Plenarveranstaltungen

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Reviewing the Learning Outcomes of Virtual Exchange in Foreign Language Education

1. Introduction

Higher education is increasingly concerned with the task of preparing graduates to be active and responsible global citizens in a world which is inherently digitalised, globalised and multicultural in nature. However, while contemporary students may have been born in a digital age, research has shown us that digital natives are not necessarily good at formal digital skills such as information retrieval, online communication or content evaluation (Kirschner & van Merrienboer 2013). Similarly, while international travel is relatively inexpensive and easy to engage in, we find that international student mobility in the European Union and the USA remains under 10%. And while access to other cultural perspectives through the media and the internet has never been easier, it seems that this often leads our students to enter into intercultural contact in only the most superficial of ways (Kramsch 2014).

International mobility programmes were for many years considered the most effective way to prepare students to be 'global citizens' and develop their "capacity to critique the world they live in, see problems and issues from a range of perspectives, and take action to address them" (Leask 2015: 17). However, the numbers of students who have engaged in study abroad programmes remain stubbornly low and research has demonstrated the limited impact of study abroad on students' intercultural attitudes and awareness. This has led educational institutions to look increasingly at 'internationalisation at home' (IaH), defined by Beelen and Jones as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (2015: 9). Models of global competence have been used to structure and integrate IaH in the curriculum (Leask 2015; de Wit 2016).

As part of their IaH initiatives, a growing number of higher education institutions are engaging their students in Virtual Exchange – a rich and multifaceted activity which refers to online intercultural interaction and collaboration projects with partner classes from other cultural contexts under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators (O'Dowd & Lewis 2016; Dooly 2017). In foreign language education, models of Virtual Exchange such as telecollaboration or e-tandem have been in use for decades and form an important part of Computer Assisted Language Learning (Warschauer 1996; Ware & Kramsch 2005) but, over the past two decades, approaches to Virtual Exchange have evolved in different contexts

and different areas of university education and these approaches have had, at times, very diverse pedagogical objectives. For example, approaches in foreign language education have explored the development of autonomy in language learners, foreign language competence (O'Rourke 2007) as well as aspects of intercultural competence (Belz 2001). Facilitator-led models of Virtual Exchange such as Soliya have focussed on bringing students from the West into dialogue with students from the Muslim world with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others on important socio-political issues and also to develop critical thinking, intercultural communication and media literacy skills (Helm 2017). Meanwhile, initiatives from the field of Business Studies such as XCulture have striven to develop in students the necessary competences to work in what are commonly described as Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) and to give them first-hand experience in online international collaboration in professional contexts (Osland et al. 2013).

In this chapter we review the main approaches to Virtual Exchange in foreign language education and use examples from student reflections in order to illustrate learning outcomes as well as challenges which can emerge from exchanges.

2. Common Approaches to Virtual Exchange in Foreign Language Education

It is useful at this stage to review the two main models of Virtual Exchange which have been used in foreign language education have been the e-tandem and telecollaborative models. Each of these will now be looked at briefly.

The first of these, e-tandem (O'Rourke 2007), emerged from the tradition of tandem language learning which has been widely practised in many European universities. Tandem learning is essentially a language learning activity which involves language exchange and collaboration between two partners who are native speakers of their partners' target language. Its online equivalent, e-tandem, thus involves two native speakers of different languages communicating together and providing feedback to each other through online communication tools with the aim of learning the other's language. E-tandem exchanges are based on the principles of autonomy and reciprocity and the responsibility for a successful exchange generally rests with the learners, who are expected to provide feedback on their partners' messages and on their FL performance. In this sense, tandem partners take on the role of peer-tutors who correct their partners' errors and propose alternative formulations in the target language. In the e-tandem model, the teacher assumes a facilitating role and learners are encouraged to take responsibility for finding their own themes for discussion, correcting their partners' errors, and keeping a learner diary or portfolio to reflect on their own learning progress. E-tandem began to gain popularity throughout European

universities in the early 1990s and a centralized internet site with resources, bibliography and guidelines was financed by European project funding during this time. Today it is still very popular, especially in English-speaking countries where universities connect their students of Spanish, French and German with students of English as a Foreign Language in these countries.

In my own research I have found e-tandem approaches to provide numerous benefits for language learners, especially those of lower levels and those who do not have many opportunities to use their foreign language with native speakers. For example, students report increased confidence in using the foreign language as these extracts from student learner diaries illustrate:

> I did this activity and I feel really great because I can see that other people from another county can understand what I am trying to say but also this person can help me to improve.

> I find this project very useful and very interesting, because it gives us the opportunity to learn things that we can't find in the textbooks. It's easier to learn when we talk with someone who is in our same situation.

Students also report having opportunities to learn vocabulary in context:

> I learned many new things when talking to my partner. I learned colloquial phrases like 'I couldn't help it', 'very drab' and 'pretty much'. I also learned terms specific to his region such as 'brisket' and 'ribs', since they are types of barbecue in Kansas City.

In a related development, there is also a growing interest in higher education in online platforms that provide 'ready-made' e-tandem conversation partners for their students (for example, https://www.conversifi.com/ and https://talkabroad.com/). These platforms function in different ways but the majority connect foreign language students with native speakers in videoconferencing sessions, usually in exchange for a fee which is paid for by the universities involved. When the agreed number of conversations have been completed, the company then provides the students and/or their teachers with recordings of the conversations which can be used as part of students' evaluation. This 'outsourcing' of Virtual Exchange takes a considerable organisational and technical burden off the teacher but there is currently a lack of research as to how learners can develop their linguistic and intercultural competences through such un-mentored virtual conversations with native speakers.

In contrast to e-tandem models, the telecollaborative approach to Virtual Exchange places a greater emphasis on intercultural aspects of language learning and requires students to work together with their international partners in collaborative and comparative tasks related to culture and language. Belz (2001),

for example, reports on a USA-German exchange which involved developing a website which contained bilingual essays and a bilingual discussion of a cultural theme such as racism or family. Another popular intercultural task for classroom integrated exchanges has been the analysis of parallel texts. Belz defines parallel texts as 'linguistically different renditions of a particular story or topic in which culturally-conditioned varying representations of that story or topic are presented' (2005: n.p.). Popular examples of parallel texts which have been used in telecollaborative exchanges include the American film *Three Men and a Baby* and the French original *Trois hommes et un couffin*. In German, telecollaborative projects have engaged learners in the comparison of the German fairy tale *Aschenputtel* by the Brothers Grimm and the animated Disney movie *Cinderella*.

A further task which reflects this approach was the application of ethnographic interviewing in synchronous online sessions. O'Dowd (2005) trained a group of German EFL students in the basic techniques of ethnographic interviewing and the students then carried out interviews with American informants in the USA using group-to-group videoconferencing sessions and one-to-one email exchanges before writing up reflective essays on their findings. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous tools allowed the students to develop different aspects of their intercultural competence. Videoconferencing was seen to develop students' ability to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and also to elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their partners' behaviour and their opinions. However, e-mail was employed to both send and receive much more detailed information on the two cultures' products and practices as seen from the partners' perspectives. In other words, e-mail was suited to foster cultural knowledge, while videoconferencing supported the development of students' intercultural negotiating skills.

Another intercultural OIE activity which has become very popular in recent years is the *Cultura* exchange (Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillet 2001; O'Dowd 2005). This intercultural exchange uses the possibility of juxtaposing materials from the two different cultures together on web pages in order to offer a comparative approach to investigating cultural difference. When using *Cultura*, language learners from two cultures (for example, Spanish learners of English and American learners of Spanish) complete online questionnaires related to their cultural values and associations. These questionnaires can be based on word associations (e.g., What three words do you associate with the word 'Spain'?), sentence completions (e.g., A good citizen is someone who . . .), or reactions to situations (e.g., Your friend is 22 and is still living with his parents. What do you say to him/her?). Each group fills out the questionnaire in their native language. Following this, the results from both sets of students are then compiled and