Virtual Exchange and Meaning-making – Translanguaging and Pushing the Boundaries

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe the latest iteration of our virtual exchange project (see [1], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9] for context) between students of Italian in an Australian university and students in a liceo linguistico in Italy. Students, in pairs or groups of three, met online for 4 weeks and, unlike previous virtual exchanges where we prescriptively programmed topics to be discussed, were given the instruction to define their own topics of interest to pursue together. The objective of this freer approach was to encourage students to become stronger agents of meaning-making using the languages at their disposal. As García and Kleifgen [2] note "[t]o liberate the meaning-making potential of […] bilinguals, a translanguaging pedagogy privileges emergence of meaning making, feeling, intensity, and excitement, as it moves the imaginaries of students to make connections across what are perceived and encoded as separate sign systems" (p. 568). Multilinguals can experience a transformation "when they realize the artificial and constructed nature of the categories imposed on them" ([4], p. 498), and they can then coordinate their own performances without the strictures of external categories." ([4], p. 560). We explore the range of topics defined by student participants and compare this with both our own previous models for virtual exchange as well as others drawn from the literature. We also detail student responses to their online translanguaging experience. We examine the ramifications of this information for future similar projects but also for meaningful meaning-making for young people in languages education.

Keywords: *virtual exchange, translanguaging, languages education, Italian language and culture*

1. Virtual exchange and translanguaging

Our approach to virtual exchange is to create an online space integrated into the educational program and existing in parallel to the space-time of traditional class-tuition, which students inhabit with a great degree of autonomy. This is based on recommendations made by O'Dowd and Ware [9], O'Dowd ([5], [6], [7], [8]) about factors that educators should consider when designing and implementing virtual exchanges. The objective is to provide an authentic forum for language use amongst peer learners while also developing transversal skills such as intercultural competence and global citizenship through the critical analysis of the cultural practices and values of the cultures of the groups involved in the virtual exchanges. This project consistently blends face-to-face and digital learning through synchronous video communication tools.

We promote a translanguaging approach (see [10]) to communication whereby students are free to deploy the full range of their linguistic repertoires to communicate rather than being artificially restricted to parallel monolingualism, i.e. only speaking Italian and then only speaking English. This mixing allows students to "liberate the meaning-making potential" that their use of language can provide.

1.2 Pavia-Melbourne 2023

The virtual exchange project we discuss in this paper took place in April-May 2023 between students learning Italian at the University of Melbourne, Australia and senior secondary students learning a range of languages at the Liceo Adelaide Cairoli in Pavia, Italy. This is the continuation of a virtual exchange project which we have been developing over the past number of years and which has now settled into a familiar formula:

- Both sets of students receive details of the virtual exchange (see Fig. 1.)
- Students are paired by staff with a peer or occasionally two depending on respective class numbers
- All students post a short video introduction using flip.com, a video sharing platform which shares many aspects of current social media sites such as Instagram or TikTok but is

especially designed for educational purposes – this then forms a useful repository of introductory videos which students can access at any time

- Students then organise themselves to meet weekly online via video to exchange ideas, views and opinions
- Typically, staff set a schedule of topics to be discussed which has sometimes also lead to the development of a shared piece of work

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Progetto Pavia-Melbourne | Virtual exchange
Italian Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia | Liceo Linguistics Adelaide Cairoli, Pavia, Italia

Each student will have an international partner in the other country, who she/he will meet once a week online (4 weeks)

The virtual exchange will consist of
- Language exchange - you will speak both English and Italian during the exchange. We suggest at least 20 minutes in each language during each encounter (at least 40 minutes)
- Intercultural exchange – listening to each other and communicating, you will compare different cultures and think critically about them. You will certainly get to know Australia, and also Italy, better!

Dates
As a first step use Flip to create your introductions and post them by 30 April. Go to flip.com and enter the Join Code
For the following weeks, you need to organise at least one meeting online with your partner each week during which you chat in Italian/English for at least an hour

Program
- By April 30 Post your video on flip.com
- Settimana 9 First meeting – decide with your international partner dates and time of your meetings Introduce yourself. What do you know about the other person's country?
- Settimana 10   …
- Settimana 11   …
- Settimana 12   …

Assessment
This project will be assessed via the final small online assessment (week 12) and in the final exam
- In your blog, I want you to include a dedicated reflection on the sorts of things you discover through your interactions with your partner in line with the ideas immediately above - this can be in Italian or English or a mix. This will be considered along with your reading reflections in week 12. For me to consider your reflections, you need to have published a Flip video introduction
- On the final exam, there will be an explicit section in which you will be asked to describe what you've shared and learned during the exchange along with any particular language aspects that came out

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(Fig.1. Information presented to University of Melbourne students via the learning management system).

For this iteration of the virtual exchange, we decided to given students complete liberty and control over the content of their weekly meetings. This was an attempt to free them from what Claire Kramsch calls the "strictures of external categories" with the hope that this would lead to more spontaneous and fruitful exchange. It is also in line with Stephen Krashen's position that "forced speech is not only uncomfortable, it makes no direct contribution to language acquisition". In the next section we discuss what students did and their reactions to the virtual exchange experience.

2. Forging connections through online communication

An analysis of student reflections on the virtual exchange experience allows us to provide an overview of the range of topics canvassed during their weekly meetings (Table 1)

Animals	Food and eating	Slang
Books	Growing up	Sport
Cities (= their own cities)	Hobbies/Interests	Stress*
Climate change	Holidays	Student wellbeing*

Cultural stereotypes	Italian culture	Study
Cultural traditions and festivities	Introductions	Traditional games*
Day-to-day life	Knowledge of the other's country	Travel
Differences between Italy and Australia	Language learning	TV programs
Education systems	Driving licences	Ukraine-Russian war*
Environment and sustainability	Multiculturalism*	Weather
Eurovision	Music	Work
Family	Natural disasters*	
Floods in Emilia-Romagna	Patriotism/National pride*	
Films	Politics/Political issues	

(Table 1. Student themes - *denotes only found in one student entry)

These topics reveal a desire to connect with each other through familiar and known experiences combined with an attempt to test the knowledge held about the other country and culture. It is evident throughout student reflections on the experience that a constant compare and contrast approach was taken to evaluating information gleaned during online interactions. The range of topics in Table 1. Is not dissimilar to the types of indications we normally provide to students in terms of what they should discuss together. This clearly indicates that students have a firm task orientation in mind when approaching the virtual exchange.

2.3 New friendships
Many students reflected that they made a real connection with their partner through the virtual exchange. For some this was unexpected. Others also noted future intentions to meet in person, typically in Italy.

2.4 Not so different after all
Another recurring theme was an expectation of cultural difference which was offset by a surprising realisation of shared similarities, whether in views or different aspects of daily life.

2.5 Connecting across media
The virtual exchange provided a gateway for a complex set of connections across social media. Students detail how the initial contact led to exchange of Instagram profiles, sharing TikTok videos, and, in one case, the development of a shared online music playlist. This speaks to the multifaceted nature of identity both on and offline and demonstrates that virtual exchanges have the power to reach across the temporal-physical divide to integrate the online persona. Of note, some students detailed using one language while communicating in writing and then another in the online face-to-face contexts.

2.6 Understanding language and communication
Interacting with a stranger online provided students with an experience of real, authentic and spontaneous communication which enabled many of them to appreciate it does not depend strictly upon accuracy and correctness. They detail using a translanguaging approach to resolve moments of incomprehension and make statements like "it's more important to try to talk rather than be perfect".

2.7 Real communication means real learning
Students note that because the topics where either self-directed or unpredictable their learning was somehow strengthened in ways that were different from normal classroom learning. This suggests that virtual exchanges among peers have the propensity to provide more fertile learning experiences for students. There was also clear appreciation for the chance to learn about the world view of someone of a similar age but in a different part of the world.

2.8 Opportunities to control the situation
Out of student reflections it becomes clear that some students enjoyed the freedom to set their own agendas while others initially floundered. Those who had difficulty at the beginning, however, detail

how they took control of the situation and either suggested a range of topics to ensure they felt comfortable in each meeting or developed a weekly program of topics to guide the online interaction.

3. Concluding remarks

The overwhelming perception we have as staff of this particular iteration of our virtual exchange project is that making it less structured and more open-ended allowed students to engage more meaningfully on a human level which, in turn arguably leads to more significant learning experiences both linguistically and interculturally. Students from both hemispheres expressed how strongly they felt they had made new friendships which they hoped would endure. The natural interconnection between the virtual exchange experience and the students' online identities reveals that, for students, this is not just another "homework task" but is something more. Putting students in these situations allows them to test not only their language and culture skills but also their ability to communicate. Promoting translanguaging is key to providing an underpinning confidence - when things don't seem to work in a single language, they know that they have the flexibility to draw on all of their linguistic resources to ensure that they can make meaning. This pushes the boundaries of classic language teaching contexts and clearly provides students with access to deeper and more satisfying interactions.

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