

Virtual Exchange Programs and the Development of Cross-Cultural Communication and Academic Language Skills in Higher Education

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of language in two virtual exchanges that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, between a public university in Spain and two partner universities in the U.S. The exchanges focused on English literature and cultural studies and aimed to enhance intercultural competence, cross-cultural understanding, and skills in English-language literary analysis. The students were able to develop their skills in critical thinking, investigate relevant topics regarding gender, race, and identity, enhance technological competence and digital professionalism, sharpen interpersonal communication and teamwork skills, and improve their use of English for academic purposes. The interactions took place entirely online, in English, and both synchronously and asynchronously. The paper discusses how the English language impacted communication and group work in the international student teams.*

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), literature and cultural studies, international virtual exchange, intercultural and digital competence, language skills*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted higher education worldwide, leading to the widespread adoption of online teaching and learning. Among the various online pedagogical approaches, virtual exchange programs have gained attention as an effective way to promote intercultural competence and enhance language learning. This paper examines the role of language in two virtual exchange programs held in fall 2020 and spring 2021, between a public university in Spain and two partner universities from the U.S., in the areas of English literature and cultural studies. These virtual projects were designed to provide a meaningful way to develop intercultural competence in the English literature classroom, enhance cross-cultural understanding, build skills around English-language literary analysis, and foster the use of English for academic purposes.

The paper highlights the outcomes of the virtual exchange programs, including the development of students' skills in literary analysis and critical thinking, investigation of relevant topics regarding gender, race, and identity, and increase of intercultural competence. Additionally, the paper examines

how the English language impacted communication and group work in the international student teams, and how the virtual exchange programs benefited the Spanish students with additional English language enhancement. Hence, this paper will contribute to the understanding of the potential of virtual exchange programs for language learning and intercultural competence development in higher education.

To examine the impact of English language on communication and group work in international teams of students, this paper will review data collected through pre- and post-project surveys of Spanish participants. The study will explore students' preconceptions and final feedback on their experiences. Additionally, the paper aims to address the following research questions: (1) to what extent did the English language aid or hinder communication and group work, (2) was the virtual exchange module beneficial in developing students' cross-cultural communicative skills, and (3) what were the main challenges faced by students during the project?

The first section of the paper presents the theoretical context of the study, focusing on Virtual Exchange and Intercultural Competence. This is followed by a description of the methodology and empirical study, including information about the virtual exchange projects, participants, data collection process, and methods of analysis. Results and findings of the study are presented in a subsequent section. Finally, the paper concludes with implications and limitations of the study.

Theoretical Background

Virtual Exchange (VE) programs, also known as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), Telecollaboration, or Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) are becoming increasingly popular in higher education as a way to promote intercultural communication and enhance academic language skills among students (Belz & Thorne 2006; Dooly & O'Dowd 2012; Guth, Helm & O'Dowd 2012). These programs involve virtual collaborations between students from different universities and countries, providing them with opportunities to interact and learn from each other's cultural perspectives, academic backgrounds, and linguistic abilities.

Virtual Exchange programs offer several advantages over traditional study abroad programs, such as increased accessibility, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness (O'Dowd 2016). They can be integrated into existing courses, allowing students to participate without having to disrupt their regular academic schedules. Additionally, virtual exchanges can reach a wider range of students, including those who may not have the financial resources to participate in traditional study abroad programs (Thorne 2013).

One of the key goals of Virtual Exchange programs is the development of cross-cultural communication skills (Guth et al. 2012). Students participating in these programs are exposed to diverse perspectives and learn to navigate cultural differences in order to effectively collaborate and communicate with their international peers. They develop intercultural competence, which involves understanding and appreciating different cultural norms, values, and beliefs, and being able to communicate and interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Kramsch 2014).

Another important objective of Virtual Exchange programs is to enhance students' academic language skills (Dooly & O'Dowd 2012). By participating in virtual exchanges in a foreign language, students are immersed in authentic communicative contexts that provide opportunities to practice and improve their language proficiency. They develop the ability to use academic language in a variety of contexts, including research, analysis, and critical thinking (O'Dowd 2016). In the context of Virtual Exchange programs, students learn from each other's perspectives and experiences, and together they construct new knowledge that is informed by their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Belz & Thorne 2006). In summary, Virtual Exchange programs offer a promising approach to developing cross-cultural communication and academic language skills in higher education (Guth et al. 2012). By providing students with opportunities to engage in meaningful virtual collaborations with peers from different countries and cultures, these programs help prepare them for an increasingly interconnected and globalized world (Thorne 2013).

This paper focuses on two international virtual exchanges that were structured as a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) experience between two partner universities, one in Spain and the other two in the U.S. COIL is a novel method that utilizes online collaborative teaching and learning, according to the SUNY COIL Center. The COIL approach, initiated in 2004 by the State University of New York (SUNY) Office of Global Affairs, now includes more than 135 institutions from all around the world. In the same vein, the dedicated COIL Center, founded by SUNY in 2004, creates and manages significant opportunities for intercultural and transnational learning for high school and college students and professionals. To find a suitable match for the project, the author utilized a SUNY COIL Fair online, assisted by the COIL International Coordinator at URV.

COIL enhances global skills development by requiring participants to work in multicultural teams and adapt to virtual working environments (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020). COIL also promotes intercultural communication, digital professionalism, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, among other 21st century skills, since participants have to

collaborate and negotiate on shared topics collaboratively and cooperatively. Participation in a program based on the COIL model can help students develop these critical skills, which are essential for a global economy and education. They also learn to be flexible and comprehend their cultural perspectives in the context of another culture and socio-economic environment (Stallivieri, 2020; Wojenski, 2021). As advised by the SUNY COIL Center (SUNY COIL Center), the students who participated in this virtual exchange project spent seven weeks on four phases: (1) establishing group rapport and trust through icebreakers; (2) planning the project and comparative discussions; (3) collaborative project work and problem-solving; and (4) summarizing, presenting, and reflecting (Figure 1 below).

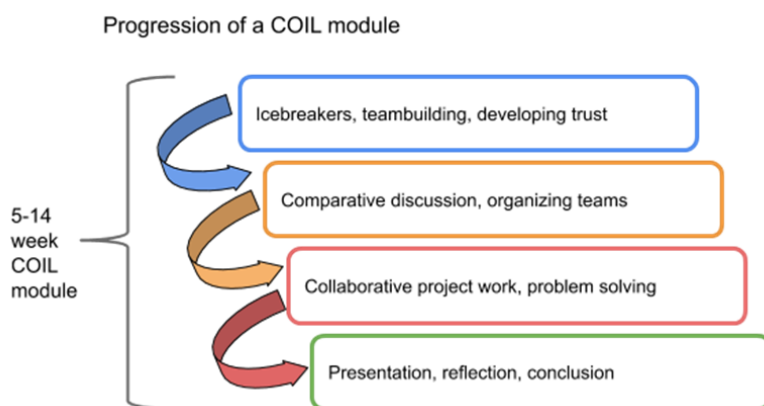


Figure 1: Progression of a COIL Module (adapted from SUNY COIL Center website)

As already mentioned, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an educational approach that enables teachers and students from different parts of the world to connect through online communication. COIL emphasizes interactive and cooperative learning as well as cultural understanding (Naicker et al. 2021).

A COIL module can be developed in any academic discipline and can run from five to fifteen weeks, using any appropriate technological tools to achieve the learning objectives. The key elements of a standard COIL module include ice breakers and team building activities to facilitate communication and coordination among students. Comparative discussions are also conducted to organize the project and determine the teams' tasks. The collaborative project and the problem-solving phase is the main component of the COIL module, requiring students to work together with their international partners to apply their knowledge and create a product that addresses the task assignment. The presentation, reflection, and conclusion

phases follow, where students present their completed task and reflect on their experiences and intercultural exchange (SUNY COIL Center).

For a COIL module to be effectively implemented and meet the course objectives, professors from both institutions must collaborate closely, starting with the planning stage. This involves defining learning goals, determining the interaction length, designing collaborative activities, selecting appropriate methodologies and technology tools, monitoring students' work, and offering support when necessary. Students can then form effective international and intercultural teams, discuss course assignments, complete project-based activities, and reflect on their academic and intercultural experiences (Pouromid, 2019).

When developing a COIL module, teachers must consider language use, timing, aligning the module's learning goals with the overall course objectives, assessment methods, classroom management, and technology tools. Various COIL tools and resources are available to assist teachers, practitioners, and institutions in preparing and integrating COIL modules as part of their course curriculum in collaboration with an international institution.

Methodology

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning, two virtual exchange teaching modules were implemented in two subjects offered within the BA of English Studies program at Rovira I Virgili University in Spain. The subjects were *Literature and Society* for 1st-year students and *Analysis of English Texts I* for 2nd-year students. The online lectures were conducted both synchronously and asynchronously using Microsoft Teams and Zoom, while students utilized various digital tools such as WhatsApp, FaceTime, Padlet, and Slack for internal communication with their international partners from State University of New York (SUNY) in the U.S.

Throughout the 7-week duration of each virtual exchange, students were closely monitored as they actively participated in the preparation, execution, and reflection of their activities and learning outcomes. The learning activities were carefully planned to ensure that students engaged in collaborative learning, which involved working together with their international partners to analyse and interpret American short stories and poems. The texts selected for analysis portrayed characters struggling with identity crisis and discrimination problems in contemporary American society. Through the exploration of selected texts, students tackled a range of relevant challenges that included dominant patriarchal views on mental illness, motherhood, gender expression, teenage suicide, sex work, racial discrimination, immigration, and cultural assimilation. The students had to

examine culturally specific attitudes towards marginalized individuals represented in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1895); “Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament” (Willa Cather, 1905); and “In a Window” (Dionne Brand, 1999) for one project, while for the other the assigned reading were “Fish Cheeks” (Amy Tan, 1987); “No Speak English” (in *The House of Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros, 1984); “Blue Winds Dancing” (Thomas S. Whitecloud, 1938); “Won’t You Celebrate With Me” (poem in *Book of Light*, Lucille Clifton, 1993).

The main Students' Learning Outcomes (SLOs) in these virtual exchanges are summarized as follows:

- Enhancing interpersonal communication and teamwork abilities through collaborative learning activities
- Advancing critical thinking skills and textual analysis through the exploration of American short stories and poems
- Developing an understanding of character development and narrative modes, recognizing literary texts as representations of diverse realities and identities
- Promoting intercultural competence by acknowledging and respecting cultural differences between Spain and the United States
- Improving digital literacy and technological competency through the use of various digital tools and platforms during the virtual exchange
- Cultivating effective interpersonal communication and teamwork skills by engaging in virtual learning experiences with international partners
- Practicing and enhancing English language skills for academic purposes, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking
- Improving English language skills by engaging in authentic interactions with native English speakers in real-life situations.

Our virtual exchanges were conducted in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), with a focus on (English/Foreign) Language Learning and Cultural Studies. These projects demonstrate various strategies and models for promoting intercultural exchange while addressing the challenges of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEI & B) in the pursuit of sustainable development. We utilize multiple sustainability frameworks that encompass the environmental, social, and economic aspects of creating a fair and enduring future for our planet and its inhabitants. Furthermore, we support the call for increased sustainability efforts at the university level, which was highlighted at the United Nations

University Global Coalition conference, organized by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), held in September 2020.

The study's data was collected from the COIL exchange modules as described earlier, which were mandatory components of the course syllabus, accounting for 30% of the final grade for the two subjects. The first-year subject had 56 students, while the second-year subject had 42. To gather data, Google Form surveys were distributed at the beginning of the projects to obtain participants' expectations, and follow-up surveys were conducted to assess student satisfaction. Both surveys proved to be effective tools for obtaining feedback from participants. The post-surveys data was analysed using a mixed method approach, with qualitative analysis based on manually examining students' responses to open-ended questions and quantitative analysis based on percentages and graphical analysis (graphs, charts) using the Google Forms software tool. The findings shed light on the perceived benefits and challenges of the virtual intercultural telecollaboration exchange. The qualitative analysis was carried out manually based on content and no specific software was employed.

Findings and Results

The pre-survey conducted for this investigation showed that there were some initial concerns about language being an obstacle for group work, with 50.6% of the students expressing such concerns. However, a large majority of the students believed that they would learn a lot about the foreign language through the virtual project, with 83.2% expressing this belief. Moreover, improving foreign language skills was graded as the most important part of the virtual project by 82.2% of the students. These percentages suggest that while language barriers might be a potential challenge to effective collaboration, students were highly motivated to improve their language skills and view language learning as a key goal of the virtual project.

In the post-survey, once the entire virtual exchange was finalised, students were asked about the communication problems they have encountered during the realisation of the exchange. This question was in the form of Likert scale: "Grade the difficulty of the following items from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very simple)." In the same questions, they were asked to grade different items, such as the level of difficulty in reading and analysing the texts (short stories), the reflection activities on Padlet/Slack (checkpoints), information-gathering (research for secondary sources), final projects (both PPT slides and audios). For the purpose of this research paper, only those questions related to communication and group work will be discussed hereafter.

The following figure illustrates the responses about the difficulty of initial communication with international partners (Figure 2).

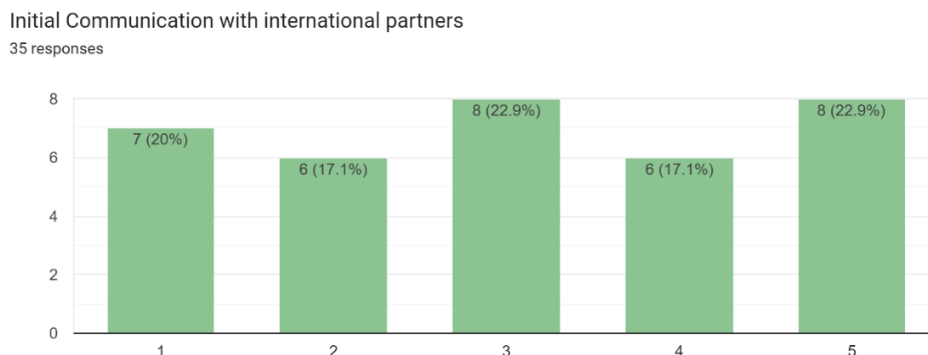


Figure 2: Initial Communication with international partners.

Even when the responses were quite even, it appears that the initial communication with international partners was perceived as quite challenging, particularly by the first two items on the Likert scale, which account for 20% and 17.1%. This trend seems to have improved as the collaboration progresses, since, as the next figure shows (Figure 3), subsequent communication with partners was perceived as easier by a majority of participants. This is a good sign as it suggests that communication skills improved as the project was moving forward in time and intensity.

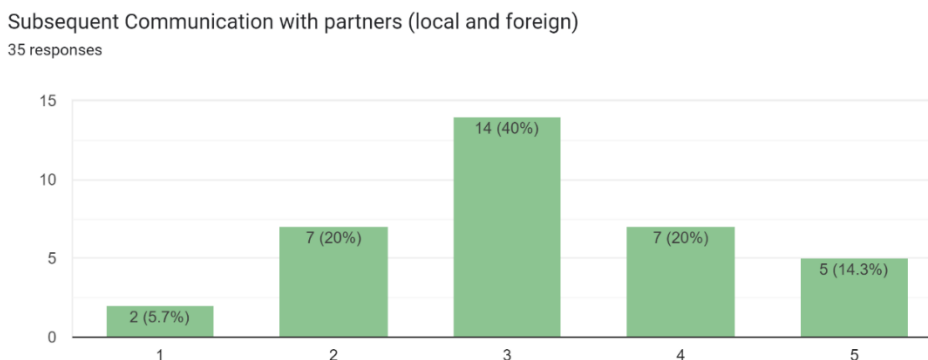


Figure 3: Subsequent Communication with partners.

In a follow-up question, participants were asked to grade the difficulty regarding group work. As shown in the bar chart below (Figure 4), answers are quite even for the in-between numbers, with a slight positive tendency into the less difficult options. Again, this is a good sign in the sense that this

suggests that participants actively worked on the negotiation and agreement of ideas, as well as more personal features regarding motivation and implication.

Group Work in general (agreement on ideas, personal implication and level of commitment)

35 responses

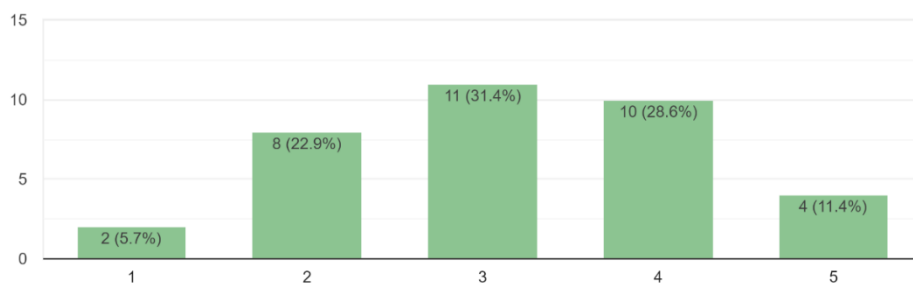


Figure 4: Group work.

In the post-survey, as a final question, students were provided with an open-ended question, which allowed them to express themselves freely and reflect on any aspect of their virtual exchange experience. This approach aimed to capture the direct voice of the participants and encourage them to provide detailed and honest feedback. The responses were analysed to identify the most relevant replies related to the topics that this article seeks to analyse, including cross-cultural communicative skills and English language skills. The direct quotes from the participants that are most pertinent to these themes are listed below. These responses (Figure 5) provide valuable insights into the students' perceptions of their learning outcomes from the virtual exchange experience.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN/GAIN THROUGH THIS VIRTUAL EXCHANGE?

- Different *vocabulary*
- I *practiced speaking*
- I'm a little bit *more confident about my language skills*
- *Confidence to talk in English with native speakers*
- I think I have *improved my communication skills*
- I have learned [...] *skills when it comes to speaking*
- I learnt how to be *confident when talking to people*
- I have *improved my English*
- I had the opportunity to *see how English native speakers express themselves* and I also interacted a lot with them
- I have gained *self-confidence with my English*, as I have been improving my skills not only in writing but also in speaking
- Develop *stronger communication skills*
- I have *gained more fluency in speaking* with people who have English as their mother tongue,
- More *confidence in expressing myself*
- I gained *more skills to communicate with my peers*

Figure 5: Final Feedback.

From the students' responses to the question about what they learned from the virtual exchange shown above, it can be observed that the experience has provided them with various benefits related to their language and communication skills. The students reported that they have gained more confidence in speaking English with native speakers and improved their fluency and vocabulary. The virtual exchange also helped them to develop stronger communication skills and interact more effectively with their peers. Overall, the responses suggest that the virtual exchange has contributed positively to the students' language proficiency and intercultural competence, as well as their self-confidence and ability to express themselves in English.

Participant students were also asked to indicate the main challenges they had to overcome for the virtual exchange. As can be clearly seen in the figure below (Figure 6), respondents were provided 6 options and could choose one or more from these 6 options.

According to the graph, the most significant hurdle that arose during the COIL module was the time difference between Spain and the United States, which was identified by 36.5% of the respondents. The instructors had anticipated this issue and provided students with the most suitable time frames for virtual meetings. However, it appears that this was not enough to fully overcome the challenge.

The second most prevalent concern was communication problems, with 22.2% of the respondents indicating this as a challenge. This implies that there were some real communication barriers that students faced during the module. It is important to note that the question was quite broad and could have referred to cultural differences, language barriers, or technical issues.

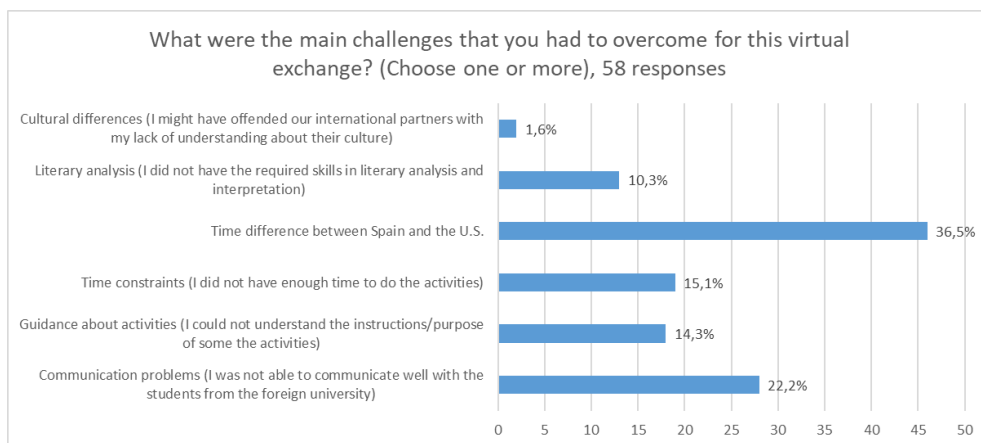


Figure 6: Main challenges to overcome.

The third most cited challenge was time constraints, with 15.1% of the respondents identifying this as an issue. Some students had difficulty completing the reading assignments due to other courses' demands, while other students postponed their interactions with international partners, leading to delays in task completion and organization. It is reassuring to note that the majority of students did not perceive cultural differences as a significant challenge.

In summary, the graph about challenges reveals that time difference, communication issues, and time constraints were the most significant challenges encountered during the COIL module. While instructors provided students with suitable time frames, some communication barriers persisted. Time constraints also proved to be a challenge, but cultural differences were not perceived as a significant issue by the majority of students.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of two virtual exchanges between a public university in Spain and two partner universities in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study aimed to investigate the impact of English language skills on communication and group work in international student teams. The exchanges, which focused on English literature and cultural studies, were conducted entirely online, both synchronously and asynchronously, with the goal of enhancing intercultural competence, cross-cultural understanding, and skills in English-language literary analysis.

The findings suggest that the English language played a crucial role in facilitating communication and group work among international student teams. The students were able to improve their skills in critical thinking, investigate relevant topics regarding gender, race, and identity, enhance technological competence and digital professionalism, sharpen interpersonal communication and teamwork skills, and improve their use of English for academic purposes. The virtual exchange module was found to be beneficial in developing students' cross-cultural communicative skills to a certain extent.

It is important to recognize that this study has certain constraints and limitations. Firstly, the study was limited to Spanish students only, as permission to share the responses of American students was not obtained. This means that the perspective is limited to one side of the exchange, and a more comprehensive comparison was not possible. Thirdly, the data collection method was restricted to Google Form questionnaires, as time limitations did not allow for the use of other tools such as interviews or student journals. Additionally, students identified several challenges

associated with virtual exchange projects, including time constraints and difficulties working with team members in different time zones. The study also identified several challenges that students faced during the project, such as difficulties in adjusting to different time zones, technical issues with online platforms, and communication barriers due to cultural and linguistic differences. Despite these challenges, the overall experience was positive, and the students demonstrated a high level of engagement and motivation throughout the exchanges.

In conclusion, this investigation highlights the importance of English language proficiency in facilitating successful communication and group work in international virtual exchanges. The findings suggest that virtual exchanges can be an effective tool for enhancing intercultural competence language skills, and cross-cultural understanding among students, even when there were certain communication problems. The study has also tried to provide insights into the challenges that students and facilitators may encounter during virtual exchanges.

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