
Short Research Papers

Virtual Exchange and ESP: Natural Bedfellows

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This poster introduces three different virtual environments that address issues of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in different ways at Kyoto Institute of Technology. The first is a virtual exchange between Belgian and Japanese students. The second is an academic presentation course in which Japanese students work online to improve their performances with teachers based in the Philippines, and the third is an intercultural communication course connecting students in Burundi with students in Japan.

Recent developments in technology have led to increased opportunities for creating new virtual environments for teaching and learning. This article describes three different virtual exchanges developed by a team of researcher-practitioners at a national university in Kyoto to give students opportunities to develop the skills that they need to achieve their research and career goals. The students are science, architecture and design undergraduates, and the majority go on to undertake master's degrees, which they then use to enter academia or to work in research departments in both domestic and international companies. Virtual exchange has the capacity to bring English alive for these students as it is directly

relevant to their studies and their futures. Through it, they can use English and see that it has practical and immediate use.

The university was chosen as a Top Global University, one of 37 Japanese universities selected to improve the internationalization of Japanese society by increasing the number of courses taught in English and increasing the percentage of international students and faculty members (MEXT, 2018). Ideally, many of the university's students would study abroad as part of this internationalization, but this is not always possible due to financial and/or time constraints. Virtual exchange allows a much wider population of students to experience international communication than is presently possible through traditional study abroad programs.

O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) describe online mediated virtual internationalization as a way to enable students to become global citizens. They define the qualities of being a global citizen as having "a heightened capacity for interconnectedness and empathy that supersedes parochial nation state identifications" (p. ix), and also having the ability to participate and contribute responsibly to decision-making in professional and social contexts that are intercultural in nature. In addition, they state that having historical and cultural knowledge of diverse world languages and cultures and how these concepts relate to the present day are vital for global citizens. By providing opportunities for virtual exchange for our students, we as educators can work towards achieving the diverse language and intercultural communication goals of our students, the goals of the university and the needs of society at large.

Literature Review

From the early 1990s, foreign language teachers have been using the Internet to connect their students to partners around the world in order for them to improve their language skills. Most projects have fallen within two models, namely the *E-tandem model* (O'Rourke, 2007) and *telecollaboration* (Warschauer, 1996). In the E-tandem model native speakers of two different languages connect and try to learn each other's languages. In these exchanges, the role of the teacher is limited and the students take responsibility for their own interactions. This

type of model was the earliest form to appear in foreign language teaching, but soon after that, *telecollaboration*, a term coined by Mark Warschauer in 1996, emerged. *Telecollaboration* widened the focus from language learning to include the development of intercultural communicative competence, and in recent years there has been increased movement to integrate this kind of virtual exchange into formal education especially at the university level (O'Dowd, 2013). A well-known example of this is Cultura, a project which was developed by Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2001.

Virtual exchange has also been embraced by the business world, with a wide variety of projects developed. Some of these projects have been brought into the university sphere, with significant crossover between business uses and language learning uses. One example of such an exchange is X-Culture, a project at University of North Carolina at Greensboro (Taras et al., 2013). These types of virtual exchanges are known as *subject-specific exchanges*.

Other university subjects have also begun to use virtual exchange as part of their educational programmes in what is termed *the shared syllabus approach*. One particular example of this is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), developed at the State University of New York (SUNY) (Rubin, 2016). In shared syllabus approaches such as COIL, classes that have similar content connect together and work on shared problems or have discussions based on the same material. A task-based approach is often used and the focus is on the different cultural interpretations that are brought to the material.

As we can see, virtual exchange would seem to be ideally suited to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as it can be tailored to any educational context. Jendrych (2013) explores the complexity of ESP teaching in the present day, connecting it with the development of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as both emphasize learners' needs and have a focus on communication as well as content. While many believe that ESP and CLIL are separate approaches (Fortanet-Gómez and Bellés-Fortuño, 2008), Liew and Khor (2014) define CLIL as an integrated version of ESP and believe that it addresses some of the weaknesses of ESP citing the need for more collaboration between language

specialists and subject specialists. This is the definition that is used in this paper.

The first virtual exchange is a jointly developed online module between universities in Japan and Belgium in which students use the same materials to explore similarities and differences in the students' experiences of the teaching of their subject area in their respective countries. English is used as the *lingua franca* in this exchange, with both the teachers and the students working virtually together, both synchronously and asynchronously. This exchange is based on the shared syllabus model of virtual exchange, and as such, there is a dual focus on the development of linguistic skills, specifically targeting language for the students' major, and cultural learning. The cultural interpretation of materials is a vital component, as well as the interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds.

The second virtual exchange presently underway is a course that was created to develop the academic presentation skills of 40 first-year undergraduates. In this course, students prepare and practice presentations which they give online to teachers based in the Philippines. The teachers work synchronously with the students to improve their presentations, and as a consequence of this interaction, students' linguistic and intercultural communication skills are also developed. This is a single-language virtual exchange (SLVE), and students are excited to find that English can truly operate as a *lingua franca*. Since the students are interacting with teachers from another culture rather than other students, the exchange does not fit previous models. Its focus on the development of a specific skill, however, means that it may be viewed as a new "hybrid model" type.

The third is a virtual exchange which focuses on the building of intercultural communication skills for students based in Japan and in Burundi. In this course, graduate-level students from the two institutions work together to complete tasks related to the development of intercultural understanding and sensitivity. They explore issues related to intercultural communication together, sharing and experiencing the realities of intercultural communication both practically and theoretically. This type of exchange follows the Cultura project model, and the emphasis is on the development of cultural awareness and knowledge of diverse perspectives and identities, alongside the development of empathy and

teamwork. As with the other exchanges, it is classroom based, and teachers on both sides of the exchange are actively involved in the learners' interactions.

Project Assessment

Various data, both qualitative and quantitative, concerning these three virtual exchanges was collected. Data included questionnaires concerning anxiety, enjoyment and the perceived benefits of virtual exchange; students' written reflections which were coded and analysed; comments and feedback provided by the Filipino teachers; and recordings of all the sessions which were analysed from a variety of perspectives. The results show largely positive outcomes (for example, Healy, 2017). Student responses revealed that a large majority (some 87%) perceived an improvement in their English language skills and an increase in their motivation to study English (76%). Comments also clearly showed that students believed virtual exchange to be a positive addition to learning. It was all participants' first experience of this kind of learning environment and many commented that they would like to use this method again. The questionnaires also revealed changes in the areas of language learning that the students were anxious about. There was a shift from fear of the unknown to a focus on specific weaknesses that emerged during their online interactions, such as the desire for a better ability to paraphrase. The written reflections show that many appreciate that they have become language users rather than language learners. Additionally, many students showed an increased awareness of international posture, a concept described by Yashima (2009) as participation in an international community that results in the creation of an English-using version of themselves. Evidence of ambivalence was also found, however, with some students voicing complicated feelings towards speaking English, expressing simultaneously a willingness and unwillingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Virtual exchange is a valuable addition to the field of ESP, and by extension CLIL. It provides opportunities for students to engage internationally with people in other countries whilst developing numerous skills related to their specific subject areas, as well as more holistic skills.

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