Transnational Conversations in Education: the Benefits of Student Virtual Exchanges Structured around Social Justice Themes

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Abstract

The inclusion of virtual exchanges in the curriculum of language programs in the United States is steadily increasing. Implementing virtual exchanges requires careful planning across institutions and concrete venues to benefit all students involved. Focusing on social justice as an overarching theme of virtual exchanges has the potential to promote the development of students' linguistic skills in a foreign/second/heritage language and to enhance intercultural understanding through meaningful conversation [1] [2] [3]. In this article we discuss the virtual exchange experience between university-level students from the United States and Latin America (Argentina). The virtual exchanges took place over six weeks in both English and Spanish. Student perceptions before and after the virtual exchange experience were analyzed to uncover the perceived benefits of the conversation exchanges. Survey responses showed how US students became aware of social, historic, and economic disparities in Latin America and how Latin American students challenged narratives and stereotypes originating in mass media sources like the film industry (e.g., Hollywood), TV, and social media. This research has implications for the classroom use of critical pedagogy, transformative learning, and critical language awareness in relation to multilingual practices [4].

Keywords: *Intercultural development, language learning, virtual exchanges, social justice*

1. Introduction

Social justice has been defined as the equitable sharing of the benefits of a society [5]. According to Osborn [6], there are four pillars that can be used to address social justice in the world language classroom: identity, social architecture, language choices, and activism. For Randolph and Johnson [7], language education is an ideal context for studying culture and community from a social justice framework. Transformative learning, as described by Byram [8], emphasizes the need for members of different cultural groups to engage in interactions that acknowledge social, historical, political, and economic forces so that the members of the two groups no longer approach one another from the privileged position of the *tourist* who does not need to acknowledge race, class, power, and oppression. A social justice framework approach, by contrast, promotes the ability to identify with different perspectives and situations beyond one's own.

Study abroad has been shown to benefit intercultural understanding and second language development [9]; however, the number of students who can afford study abroad is limited. Scholars who ascribe to postcolonial and critical discourse perspectives have highlighted the negative effects of "commoditizing" and "exoticizing" study abroad [10] [11]. Moreover, since not all programs abroad are created equal, studying abroad does not necessarily help students expand their networks overseas or provide them with enough opportunities to interact with locals from the host country, especially with peers in the same age range [12].

Virtual exchanges – which link virtual classrooms with university partners overseas in an economical and feasible manner – have recently gained momentum in higher education as a way to give students continued exposure to international education [13]. For educational institutions, creating virtual spaces within the curriculum that connect learners digitally across borders enhances intercultural dialogue that otherwise would be more difficult to access. These virtual spaces also help individuals from diverse backgrounds to build international networks.

Virtual exchanges involve grouping or pairing learners with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations to engage in an online intercultural interaction under the guidance of an educator. Participating in virtual exchanges gives learners the opportunity to collaborate and develop intercultural understanding by becoming more aware of cultural differences, commonalities, and the values of interlocutors from different regions and cultures.

2. Methodology

This paper discusses the experiences of US and Argentinian students who were participants in a virtual conversation exchange organized between a national public university in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and a state university in California, United States. The exchange took place over six weeks in both English and Spanish. Student perceptions before and after the virtual exchange were analyzed to uncover the perceived benefits of the conversation exchanges. Survey responses show that US and Argentinian students were able to challenge and confront narratives and stereotypes originating in mass media sources like the film industry, TV, and social media.

Twenty-five (25) Argentinian students were paired one-on-one with twenty-five (25) US students; the students in the US were second-language learners and heritage speakers (e.g., learners who grew-up speaking Spanish at home with parents and/or relatives). The language exchanges served to expose Argentinian learners to the US English variety and US learners to the *Rioplatense* variety of Spanish and to generate a channel of intercultural dialogue. During a period of 6 weeks, dyads met on an internet-based video platform for one hour each week. Prior to each meeting, students were given readings to complete on the week's topic (in English for the US-based students and in Spanish for the Argentinian-based peers). Students were advised to conduct conversation exchanges both in English and Spanish. Translanguaging, the use of the students' full linguistic repertoire [14], was allowed and encouraged.

All participants (Argentinian students and US students) completed surveys before and after the virtual exchanges (e.g., pre-/post- surveys) which were created with the purpose of eliciting students' perceptions about US and Argentinean language and cultures. US students also completed individual reflections about the exchanges on Canvas as part of their class assignment. Conversation topics corresponded to the four pillars of social justice identified by Byram [15] for use in the language classroom: "identity, social architecture, language choices, and activism". These topics included discussions on race and policing; voting rights and election processes in the respective countries; womxn's rights in both countries; linguistic diversity and varieties of Spanish, including Spanish in the US; the use of inclusive language in Spanish; the state of indigenous communities in both countries. Faculty leaders in Argentina and the US discussed and chose topics for their perceived relevance to students in both language exchange groups.

3. Results

Both groups that participated in the virtual exchange overwhelmingly agreed that the exchange had a positive impact on their linguistic and intercultural skills. When asked about their perceived benefits, US students specifically mentioned that regular virtual meetings improved their understanding of the *Rioplatense* variety of Spanish, which includes the use of "vos" as the singular second-person pronoun in Argentina. Furthermore, US students reported improvements in their listening comprehension skill as well as an expansion in their vocabulary, including the use of slang terms in Spanish.

Regarding cultural development, many US students acknowledged their previous tendency to generalize about people from Latin America without considering the diverse experiences and characteristics of different national identities. For example, some students said that they believed that other cultures in Latin America had cultural customs concerning food similar to those in Mexico. Similarly, Argentinean students mentioned learning about bilingual practices in the US, including the use of Spanish, as well as dialectal characteristics of English spoken in the US. Survey data from Argentinean students highlighted their increased awareness of racial and ethnic disparities, social inequities, and discrimination faced by marginalized students in the US. Students discussed recent social movements as "Black Lives Matters", the implications of Affirmative Action for students in higher education, the situation of DACA students, and the risks of voter suppression in the US. Both groups also learned about economic disadvantages faced by their peers in the respective countries: on one hand, the high costs of a university education in the US, and, on the other, the reality that many Argentinean students need to continue living with their parents as adults. The virtual exchanges played a central role in deconstructing stereotypes, particularly those perpetuated in Hollywood movies, suggesting that the exchanges had served as a critical intervention promoting critical thinking and self-reflection.

Lastly, both groups agreed that the virtual exchanges fostered a sense of connection that was perceived as the beginning of a friendship across borders; working in peer dyads seemed to encourage friendly and informal interactions which, in turn, seemed to help students on both sides of the exchange overcome anxieties when communicating in a foreign/second/heritage language.

Despite cultural and linguistic differences, students recognized that they shared commonalities and that all were part of a younger generation navigating a polarized world.

4. Conclusions

Virtual exchanges structured around social justice themes offer students an opportunity to develop their linguistic skills, including dialectal awareness, while also challenging stereotypes and preconceptions through peer-to-peer dialogue. US students had the chance to challenge preconceived notions about what it means to be a Latinx individual, while Argentinian students questioned the content and perspectives promoted by cultural industries they had been exposed to, such as Hollywood, mass media, and social media, which have a tangible presence in different communities outside of the US.

By engaging in virtual exchanges focused on social justice issues, Argentinian students were able to unpack mediated narratives that often portray the US as a country where all dreams come true (the American Dream). They started to become aware of structural inequities—social, economic, and political—that disproportionately affect marginalized groups in the US. Additionally, Argentinian students confronted monolingual narratives reproduced in the film and television industries and became aware that the US is, in fact, a multilingual country where individuals engage in code-switching between English and Spanish as part of their bi/multilingual practices, particularly within the Latinx community.

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