ムードルにおける大規模なバーチャルエクスチェンジ

Large Scale Virtual Exchanges with Moodle

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This paper outlines the importance of Virtual Exchange (VE) for the development of cultural understanding in addition to language development in any communicative language course. It proposes a model of ensuring that students in communication classes within Japan can easily be linked with students in other countries via a Moodle based VE. The benefits of the VE, and of using Moodle as the platform for it, are outlined in addition to details of successes and areas to improve the VE model.

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本論文にはコミュニケーション授業の中でバーチャルエクスチェンジ(VE)における文化理解や語学学習発展の重要性について述べる。ムードルによるの VE で世界中のコミュニケーション授業に参加している教員や学生が簡単に他国の学生との関係を作れるシステムを紹介する。そのためのムードルプラットフォームの利点や VE の成果を紹介し、それらの実績、規模、改善できるところも概説する。

1. Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a powerful means of giving students both an audience and a forum for them to interact with the language they are studying. They do so in communicative events that are more real than the more contrived classroom ones that often are generated in mono-lingual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. VE has been defined as "technology-enabled, sustained, people to people education programs ... entailing the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural exchange, interaction and collaboration with peers from partner classes in geographically distant locations, under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators" by the Intent program (2015). It can be used in various fields but it is particularly suited to foreign language learning.

Moodle is an excellent platform to use for VE. The social-constructionist ideals on which Moodle was created lend themselves well to VE. Forums in particular are easy to use and are relatively load friendly meaning even if large numbers of students are involved the server on which the Moodle exists is not too taxed. Moodle as a platform also offers wikis, blogs and workshop modules that allow students to participate in a variety of collaborative activities. The project to be outlined here uses the forum module extensively in association with the group function.

Through the use of Moodle and VE, students in a variety of countries gain "virtual mobility" (Lewis and Collis, 1995). They can use the language they are studying (English) to interact with, learn from and participate in collaborative activities with students from a variety of cultures. This paper will outline an exchange between Japanese, Colombian, Taiwanese, Thai, Chinese and the UAE students. Harashima et. al. (2014) carried out VE via Moodle between students in different universities within Japan. With the use of LTI these exchanges proved very useful to all those that participated. However, as the Japanese government is encouraging tertiary institutions to ""promote global human resource development ... overcome the "inward tendency" of Japanese students … ensure students can succeed in the global field ... and to enhance ties between nations" (MEXT, 2012) it is necessary that educators look further afield and begin VE with students in other countries. This is easier said than done. One should also be confident that the VE would be useful to the students involved.

A number of VE have occurred between students in Japan and other countries and they have taken various forms. Bower and Kawaguchi (2011) reported on a Dual Language VE (DLVE) where English and Japanese was used in a synchronous chat and asynchronous email exchange. They called this method, as others do, an e-tandem exchange. It was noted that students were able to participate in negotiation of meaning and receive corrective feedback. Carney (2006) gives an overall positive review of a number of exchanges that occurred between Japanese students and students in various other countries when reviewing the literature thereon. Jones and Yamauchi (2013) as well as Dunne (2014) also noted positive outcomes from their intercultural exchanges.

There is numerous other research to show that VE results in both positive outcomes in language acquisition and building intercultural competence though there are also papers that note the importance of tasks and careful consideration of how the VE are carried out. Noting these the author created a large scale VE and invited many fellow instructors to join.

2. Large Scale VE with Moodle

The VE outlined here is a Single Language VE (SLVE) where English is used as a lingua franca. Moodle is used as the

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platform and the forum module is extensively used to encourage students, in a total of 6 countries, to interact online using the language they are studying in class, to negotiate meaning and expand their understanding of foreign cultures.

Reasons for Moodle being used as the platform are numerous. Firstly, as the exchange is quite high stakes for most of the students participating, the platform must be robust with a strong track record. Moodle is now used in almost every country and is well known to many students and teachers around the globe. Not only educational specialists but also governments, companies and training organizations, rely upon it.

As mentioned, Moodle was based on the social-constructionist approach where understandings and meanings are jointly created by students and teachers. The exchange outlined in this paper seeks to involve students in different regions doing precisely that – developing their understanding of culture and language jointly. The fact that Moodle also has numerous language packs also aids students in their understanding of the graphical interface.

2.1 Participants

There are almost 2000 students involved in the second iteration of this VE. The first one involved 800 students from three countries – Colombia, Japan and Taiwan. The one being outlined here has students from the SENA in Colombia, one university in China, 15 universities around Japan, one university in Taiwan, the Open University of Thailand and one university in the United Arab Emirates. There are very few English majors involved. The vast majority of students have a variety of majors and their level of English ranges from beginner to intermediate.

2.2 Structure of the exchange

Teachers that are interested in having their students participate in the exchange send their students' details via a CSV file to the organizer. The teacher is paired with another teacher in (an)other country(ies) and they are placed in a group together on the course page. The students then post to forums in the course. The present forums are based on simple topics that students at a beginner level will be able to participate in. They are: self-introductions; my place; events in our lives; future plans and dreams and an open forum. Students are encouraged to both post to the forums and reply to other students' posts. Students are able to post text, audio and video (via Poodll), in addition to other multi-media such as pictures, links to videos and other materials.

Teachers can see all their students' work relatively easily in addition to being able to see other groups' work, though students can only see their own group's students. The assignment module is made available for use by teachers and a rubric is in place to use if teachers wish to use it to assess their students' work. However each teacher has complete autonomy to assess their students' work in any way they see fit.

2.3 Student feedback regarding the platform

In a survey from the previous exchange where 360 students answered questions relating to the exchange 71% of the respondents stated that the web site was easy to use. Some of those that said that it wasn't noted in comments that they wanted it to be smart phone accessible. As it was, this leads us to believe we need to educate students a little better on how to access the site with mobile devices.

3. Benefits of VE

In the survey just mentioned 88% of the 360 students surveyed believed the virtual exchange was both beneficial to learning English and a similar percentage stated they wanted to exchange information with students in other countries. These results are in tune with a number of other studies that note the benefits of VE. VE increases students' participation in communicative events (Pais Marden and Herrington, 2011; Sotillo, 2000); improves the chances of students in lower power positions being able to participate in communicative events (Kern and Warschauer, 2000); improves peer feedback (Ware and O'Dowd, 2008) as well as increases opportunities to participate in, and learn from and about other cultures (Chen and Yang, 2014; Thorne and Black, 2007).

3.1 Benefits of the present exchange

The benefits outlined above can be seen in the present large scale VE being carried out. In the author's class students who struggle to communicate with their Japanese peers are extremely active when interacting with students in other countries. One particular student will not interact with his Japanese peers at all in class but has posted and replied in the forums more than any other student in the group. When examples from the forums are brought to the students' attention in class, the group work that eventuates in the author's classroom is productive. Students work together to improve the language that was used and jointly develop better understanding thereof through their peer work. Comments from students who have participated in this and past exchanges have been overwhelmingly positive. "I was totally unaware of the Colombian culture. This exchange has totally changed my way of looking at them and at other countries. I'm more interested in other cultures now and feel more confident in both finding out about them and talking about my own culture". Numerous other examples of Japanese students commenting on how they have benefited from exposure to other cultures can be seen in the feedback. Statements such as these are the norm when asking students to express their positive feelings about the exchange.

3.2 Areas to be aware of

The number one area that students have negative feelings toward the exchange is when they don't receive replies. This in itself can be looked at as a positive too – it shows that students are keen to interact and want to learn about other cultures if given the chance through a VE. It is something they don't receive without participation in a VE. Therefore it is an important part of any VE that students are active in replying to other students' posts and that teachers monitor said interaction so that students without replies, receive them in a timely manner.

O'Dowd also pointed out in a presentation at the 2nd Conference on Telecollaboration in University Education that VE is not a

panacea – one cannot simply add students to the VE proposed here and presume that all the benefits will arise. Teachers must be involved and encourage students to reflect on their learning and try to truly understand and appreciate the cultures of the people they are interacting with. It is essential that teachers are integrally involved in the VE from the planning thereof, through the carrying out stage and into the reflection and assessment stage.

3.3 From conceptualization to realization

As noted in the introduction, MEXT wants the Japanese population to become more socially and linguistically aware on the international stage. Physical travel to other countries in the form of study abroad and short term language immersion programs are an option but an expensive one that many students cannot afford. To meet the needs of MEXT the concept of VE has broad appeal as the benefits vastly outweigh any negatives. The major problem to date is how teachers can easily find partner classes and have a solid platform on which there students can interact with students in another country in a safe and secure environment.

The VE outlined in this paper provides that and in so doing goes a long way to meeting the goals of MEXT. Teachers can easily join the VE by simply mailing the coordinator with their school and class details. Teachers don't have to do any of the tech side of an exchange. For many, there may be a learning curve to come to terms with using Moodle, but this should not be a steep curve. The VE supplies teachers and students with online tutorials on how to use the site and online training courses are available via Skype too.

Moodle, as mentioned, is robust enough to have many thousands of students participating in courses. The Open University UK has some 200,000 students on their Moodle platform. Hardware is obviously also an important issue, but from the pedagogical perspective the VE outlined here can be scaled to a very large degree. The SENA in Colombia is aiming to have 10,000 students involved in VE by 2020. The author and organizer of the VE hopes to have that number of students from Japan also participating. Students from China and Thailand in addition to students from the Middle East and Europe are also showing intense interest in the program. Realization of including a VE as a part of any communication course in Japan is becoming a reality.

4. Future Considerations

4.1 Future of VE

UNICollaboration: A Cross-Disciplinary Organization for Telecollaboration and Virtual Exchange in Higher Education was established in 2016 with its base in Europe where numerous institutions and governments are promoting VE. It is an international organization that will continue to promote VE around the world. The U.S. government, via the J. Christopher Stevens VE fund and other initiatives is encouraging the development of VE too. With these initiatives continuing, it is obvious that VE will play a part in a variety of educational contexts in the future.

4.2 VE and Language Education in Japan

Japan has a number of areas that can hold back the positive effect of VE. Privacy laws in Japan are, if not the strictest, some of the strictest in the world. Students have been told from a very early age, and rightly so, of the dangers of the Internet and therefore often approach VE with great trepidation. Many students will not post a simple photo of themselves into their own profiles even though the site is password protected and closed. In an environment where communication is being promoted, closing oneself off because of privacy fears does not engender open communication. Helping students overcome these fears and giving them the tools to be approachable in a safe way is an important part of ensuring the success of VE in Japan.

Of course teachers need to give their students the tools to participate in VE. Scaffolding and other essential parts of a sound syllabus and curriculum are essential. The teacher remains an incredibly important part of the learning that takes place in any VE. VE in language learning will always be a part of a course and never the whole course. Yet it will become a core part of any truly communicative course. There are already a number of VE within Japan and as the VE outlined in this paper develops, it will go a long way to ensuring VE becomes mainstream in language courses around the country.

4.3 Costs and other future considerations

The costs of the first few years of this VE are being covered by Japanese government grants. The SENA has stated it would cover some costs as the program develops and it is hoped that other institutions and groups will help finance the running of the servers. This is the only real cost involved.

Another important issue that will hopefully develop further is collaboration between teachers who are participating in the exchange. With such a large number of teachers involved (there are 43 involved in the present exchange) the possibility of collaboration in creating and further developing learning materials is immense. From such materials could come a universal syllabus that promotes cultural competencies being achieved and language learning to improve.

A final area that requires further development is increasing the number of levels of language competence that students can participate in. At present beginner to intermediate students are involved but it is the goal of those participating now to increase these to include beginner, intermediate and advanced level VE.

5. Conclusion

Teachers of communicative English courses in Japan want their students to be able to interact with other speakers of English rather than only with other Japanese speakers. There are numerous reasons for this, many of which have been outlined in this paper. The chances of becoming more inter-culturally and linguistically competent increase with the more exposure one has to other speakers of English outside your own country. For the vast majority of the Japanese population it is financially impossible to travel to other countries in order to experience such an environment. VE is a valid option to ensure that

students are able to have the opportunity to meet and interact with students in other countries and gain the many advantages such interactions bring.

The VE outlined in this paper allows teachers and their students to easily participate in VE and gain all the benefits that such participation entails. Moodle is the stable safe interactive platform on which these rich language and cultural interactions between students in a number of different countries can take place. It is the sincere hope of the author that more and more teachers and students in Japan take advantage of the opportunities afforded them by this VE. In so doing, the objectives of the MEXT outlined above will be more easily achieved.

Acknowledgments

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