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## Moodleを利用したバーチャルエクスチェンジ活動 を通して英語学習者の異文化理解力とコミュニケー ションスキルを向上させる試み

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 日本 Moodle 協会 (Moodle Association of Japan) 公開日: 2018-02-14 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: ハグリー, エリック トーマス, 原島, 秀人 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10258/00009540">http://hdl.handle.net/10258/00009540</a>

## Raising the Intercultural Understanding and Skills of EFL Students through Virtual Exchange on Moodle

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A common problem teachers of foreign languages (FL) have is how to give their students rewarding opportunities to use the language they are studying. In FL classes throughout Japan, the students are usually all Japanese. Very few opportunities exist to use, in a meaningful and real-world way, the language being studied. Language learning becomes conceptual rather than authentic as there is no genuine application of the language nor access to the culture in which it is embedded. When the FL being studied is English the concept of “culture” becomes more difficult to distinguish as English is now an international language with numerous cultures affiliated to it. The Virtual Exchange (VE) outlined in this paper endeavors to adapt to this fact and bring various cultures together through the study of English. From this, students participating in the VE broaden their intercultural understanding and become more adept at communicating across cultures. Moodle is the perfect platform for this to occur on.

### Moodle を利用したバーチャルエクスチェンジ活動を通して英語学習者の異文化理解力とコミュニケーションスキルを向上させる試み

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外国語教育の中で頻繁に問われる問題の一つが、如何にして学習者に対象言語を使用する機会を与えられるか、である。日本における外国語学習環境の中で学習者は通常全て日本人である。自分たちが学習している外国語を意味のある、現実的な状況で実際に使用できる機会は非常に少ないと言わざるを得ない。外国語学習は学んだ事を現実に応用したり、その言語が使われる文化と関わりを持ったりしない限り机上の知識で終わってしまう。こと英語学習においては、今や英語は多様な文化とつながりを持つ国際語となっているので、それを取り巻く「文化」という概念を明確に捉えることが難しくなっている。本小論で述べるバーチャルエクスチェンジ (VE) はそのような実態を捉え、英語学習を通して様々な文化を結び付けようとする試みである。これにより VE に参加する学生たちは国際理解力や異文化間コミュニケーション能力を高めることができ、その様な活動を支援するムードルは理想的な基盤システムであると言える。

## 1. Introduction

To provide FL students with enriching opportunities to use the language they are studying, teachers need to bring real examples of the culture and language they are teaching into their classrooms. For teachers in countries that are not particularly cosmopolitan in nature this is difficult and even more-so in regional areas of such countries. Virtual Exchange (VE) is a relatively new means of enabling them to do so. VE has been described by the Intent project’s position paper (Intent, 2015) 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.” It comes in a number of forms but the two most common are Dual Language VE (DLVE), which is sometimes called e-tandem (Cziko, 2004), or Single Language VE (SLVE). DLVE, as the name suggests, involves students sharing the learning of two languages whereas SLVE involves one language being used as the lingua franca in the learning process. This paper will only look at SLVE as the project outlined herein uses English as a

lingua franca.

SLVE has been shown to promote Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Guarda, 2013) develop “understandings of intercultural communication” (Thorne, 2006) and encourage intercultural dialogue and understanding (Helm, 2013). It is becoming increasingly popular in Europe with the INTENT project increasing the number of VE throughout the EU, where they are increasingly being seen as a new type of mobility. VE is also growing in the U.S. The J. Christopher Stevens VE fund, set up by the U.S. government, is just one example of this. There are many other examples of VE in the U.S. with the Soliya project being particularly well regarded. Students no longer have to physically visit another country to learn from people in that country about their culture and lifestyle. Through VE students attain “Virtual Mobility” (Lewis and Collis, 1995).

EFL teachers wish to give their learners the necessary tools to use English well. In many cases though, students ability to use English in real communicative events is limited, as they have no interlocutors from outside their culture to interact with. This is where VE can be particularly useful. Both Europe and the U.S. are promoting VE because it offers learners the chance to interact and develop contacts with learners from different countries, without the enormous cost of travel. Students attain

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the opportunity to use the language, and develop the intercultural skills they learn in class. With these they are able to participate in real world communicative events via the VE. When students use English in a single culture classroom with peers they often fall back on their L1 to explain themselves. In a VE they must find the words in English to explain their ideas or experiences.

Though not to the extent of Europe or the U.S., examples of VE in the Asian context are increasing in number, but their scale is relatively small (Chun, 2014; Helm, 2015). There are a number of reasons for this: less access to suitable platforms, inter-operability issues between institutions, fewer links between faculty within and between different institutions, costs, lack of teacher training and difficulty in assessing such interactions. The benefits of VE in the Asian context are also perhaps not as well documented as in Europe and the U.S. too.

Examples of VE in the Asian context include Bower and Kawaguchi's (2011) Dual Language VE (DLVE) which examined improvements in accuracy via peer correction of emails; where both English and Japanese were used by students in Australia studying Japanese, and students in Japan studying English. Harashima et al. (2014) carried out a VE in a domestic context between students in different universities within Japan, with survey results suggesting that, overall, participants felt their English improved because of the project. Incorporating VE into the curriculum should be one goal of EFL practitioners, as VE have been shown to increase the level and amount of participation in communicative events (Hagley, 2014; Pais Marden and Herrington, 2011; Sotillo, 2000); increase the amount of interaction for students in lower power positions (Kern and Warschauer, 2000); and improve peer feedback (Bower and Kawaguchi, 2011; Ware and O'Dowd, 2008) in addition to increasing opportunities to participate in, and learn from and about other cultures (Chen and Yang, 2014; Thorne and Black, 2007). It is for these reasons that VE can be a valuable asset in a communicative foreign language class. Students then have the opportunity to interact meaningfully with other speakers of the target language on a regular basis – something that is not available to the majority of EFL students in Asia, but is extremely useful. Long (1996) notes that interaction enhances language acquisition chances, or is even a prerequisite for real acquisition. We learn language through language use; if we make a mistake that impedes understanding, an interlocutor can indicate to us that something needs rectifying or adjusting in order to get our message across. This is the idea behind negotiation of meaning. Experiences using language with others become much more memorable and meaningful increasing the chances of learning. Though some have said that not being exposed to native speaker English is a drawback and there is a chance of learning incorrect language (Cziko, 2004), if the instructor is doing their job properly, this should not be the case. Rather, it is more beneficial for students to be exposed to a number of differing cultures so they can experience and interact

with them, thus having the chance of learning about more than just one. SLVE offers this opportunity.

## 2. Structure of the SLVE

The SLVE being carried out by the authors and their research team is set up on a server at a regional university in the north of Japan, with 14 other universities throughout Japan also participating. In addition there are 5 institutions from 5 other countries (China, Colombia, Taiwan, Thailand and the UAE) involved at present. This is its present (spring, 2016) status but the exchange was born in 2004 when the first author decided to incorporate VE into his syllabus. He sent emails to a number of international teacher mailing lists asking for like minded teachers in other countries to join him. He received a number of replies, of which two in particular have continued to work with him ever since. One of the replies came from a teacher who worked for The National Service of Learning (SENA in Spanish: Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje) in Colombia. This contact became the basis for the SLVE. The other was a teacher in California teaching Japanese. Her students worked with the author's students in a DLVE where Japanese and English were both used. The DLVE is still ongoing but is of a much smaller scale and will not be outlined here.

The SLVE that began in 2005, after organization was completed in 2004, was a very small project involving only 10 students from Japan and the same number in Colombia. Though there were many positives, it was plagued with technical problems as the infrastructure in Colombia was still very limited. Over the years it grew to the point that in 2011 there were about 50 students from each country involved and often included students from other countries (Korean, Thai, Taiwanese, Chinese, Vietnamese and Malaysian students have also participated on occasion). The infrastructure in these countries has continued to improve and the quality of the VE has too. As mentioned above, the SLVE between Japan and Colombia has developed over many years. The exchange was presented to leaders of the SENA in mid 2015, and, after an expanded pilot course involving over 400 students from Colombia and the same number from Japan proved successful from October to December of that year, a major program was started in the spring of 2016. The number of students from both Colombia and Japan doubled and students from the other countries noted joined also, resulting in some 2000 (1600 active) students and 56 teachers participating.

As funding from a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science(JSPS) grant is used, the exchange is free of charge for all those joining. The first author set up a server with Moodle on it. Moodle is a very popular open source Learning Management System (LMS) used in educational and business institutions around the world. To allow students to participate, their teachers send a CSV file to the administrator (the first author) of the SLVE who enrolls the students in the site. Participants then interact with each other via the Moodle forums posting and

replying to posts. The learning environment is secure and private as only those enrolled have access to it.

Teachers and their classes from the participating institutions were paired or sometimes put in groups with three or four countries' students participating. The Moodle groups function was used so that all classes were working on the same forums but could only see their paired classes' posts. Basic online tutorials were included on the course page so that students could learn how to use the site. Forum posts could include multimedia and links to further share information on the students' lifestyles and culture.

Assessment has taken different forms as each teacher is free to assess in any way they think best. We encourage teachers to assess student participation in the virtual exchange, as assessment is an extrinsic motivation tool that improves participation levels in such exchanges. A rubric is made available as a means for assessment, but it is optional. The rubric includes criteria on weekly frequency of participation, the number of posts, use of multimedia, and message content. Some teachers choose to use the rubric to grade their students, and make it clear for students to see. Others incorporate different means of assessment, such as the number of posts the students made, whilst a few teachers offer it on a volunteer optional basis.

Once enrolled, students then exchange information on assigned forum topics. Each topic goes for two to three week periods. There were four specified discussion forums: introductions, my home town, events in our lives and future plans. There was also an open forum where any topic can be discussed at any time. Students can access the SLVE via any Internet enabled device. Some teachers used the virtual exchange forums as part of their classes, while others assigned it as homework. Teachers encouraged their students to log in, post and reply to the students in the other countries. Participation did vary due to the different circumstances that teachers and students had.

### **3. Research design & methods**

A voluntary survey was carried out at the end of the exchange in the last week of June / first week of July, 2016. The survey was anonymous with the questionnaire module in Moodle being used. Japanese, Spanish and English versions of the survey were available so that students would know precisely what was being asked and how to answer. A number of questions were asked but this paper looks at the questions related to language and culture only. The comments section of the questionnaire asked students to note positive, negative and overall attitudes to the exchange.

### **4. Results**

As is shown in Table 1, of the 272 students that took the questionnaire, 240 or 89% believed the exchange was beneficial to learning English. 76% believed they learned about the partner country and 79% believed they started to understand the lives of

the people in the other country. 69% wanted to learn English more because of the virtual exchange. 85% of students wanted to exchange information with the students in the other country, with 78% stating they were more interested in the other country now because of the virtual exchange. 67% changed their view of the other country due to the virtual exchange. The authors can only understand the Japanese and English comments so they are the only ones noted here.

Table 1 Students' Feedback on Virtual Exchange.

Question	Response
I think the virtual exchange was beneficial to learning English.	89%
I didn't learn anything about the other country.	24%
I feel like I started to understand the lives of the people in the other country.	79%
I wanted to learn English more because of the virtual exchange.	69%
I didn't want to exchange information with the students in the other country.	15%
I'm more interested in the other country now because of the virtual exchange.	78%
I changed my view of the other country because of the virtual exchange.	67%

There were three comments section – one for both positive and negative comments and a general comments section. The overwhelming majority of the positive comments came in some form of “It was wonderful to be able to communicate with people in other countries as we can't do so in our daily lives.” In particular, many students noted the personalized nature of the exchange with many noting that “I came to understand the other country through the eyes of people living there.” One in particular stated “I can trust the information from the people I interacted with more than information I receive via the news or Internet”. Some stated it was the first time they had to try and explain their own culture and through this, came to a deeper appreciation thereof. A large number of students appreciated the fact that they had to use English to participate – a situation they had never been in before, and one they enjoyed. Other comments included statements such as “it was good we could post whenever and wherever we liked”, “as it wasn't ‘live’ I could think carefully about what I wanted to say”, “it was a non-threatening environment” and “I want to visit the partner country now”.

In regard to negative comments the overwhelming majority of these revolved around the theme of “I didn't receive enough replies” or “I didn't receive replies in a timely manner”. Others mentioned they wanted emails sent to them whenever their posts

/ replies received a reply. Still others had trouble posting pictures or other multimedia. A number of comments related to the way the students perceived their teacher was grading the exchange – some believed it wasn't fair if they weren't receiving replies, that they were still being graded. There were also a few students who stated the English used by their partners often included mistakes and this caused some confusion. A number of students requested that video blogging be included or that there was a real time component. With the number of time zones covered by the different participants, unfortunately it is impossible to have a synchronous exchange. Teachers do encourage their students to carry out synchronous exchanges in their own time and some did. Asynchronous exchange, via text, audio and video, offers students more options and a more focused approach to communication. Certainly synchronous exchange is important but asynchronous exchange can complement it well. It was also telling that the second most “negative” comment was “I have nothing negative to say about the exchange”.

In the general comments section, again the overall impression was a positive one with many of the positive comments outlined above being restated. The few comments that were negative centered on the lack of synchronous exchange and situations where replies were few. Some also mentioned that sometimes the Colombian students used Spanish in the forums which was obviously difficult for the other students to understand. Just one student stated he/she wasn't sure what the point of the exchange was whereas many others included thank-you's and added mentions of how much they gained from the exchange. There were also many individualized messages to the different teachers that often didn't relate directly to the exchange.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Feedback from students is not always a good way to conclude if a particular course or method is truly useful. However the feedback does shed light on how a course or project is perceived by students and this is important when considering how to move forward. The SLVE outlined above was well received by students. Students appreciate being able to use the language they are studying in real-world communicative events and discover information about other countries. This is an important first step for students to become open to, and understanding of, other cultures. Admittedly, as O'Dowd (2016) points out, intercultural learning isn't guaranteed just because students are linked. However without the link, there is far less chance of any intercultural learning taking place. This SLVE allows students to become culturally acclimatized and therefore be more able to develop true intercultural understanding. At a beginner language level it is very difficult to ensure true “intercultural learning” takes place but “cultural acclimatization” can occur. Becoming acclimatized to something means you are gently introduced to something rather than having an initial shock. FL students often have never had a physical interaction with a foreign culture. Via VE they are unlikely to have the shock that often comes with

physically entering another country. VE is a gentle introduction to foreign culture and can therefore be considered a form of cultural acclimatization.

There are certainly areas of this international virtual exchange project that can be improved. The number of students being disappointed at the lack of input from their partner class (which occurred on occasion with all countries concerned) is the biggest one. Though being a problem for the system, it actually signifies a wonderful fact: that students want more interaction with students in other countries. These problems can be overcome with better planning, coordination, and facilitation by teachers. Prior and deliberate discussion among the teachers involved is also very important and indispensable. It is sometimes difficult to make sure teachers from different countries and cultures stay on the same page and work in harmony, especially when English is not the native language of the teachers involved, but without good coordination among the teachers better results can not be expected. The differences in academic terms among different countries are often troublesome too. However, through better use of the teacher's forum enhanced teacher communication will ensue in the future.

Another option for students to access the exchange is by incorporating LTI, or Learning Tools Interoperability. By doing so new student accounts are not required on the central server so students can seamlessly connect from their local Moodle course or other learning management system into the central server using a Single Sign On. Students' grades can also automatically be transferred back to the local course grade book, so teachers are exempt from the nuisance of manually taking the performance grades from the central server and moving them to their local server. Some teachers have already started to make use of this LTI feature.

These and other problems can be overcome with more discussion between the teachers involved, better teacher training and more tutorials for participants to make posting easier. This is ongoing and the teachers that have started out with this exchange are giving the organizers many ideas on how to improve it. Introducing projects for students continuing on after the initial exchange is one area that is being developed and improving the tasks that are assigned is another. As the exchange is continuing to expand with more teachers from more countries joining, we are endeavoring to make it even better as it is a powerful means for students to improve their understanding of other cultures whilst improving their language skills too.

## 6. Concluding remarks

VE is an exceptionally useful method language teachers can use to improve their students' communication skills and cultural awareness. Unfortunately it is often difficult for teachers to use it, as they do not have the technical understanding to carry one out or be able to find partner classes. The project detailed above

is a simple way for teachers to join a VE project and gain the benefits therein. VE is becoming more and more mainstream, so teachers will want their students to participate in them, thus being able to use the language they are learning in real world communication. If cultural acclimatization can also occur as a precursor to cultural competence then another major benefit has been achieved. The VE outlined here is one way of achieving those goals.

## Acknowledgments

This research was partially supported by the JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C), 2016-2018 (16K02875). Muroan Institute of Technology has also supported the hardware side of the project.

The authors are very grateful to all the teachers and students that are working so hard to make this exchange a success. The other four members of the Kaken research team - Thom Rawson, David Campbell, William Green and Mari Yamauchi have also been working hard with the two authors for which we are grateful. Thom Rawson in particular has provided expertise in setting up the server, which deserves sincere appreciation.

Teachers wanting to join this project should email [hagley@mmm.muroan-it.ac.jp](mailto:hagley@mmm.muroan-it.ac.jp) ideally from their school's email address (if not, with details of the school at which they teach.)

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