EURO CALL

Intercultural communicative competence development through synchronous virtual exchange

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Abstract. Virtual Exchange (VE) in second language education refers to a technology-enabled, interactive, intercultural experience that is designed to increase learners' intercultural communicative competence and performance. In this paper the findings of a bilingual (English/Turkish), synchronous video communication project among 31 US and Turkish college students are presented. Thematic analysis was used in this study. The results show that the VE – to a certain extent and similarly to other research studies – achieves the learning objectives of not only increased cultural awareness and communicative competence about the target culture and language itself but also the growth of factual knowledge about diverse topics that the students are interested in learning.

Keywords: telecollaboration, virtual exchange, intercultural communicative competence, less commonly taught languages.

1.   Introduction

As communicative competence alone is not sufficient for foreign language learning, the goal of foreign language education is to develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) skills and cultural awareness to stay relevant in the real-life context of the target language (O'Dowd, 2021; Thorne, 2006). Byram (1997, as cited in López-Rocha, 2016) suggests that an individual who has developed ICC has been defined as someone who builds "relationships while speaking in the foreign language; communicates effectively, taking into consideration his own and the other person's viewpoint and needs; mediates interactions between people of different backgrounds, and strives to continue developing communicative

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skills" (p. 107)**.** In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research investigating the role of VE practices on second language learners' intercultural competence (Bailey & Gruber, 2020; Lewis & Qian, 2021). However, there has been a scarcity of published research and conference presentations documenting the experiences of Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) students in the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) field in general and VE field specifically (Ward, 2021).

This research project has brought together US college students learning Turkish and Turkish students learning English to increase their intercultural and linguistic competencies. Realizing that less than 2% of all undergraduates in the US have the opportunity to study abroad (Feigner, 2017), the researchers have collaboratively developed, designed, and implemented this project to bring the global experience to Turkish and English language learners, thus developing their linguistic and intercultural competence.

2.   Method

The purpose of this research is twofold: (1) to understand the self-perceived effectiveness of participating in VE and (2) to form a basis for future VE research in LCTLs.

A total of 31 US and Turkish college students from various degree programs participated in a 50-minute tele-tandem (English/Turkish) synchronous Zoom video communication project in the 2021 and 2022 spring semesters. The US students were partnered with different Turkish students for each VE session. The once a month VE sessions were conducted during the US students' class sessions and hosted three to four pairs of students. After each synchronous VE session, the US and Turkish students were asked to respond to an open-ended online survey to reflect on their interactions; 104 surveys with open-ended responses were collected over two consecutive spring semesters. The students were requested to provide examples of areas that VE has contributed to their speaking competence and give specific examples in those areas of development. The students were also asked to reflect on their overall perceptions of the benefits of participating in a live VE session.

Prior to the VE sessions, the rules of effective virtual communication were clearly discussed with the students. The students were provided with globally engaging and authentic discussion topics, such as holidays, food culture, college courses,

career prospects after college, and the job market. These topics were tied to the course curriculum to maintain the rhythm of academic connection. During their exchange, the students were also given ample space to talk about topics of mutual interest.

Thematic analysis was used in this study (Creswell, 2014). The students' open-ended statements were initially coded and the identified data were then categorized into themes to correspond to the research questions below.

- RQ1: What are the common discussion topics among Turkish and American college students (aside from the instructor-designated topics) during real-time VE?

- RQ2: Do students attribute gains in their language competencies to the real-time VE?

- RQ3: In what areas do the students report the real-life VE benefits for their language competency development?

3.   Results and discussion

The results show that the VE, to a certain extent and similar to other research studies (Madden & Ashby, 2021), achieves the learning objectives of not only increased cultural awareness and competence about the target culture itself, but also the growth in factual knowledge about diverse topics that the students are interested in learning.

For RQ1, when the students were asked to report the content of their discussions during the real-life VE, besides discussing the pre-set topics that were assigned by their instructors, the students also took the initiative to actively engage in various topics of mutual interest, such as college**,** hobbies, places to visit, food, daily life, personal life, and post-college life.

For RQ2, when the students were asked whether they attributed gains in their language competencies to the real-life VE, all 31 students responded 'yes', despite the challenges of meeting across a seven hour time zone difference.

For RQ3, a chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between student target language and Theme 1 (self-confidence in speaking,

Table 1). The relation between these variables was significant: X^2 (1, N=97)=4.52, p=.033. The inference is that Turkish students were not likely to report improved self-confidence in speaking English as a target language. Theme 1 accounts for 20.20% of the total coded comments.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between student target language and Theme 2, pronunciation improvement (Table 1). The relation between these variables was significant: X^2 (1, N=97)=5.02, p=.025. The inference is that Turkish students were likely to report improved pronunciation in speaking English as a target language, and the American students were not likely to report improved pronunciation in speaking Turkish. Theme 2 accounts for 23.33% of the total coded comments.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between student target language and Themes 3 (improvement in vocabulary) and 4 (speaking and fluency improvement, Table 1). The relationship between student target language and the variables of Themes 3 and 4 was not significant: X^2 (1, N=97)=0.31, p=.580 and X^2 (1, N=97)=2.69, p=.101, respectively. There was no relationship between student target language and Themes 3 and 4. Themes 3 and 4 account for 20.71% and 22.73% of the total coded comments, respectively.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between student target language and Theme 5 (grammar improvement, Table 1). The relation between these variables was significant: X^2 (1, N=97)=7.78, p=.005. The inference is that Turkish and US students were not likely to report improved grammar in their respective target languages. Theme 5 accounts for 13.3% of the total coded comments.

Table 1.   Self-reported gains in their language competencies to the real-life VE

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (two-sided)
Theme 1: Self-confidence in speaking	4.522	1	.033
Theme 2: Pronunciation improvement	5.020	1	.025
Theme 3: Vocabulary improvement	.306	1	.580
Theme 4: Speaking and fluency improvement	2.690	1	.101
Theme 5: Grammar improvement	7.779	1	.005

4.   Conclusions

In this study, the self-perceived effectiveness of participating in real-time tele-tandem VE among college students from two countries with a seven-hour time difference was investigated, and an attempt was made to form a basis for future VE research in LCTLs that might help address the neglect of this topic in the literature and conference presentations. As the results indicate, the students proactively took the initiative to explore various themes and took charge of their own learning. The students who participated in VE attributed gains in their language competency to the real-life VE and reported language competency gains (to a certain extent) in five areas (self-confidence in speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar). Future research could include VE partnerships among other institutions and languages and increase the number of students and the amount of time allocated for the real-time exchange.

5.   Acknowledgments

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