



Virtual Exchange as a Facilitator of Intercultural Communicative Competence Development

Silvia Canto¹

¹Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Abstract

Engaging with others in a foreign language requires more than grammatical and lexical accuracy—it involves understanding interactional norms shaped by cultural values. Yet, many language programs still prioritize form over function. Building on the idea that culture permeates all social interaction (Byram, 2019), this study explores how virtual exchange can foster learners' intercultural communicative competence. Research suggests that digital environments enabling authentic communication in the target language positively affect learners' motivation and intercultural awareness (O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019). In particular, exchanges that promote meaning negotiation offer a fertile ground for language learning (Ellis, O'Donnell, & Romer, 2015; Lantolf, Poehner, & Thorne, 2020). This paper reports on the outcomes of a one-year interuniversity project integrating virtual exchanges between Spanish learners at a Dutch university and native-speaking counterparts from a Spanish university. These exchanges were embedded in both institutions' curricula and designed around meaningful communicative tasks. Analysis of quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (recordings, interviews) data revealed that language learners enhanced their communicative competence while also developing greater intercultural awareness through interactions with expert peers. The project highlights the value of authentic, collaborative tasks in video-mediated exchanges not only for language acquisition but also for critical engagement with one's own and others' cultural norms.

Keywords: virtual exchange, intercultural awareness, communicative competence

1. Rethinking Language Learning Beyond Grammar and Vocabulary

In traditional foreign language education, grammatical accuracy and lexical acquisition often dominate curricular goals. However, meaningful interaction in a foreign language involves much more than mechanical correctness. It requires the development of pragmatic and intercultural skills that enable learners to navigate communicative situations shaped by social and cultural norms. In non-immersion contexts, especially, learners are typically limited to interactions with classmates who share the same cultural background, reducing opportunities for authentic and spontaneous language use. This can lead to the internalization of simplified, static, or stereotypical representations of the target language and its users. The growing emphasis on communicative and intercultural competence in second language acquisition (SLA) theory—driven by scholars such as Byram (2019) [1]—has underscored the need to provide learners with opportunities to develop interpretive, relational, and reflective skills in real-life communication (Ellis, O'Donnell & Romer, 2015) [2]. Virtual exchange (VE) projects offer such opportunities by connecting learners with native or expert users of the target language across geographic and institutional boundaries. This article argues that VE is a powerful complement to formal language instruction because it supports both linguistic development and intercultural awareness in an integrated, experiential manner. In doing so, VE contributes to a broader vision of language education that moves beyond linguistic accuracy toward the development of global citizenship skills and intercultural responsibility.

2. Digital Collaboration and the Intercultural Turn in Language Education

Digital communication tools have transformed the landscape of language learning. Among the most innovative applications is virtual exchange (VE), defined as a form of online, sustained, and collaborative interaction between learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. VE is typically embedded into formal curricula and structured around meaningful tasks. Research shows



that VE enhances learners' motivation, increases exposure to authentic language use, and fosters intercultural communicative competence (O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019; Helm, 2020) [3] [4]. The pedagogical value of VE lies not only in its ability to connect students in real time but also in its promotion of critical reflection and negotiation of meaning. The current project builds on this research, viewing VE as a context in which students actively construct knowledge by interacting with real people in the target language, rather than consuming decontextualized input. Furthermore, the intercultural turn in language education emphasizes that language use is always situated and culturally embedded. By engaging with peers who hold different beliefs, values, and communicative styles, learners become more aware of their own assumptions and more flexible in their interpretation of others (Byram, 2019) [1]. The implementation of VE in higher education therefore represents both a methodological innovation and a conceptual shift—from transmission models of language teaching to dialogic, participatory, and intercultural frameworks. culturally embedded

3. Designing Tasks that Foster Intercultural Dialogue

In order to achieve meaningful intercultural learning through VE, task design plays a central role. The project described in this article developed a five-session sequence aligned with CEFR A2-level objectives and intercultural learning goals. Each task was built around a clear communicative situation, designed to gradually increase in complexity and depth of engagement. Session 1 ("Visit my country") invited students to present cultural, social, and geographic characteristics of their home country or region. Session 2 ("City life and rules") focused on contrasting norms and behaviours in public spaces, with particular attention to unspoken rules and cultural scripts. Session 3 ("Rules of coexistence") explored implicit values shaping everyday interactions, such as turn-taking, politeness, or time orientation. Session 4 ("Important people and traditions") enabled students to share culturally significant figures, events, or holidays, thereby contextualizing language within cultural narratives. Finally, Session 5 ("My experience learning Spanish") fostered reflection on the learning process itself and allowed students to articulate their evolving understanding of the Spanish-speaking world. Each task was accompanied by scaffolding materials, including vocabulary support, guiding questions, and reflection prompts (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2017) [5]. The goal was to create a safe yet challenging environment where students could negotiate meaning and develop both linguistic and intercultural skills. Task design thus operationalized the pedagogical commitment to experiential, student-centred learning.

4. Educational Framework and Implementation

The VE project involved students from a Dutch university enrolled in an A2-level Spanish course. A total of 40 students participated in five virtual sessions held over one semester. These sessions were integrated into the existing curriculum and assessed as part of students' coursework. Learners were matched with Spanish-speaking peers—pre-service teachers enrolled in a parallel training program at a Spanish university. The pedagogical setup was grounded in task-based language teaching and intercultural communicative competence frameworks. Each session was conducted via videoconference in small groups and was preceded by preparatory activities and followed by reflective discussions. Data collection combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Students completed pre- and post-project questionnaires measuring self-reported linguistic confidence, intercultural awareness, and task engagement. Oral interactions were recorded and analysed using a rubric that assessed fluency, interactional strategies, and intercultural sensitivity. Additionally, a subset of students participated in semi-structured interviews to explore their perceptions of learning outcomes and challenges. This mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation and deeper understanding of how VE contributes to language learning and cultural awareness. The inclusion of both performance data and self-reflections enriched the analysis and helped identify patterns of growth across different dimensions.

5. Communicative Gains and Intercultural Growth

Results from the project point to significant development in both linguistic and intercultural domains. Quantitative data indicated that 82% of students felt more confident using Spanish in real-time interaction by the end of the exchange. They reported improved vocabulary range, better listening



comprehension, and more natural use of discourse markers. Qualitative analysis of recordings revealed increased use of negotiation strategies such as clarification requests and paraphrasing, signalling a shift from scripted responses to more adaptive communication. From an intercultural perspective, students demonstrated heightened awareness of cultural variability. Many participants began to distinguish between national and regional identities within Spain, challenging essentialist views. For example, several students reflected on learning about linguistic diversity (e.g., Catalan, Basque) and noted differences in communicative style between their partners from different regions. One student wrote: “I always thought Spanish people were loud and fast, but I realized that’s just one stereotype—it really depends on where they’re from.” Interviews confirmed that VE fostered curiosity, empathy, and a willingness to suspend judgment. Students appreciated the opportunity to compare experiences and reflect on their own assumptions. Importantly, they saw their partners not only as language models but as cultural informants, which enriched the dialogic dimension of learning. Overall, the exchange created a context where students could both practice language and reflect on the cultural embeddedness of communication.

6. Reflections, Challenges, and Future Directions

Despite its successes, the project also encountered several challenges. First, aligning academic calendars and institutional priorities required considerable coordination. While the Dutch academic system followed a block structure, the Spanish partner institution operated on a semester model, complicating scheduling. Second, technical difficulties occasionally interrupted sessions, particularly due to bandwidth limitations or unfamiliarity with the video platform. Third, group dynamics varied, and not all interactions achieved the same level of depth. Some students found it difficult to sustain conversation or navigate disagreement, highlighting the need for more explicit training in pragmatic strategies and intercultural listening. Furthermore, task engagement was influenced by the perceived relevance of topics. Tasks that connected directly with students’ personal experiences tended to yield more engaged and spontaneous conversations. Going forward, future iterations of the project could benefit from more robust orientation sessions, clearer communication guidelines, and opportunities for asynchronous follow-up. Institutional support and teacher involvement remain crucial to the success of VE. The reflective element—both in-class and post-task—emerged as particularly important for helping students process their experiences and articulate learning outcomes. While VE is not without its limitations, it offers a cost-effective and scalable approach to integrating intercultural experiences into language education, especially in contexts where physical mobility is limited.

7. Conclusions

This article has argued for the pedagogical value of virtual exchange as a facilitator of intercultural communicative competence in the context of Spanish as a foreign language. Drawing on a one-semester VE project between Dutch and Spanish university students, the findings show that carefully designed and scaffolded online interactions can support significant learning outcomes (Thorne, 2016) [6]. Language learners improved their fluency, adapted their interactional strategies, and demonstrated increased sensitivity to cultural variation. The experiential and dialogic nature of the exchange helped students move beyond textbook representations and engage with the lived realities of Spanish speakers. While challenges related to logistics and interaction management remain, the benefits of VE—in terms of accessibility, authenticity, and intercultural reflection—make it a compelling tool for language educators. Importantly, VE promotes a shift in mindset: from viewing language learning as mastery of form to understanding it as participation in culturally situated meaning-making. This shift aligns with broader educational goals, including the cultivation of global citizenship and intercultural responsibility. As higher education continues to explore hybrid and digitally mediated models of teaching, VE should be recognized not as a temporary solution, but as a sustainable and enriching component of language education.

REFERENCES

- [1] Byram, M. Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence: Revisited. Multilingual Matters, 2019.
- [2] Ellis, R., O'Donnell, K., & Romer, U. “Task-based language learning and teaching.” In The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, 2015.



- [3] O'Dowd, R., & O'Rourke, B. "New developments in virtual exchange in foreign language education." In M. Dooly & R. O'Dowd (Eds.), *In This Together: Teachers' Experiences with Transnational, Telecollaborative Language Learning*, Peter Lang, 2019.
- [4] Helm, F. "The practices and challenges of telecollaboration in higher education in Europe." *Language Learning & Technology*, 19(2), 2015, 197–217.
- [5] Kurek, M., & Müller-Hartmann, A. "Task design for telecollaborative exchanges: In search of new criteria." *System*, 64, 2017, 7–20.
- [6] Thorne, S. L. "Intercultural communication in computer-mediated contexts." In S. Canagarajah (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*, Routledge, 2016, 192–205.