INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING International Conference

Navigating the Healthcare Administration Systems in the US and Costa Rica

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Abstract

In an era where global tensions are mounting and university budgets are shrinking, is it still possible to implement language learning through immersion? The answer to that question is explored in this paper by introducing you to the Experiential Digital Global Engagement (EDGE) at Penn State University. EDGE is a project-based international virtual exchange program, known more commonly around the world as COIL (collaborative online international learning). Using language for a specific purpose, the EDGE project advances L2 languages and promotes intercultural communication as students learn the language skills and effective communication strategies needed to work with their international partners. The projects are delivered in synchronous and asynchronous formats, which teaches students certain cultural and linguistic differences that exist between the partnering institutions. Drs. Donna Chambers and Belén Rodríguez Mourelo are partnering with the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica on a project called Navigating the Healthcare Administration Systems in the US and Costa Rica. Utilizing targeted L2 languages, students at both universities will learn about physical and mental ailments common among the populations of both countries, and the attitudes and barriers that may prevent them from seeking treatment for those conditions. Once the research is complete, students from both universities will conduct mock interviews with each other on topics that they have selected in consultation with one another. The US students will conduct the interviews in Spanish, and the Costa Rican students will conduct the interviews in English so that both sets of students can understand the language barriers that could potentially exist among patients. Students will conclude the project with a virtual presentation, in the L2 language, linking their understanding of healthcare systems as paths for intercultural communication and learning language for a specific purpose.

Keywords: *Language for Specific Purposes, Project-Based Learning, E-Learning*

1. Introduction

Most people would agree that total immersion in a foreign country is the single most effective method of learning a foreign language and the cultural nuances of that country. However, in an era where global tensions are rising and university budgets are shrinking, is it still possible to implement language and cultural learning through traditional immersion? This paper responds to that question with a resounding yes! By adopting the contemporary definition of immersion, which no longer views immersion solely in terms of physical study abroad, there is now a viable method of virtual "Internationalization at Home." (Verzella, 2018).

In the United States, the military and several federal agencies successfully developed virtual programs that approximate total immersion. They achieved this through rigorous teaching methods and realistic simulations, aided by technological advancements and improved global communication platforms. When institutions of higher learning realized that linguistic and cultural immersion could be achieved virtually, universities began to develop virtual programs of their own. In 2006, Jon Rubin, from the State University of New York (SUNY), developed COIL, the first Collaborative Online International Learning program. His program enabled professors from two or more countries to design a shared project that their students could complete together, regardless of where in the world the universities were located (Montoya, 2026). In 2017, Penn State University followed suit by introducing their own version of COIL called EDGE, The Experiential Digital Global Engagement program.

The EDGE program at Penn State University started small but has grown to include dozens of international partner institutions across an array of countries in Europe, the Americas and the Caribbean, as well as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, Ukraine and Croatia. Projects involving language learning include Multilingual and Intercultural Communication, Composition and Conversation, Latine Families, International Business, International Entrepreneurship, and Intercultural Communication Theory and Research. Language learning has included German, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Ukrainian, Russian, French, Arabic, Croatian, and Spanish.

Learning Spanish through an innovative virtual immersion experience is the focus of this paper, based on the upcoming, well-planned initiative: Penn State Berks begins *Navigating the Healthcare Administration*



Systems in the US and Costa Rica. This is a new EDGE project, undertaken in partnership with the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica (UNA). The project is an interdisciplinary language project that brings together Penn State students studying Costa Rican Healthcare, and UNA students studying US business systems. The two groups will research their respective topic in the L2 language at their home University, then come together to interview each other according to a rubric created by the professors of both institutions. This project offers a timely example of how virtual exchange formats can sustain meaningful international language and cultural learning despite constrained budgets and heightened geopolitical tensions. The proposed *Navigating the Healthcare and Administration Systems in the US and Costa Rica* project combines intercultural competence, language learning, and engagement, recognizing structural barriers to health and entrepreneurship equity.

2. Adapting the Concept of Virtual Exchange

As technology improved, language educators began to embrace the idea that immersion no longer needed to be tied solely to travel. Virtual opportunities for language acquisition mushroomed on the Internet, ranging from gamification, tele-tandem, telecollaboration, virtual reality to virtual exchange platforms such as COIL and EDGE. Educators could now offer their students real-time conversations with native speakers that were not limited to textbook scenarios. The conversations could be turned into videos, podcasts, social media sites, and a multitude of other student driven creations. In a content-based immersion course, a subject such as science, business, or social studies is taught through the target language, using language for a real purpose. Instead of studying language in the abstract, students use language to investigate ideas, solve problems, complete tasks, and discuss knowledge.

Well organized virtual exchange courses cultivate intercultural competency and global perspective, resulting in student empathy, and an understanding of the cultural context behind a language (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022). Part of being well organized is recognizing and teaching the differences that may exist between the two partnering institutions such as different academic calendars, time zones, class sizes and language abilities. Educators may want to separate the classes into compatible breakout groups according to student language proficiency. Educators should frequently monitor the progress of virtual exchanges to ensure that expectations are being met and that students are benefitting from the experience as they should.

Whereas the benefits of virtual exchange do not replace the experience of living abroad, they do provide strong, consistent exposure to real time language and culture, and more importantly to real people, as opposed to avatars. Thus, educators should carefully consider the desired outcomes of their courses in selecting a counterpart with whom to establish a partnership.

3. Establishing the Edge Partnership

To add a realistic dimension to the material taught in their classes, each university sought an immersion component to their courses; Penn State for Medical Spanish, University of Costa Rica for US Business Systems. However, neither school was able to travel abroad that semester. As an alternative, the professors at Penn State enrolled in a chancellor endorsed program to explore the potential of EDGE. Coincidentally, the professor from Costa Rica, who was serving as a visiting professor at Penn State, also enrolled in an EDGE program. The two sides met and created a partnership.

Establishing an immediate partnership fits well with the EDGE emphasis on intentional partnership development. The early connection allows both sides substantial time to align expectations, refine the collaborative task, and think carefully about how the project will fit both course contexts.

By adapting their existing syllabi to incorporate EDGE learning objectives, activities, and assignments, the professors designed an EDGE Language Learning Action Plan for a project that included cultural diversity, technology, and disciplinary relevance. The project has a real-world focus which is well suited for a Spanish language course. Students are expected to compare how healthcare or workplace interactions are handled across cultural and linguistic contexts, conduct bilingual interviews using appropriate vocabulary and communication strategies, or reflect on how language shapes access to services. The project fosters meaningful cross-cultural engagement, collaborative problem-solving, and intercultural learning, which align with the global learning objectives of achieving growth in intercultural fluency and communication; global self-awareness; and personal and social responsibility as related to an international group project (O'Dowd, 2025). Asking students to explore business and healthcare-related interactions in a second language creates meaningful opportunities for both language development and intercultural learning

4. Methodology

Since this is an inter-university collaboration involving an inter-disciplinary project, each university will select its own teaching methods, rubrics and grading system for their respective course content, although both universities will concur with the portion of the project that involves virtual student interactions.

At Penn State, Medical Spanish is a course that enrolls students at the ACTFL level of advanced low, meaning that students can narrate fluidly in the past, present, and future tenses. Therefore, students will conduct research in the L2 language and explore what it means to navigate healthcare related matters in Costa Rica. Instruction will focus on using high-frequency vocabulary prioritization and practical task-based training skills such as conducting interviews, managing surveillance, and understanding regional dialects or local slang. Penn State students will also practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in Spanish that focus on *costarriqueñismos*, and Costa Rican healthcare concerns, cultural celebrations, and business communications.

Students in the Business Administration course at the UNA have approximately the same level of skills in English that the Penn State students have in Spanish. UNA will mirror the linguistic and cultural pedagogy of the Penn State course, except their content will be on marketing, entrepreneurship, and small business development. UNA students will analyze case studies involving startup businesses, marketing techniques, and how the use of language differs between social media posts and formal interviews.

Penn State and UNA professors have already met and created a rationale and a reciprocity statement for the project. They also outlined the learning objectives and a rubric that will serve both universities to assess the quality of the simulated interview.

Both Penn State and UNA will develop and utilize linguistic landscape activities for students to document and analyze language related to their respective classes, such as healthcare services for students in Pennsylvania and customer service for business administration students in Costa Rica.

The EDGE project will culminate in simulated interviews, where Penn State students will interview UNA students in Spanish for a health center, and the UNA students will interview Penn State students in English for a Human Resources Department of a business enterprise. Students are to create interview questions in the target L2 language and submit a summary of the answers. The simulated interviews serve to compare how language shapes access to services, how healthcare or workplace interactions are handled across cultural and linguistic contexts, and finally to learn how to conduct bilingual interviews using appropriate vocabulary and communication strategies. The aim is for students to understand the language barriers that could potentially exist among healthcare seekers or workers, or among enterprise interviewers and interviewees. The intended outcome is primarily linguistic and cultural empathy. Students will experience first-hand linguistic and intercultural vulnerabilities, as they navigate culturally embedded health concepts and business codes of etiquette across languages.

The interviews will take place over Zoom. As an informal communication channel, students will use WhatsApp. If a shared space is needed for collecting questions, vocabulary, interview notes, or media, Padlet will be used. These platforms were chosen after checking the Penn State, UNA, and Costa Rican privacy expectations, and after obtaining permission and photo releases from all participants, so that students will be able to document the simulated interviews with photos and videos taken from the sessions.

5. Assessment

The following methods of assessment will be used throughout the project:

- **Reflective checkpoints:** To help students process the experience as it unfolds, and to gain richer evidence of their intercultural and linguistic development, there will be regular reflective checkpoints throughout the collaboration. These checkpoints will be in the form of brief, manageable, short responses after the first partner meeting, after students draft interview questions, and after the simulated interviews. The purpose of these checkpoints is to ask students what they are noticing about communication, cultural assumptions, vocabulary use, collaboration, and/or the challenges of conducting interviews across languages.
- **Synched presentation:** An oral, synched team presentation on the simulation experience will be required.
- **Peer assessment:** A peer assessment of collaborative contribution and project experience will also be required.
- **Post project reflection essay:** To measure a deeper understanding of the project's effects, there will be an essay consisting of guided questions that asks students to connect the linguistic, cultural, personal, and global learning milestones they achieved. In alignment with the goals of the Experiential Learning Community of Practice at Penn State, the essay will also ask the student to write about how the project helped them grow across the following core competencies:

- Multicultural awareness: How they developed the knowledge and cognitive skills to interact appropriately and effectively across diverse cultural contexts.
- Civic responsibility: How they may now positively impact local, national, and global communities.
- Professional Development: How the project may have helped define the ability to define their career goals and master professional expectations.
- Ethical Reasoning / Leadership: How they assessed personal values and social contexts to recognize and navigate ethical issues.
- Systems Thinking: How they came to understand that different parts of a system influence one another and evolve over time

6. Conclusion

With global tensions mounting, prices of consumer goods skyrocketing, and university enrollments sharply declining, travel abroad immersion programs are becoming less accessible for students. Fortunately, with the technological advances of the last 10 years, immersion experiences are now possible through virtual exchanges, creating a new sense of internalization at home.

Although the Spanish program at Penn State Berks has previously participated in international, virtual exchanges such as the Interconectados project with Venezuela, and the ESC program with Croatia, *Navigating the Healthcare Administration Systems in the US and Costa Rica* is the first EDGE project they will undertake that is primarily language-based. Having announced and outlined the project in this paper, the authors intend to present a follow-up report on the project results in future conference proceedings and presentations.

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