. VE is an excellent way to do this and there are a number of arenas in which VE could take place. One of the best would have to be the language classroom.

It has become clear that VE should be at least one part of all second and other foreign language courses. As language classes are included in most degrees at universities throughout Asia, and as culture is intrinsically tied to language, it would seem obvious to include VE in language classes. The question then, is how best to enable this to happen? The extra work required of language teachers to ensure a platform is maintained, interactions take place, and everyone is on the same page, is too much to ask of already over-worked educators. Though many teachers might already have their students in VE, it is often difficult to maintain the VE long-term as funding is not guaranteed and partner teachers may move on. The need for ready-made VEs that can be incorporated into language courses is obvious. The IVE Project mentioned above is one such method where both ELF exchanges and dual-language exchanges take place, and research in this book and elsewhere (Hagley, 2020; Qu & Hagley, forthcoming) shows the benefits of participating therein. However the scale required for all language learners to be a part of a VE is such that no single VE could possibly handle the millions of students studying English in the region, not to mention the many other second languages that are being studied. For this reason, more effort needs to be made at the government and institution level to develop platforms and resources for VE to be carried out.

6.   Conclusion

VE has quickly grown to be an integral part of many education programs in the EU and the US. Collaboration is taking place online between many researchers in numerous fields throughout other parts of the world as well but it is rarely systematically or firmly established in the curricula of institutions in the Asia-Pacific region. This situation needs to be rectified particularly in the fields of language learning and intercultural studies. Of course, there are obstacles in the way, but some of these can be overcome quite easily. Certainly, the VE terminology in the language field will be easier to understand if all the terms come under the VE umbrella. More problematic is the issue of assessment of student participation in VE. This has to be refined such that teachers and students can feel confident in knowing what it is they are being assessed on, and how they are being assessed. The CEFR scale is a good starting point but does not truly capture the online aspect of VE; hence more work needs to be done particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Better appreciation of the soft skills required to be proficient in ICC is also necessary and an understanding that a grade between one and a hundred will never be able to tell you whether you are proficient. To ensure all this happens and that VE can be carried out easily throughout the region, national education departments need to work more closely together to develop platforms and systems where VE can flourish further. To improve understanding between people and cultures, and for the betterment of international relations in the region, the development of superior language and intercultural competence among students is an important step. VE needs to be systematically incorporated into education systems for this to happen. This book has hopefully gone some way to helping, however, as has been noted, much still needs to be done to make this happen.

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