

Virtual Language Exchange as Internationalization at Home: From Initial Expectations to Perceived Outcomes

Montserrat Iglesias & Cristina Tarazona

CETT-UB Barcelona School of Tourism, Hospitality and Gastronomy, University of Barcelona, Spain
Oxford College of Emory University, USA

INTRODUCTION & AIM

Virtual exchange (VE), understood as technology-mediated, sustained interaction between learners from different cultural contexts, has become a central component of internationalization at home (O'Dowd, 2021; O'Regan et al., 2023).

A growing body of research shows that VE can support the development of intercultural communicative competence, linguistic ability, and transferable skills without requiring physical mobility (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2023; Villegas-Paredes et al., 2022; Yeh et al., 2024). However, these benefits are closely tied to pedagogical design: structured tasks, clear guidance, and sustained interaction are key to avoiding superficial engagement or cultural misunderstandings (O'Dowd, 2021; O'Regan et al., 2023).

Although VE is now widely recognized as more than a substitute for study abroad, several gaps remain. In particular, institutional differences within shared exchanges are often underexplored, longitudinal changes in learner perceptions are not always systematically examined, and cross-cohort comparisons are relatively rare. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing two cohorts participating in the same VE program across two institutions in Spain and the USA, focusing on how linguistic, affective, and intercultural perceptions evolve over time.

The study aims to:

- examine initial expectations and motivations
- analyze final perceptions
- compare changes over time
- and explore institutional and cohort-based differences.

METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative, longitudinal design based on pre- and post-exchange online questionnaires. Participants were undergraduate students from a Spanish and an American institution who took part in a structured virtual language exchange (CETT-UB Barcelona & Oxford College of Emory University).

Two cohorts were analyzed: Cohort A (n = 62), who completed the exchange in an earlier iteration of the project, and Cohort B (n = 21), who participated in a subsequent iteration in the following academic year with the same overall design and procedures. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, and their anonymous responses were processed in aggregate.

The initial questionnaire captured self-perceived language level, confidence, expected involvement, anticipated gains, and intercultural attitudes. The final questionnaire focused on satisfaction, interactional conditions, perceived linguistic development, involvement, and intercultural learning. Likert-scale and categorical items enabled both descriptive and inferential analyses.

We analyzed data by means of GNU PSSP using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, chi-square tests, and Pearson correlations. Having set an alpha level of .05 for all inferential statistical tests, analyses were conducted globally and by institution, and results were compared across cohorts to identify shared and divergent patterns.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Cohort A

At the outset, students in both institutions showed strong intercultural motivation, confirming previous findings on the role of VE in developing global awareness (Hagley, 2020). In contrast, the lowest mean value reflected limited initial self-confidence in the target language (M = 2.58, S = 1.02), especially among American students (M = 2.22, SD = .93). Expectations for linguistic gains were broadly aligned across institutions. Participants most frequently anticipated improvement in fluency (40.3%), followed by listening comprehension (22.6%), and grammar and vocabulary range (19.4%).

By the end of the exchange, students reported high levels of satisfaction with several institutional differences, such as suitable length of the conversations: $t(60) = -2.18, p = .033$ (equal variances assumed) and increased knowledge about partner's country: $t(60) = 2.25, p = .028$ (equal variances assumed). Notably, 79% of students worked with the same partner throughout the virtual exchange, although partner changes were more common among American students. While both groups reported high partner satisfaction overall (M = 4.50, SD = .82), satisfaction was significantly higher among students who retained the same partner throughout the exchange.

The final questionnaire produced a substantial number of positive correlations (87 in total), such as (1) satisfaction with the exchange partner linked to both the perceived adequacy of conversation frequency and the partner's level of involvement, (2) the wish to continue with the program strongly associated with both willingness to recommend it and satisfactory conversation frequency, (3) participants' perceived TL level at the end strongly correlated with initial self-assessment ($r = .69$), and (4) learning about the partner's country strongly related to heightened awareness of cultural differences and students' sense of having opened their minds to other realities. These findings support the view that initial motivations led to meaningful outcomes through sustained interaction (Yeh et al., 2024).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION (Cont'd)

3.2 Cohort B

Like the previous group, Cohort B's initial responses indicate strong motivation toward cultural openness (M = 4.38, SD = .75) alongside relatively low linguistic confidence (M = 2.62, SD = 1.13). American students reported particularly low target level self-confidence (M = 2.29, SD = 1.07) while initial involvement (M = 2.92, SD = 1.00) constituted the lowest rating for Spanish participants. Expected linguistic gains across both institutions were aligned. Fluency was again the most frequently selected anticipated improvement (42.3%), followed by grammar and vocabulary accuracy (23.1%), but in this case listening comprehension had the lowest percentage (7.7%).

Final results indicate high overall satisfaction, especially regarding partners (M = 4.52, SD = .51). Institutional differences also emerged, with American students reporting lower partner satisfaction and Spanish students perceiving fewer intercultural gains:

-Satisfaction with exchange partner: $t(19) = -2.70, p = .014$ (equal variances assumed).

-Increased knowledge about partner's country: $t(19) = 2.25, p = .036$ (equal variances assumed).

The final questionnaire yielded 31 positive correlations and 29 negative correlations, none of which were significant. The strongest and most statistically significant ($p < .001$) are the following: (1) clear guidelines strongly associated with learning about the partner's country ($r = .79$), suggesting that structured support facilitated culturally meaningful conversations, (2) satisfaction with the frequency and length of conversations closely aligned ($r = .64$), indicating coherent perceptions of conversational organization, (3) motivation to continue the virtual exchange tightly linked to recommending it ($r = .63$), (4) initial target language level positively associated with final target language level ($r = .82$) and with participants' involvement ($r = .67$), while involvement itself correlated with perceptions of final proficiency ($r = .75$), (5) final target language proficiency strongly related to increased self-confidence in the language ($r = .64$), (6) students who viewed themselves as more involved tended to perceive their partners as highly involved as well ($r = .72$), and (7) gains in linguistic self-perception seemingly correlated with deeper intercultural engagement. In conclusion, linguistic, interpersonal, and intercultural dimensions were tightly interconnected, supporting the idea that VE outcomes emerge from the interaction of multiple factors rather than isolated gains (Villegas-Paredes et al., 2022).

3.3 Cross-cohort comparison

Comparing both cohorts reveals a high degree of consistency. In both cases, students began with strong intercultural openness and relatively low linguistic confidence, and both cohorts ended with high satisfaction and evidence of intercultural growth. This reinforces the idea that VE reliably supports affective and intercultural development across contexts (Iglesias & Tarazona, 2023; Yeh et al., 2024). At the same time, differences across cohorts point to the importance of contextual and structural factors. Cohort A was more affected by partner instability, while Cohort B placed greater emphasis on clarity of guidelines. Despite these differences, both cohorts showed similar relational patterns: involvement, satisfaction, and perceived learning were strongly interconnected.

Importantly, linguistic self-confidence remained relatively stable across both cohorts, suggesting that short-term exchanges may have a stronger impact on intercultural and affective dimensions than on deeply rooted perceptions of linguistic ability. However, the strong correlations between involvement and perceived gains indicate that active participation can mitigate these initial limitations. Overall, the findings support a view of VE as a complex learning environment in which linguistic, interpersonal, and intercultural processes are mutually reinforcing. They also confirm the importance of pedagogical structure, consistent interaction, and partner engagement in shaping student experiences (O'Dowd, 2021; O'Regan et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that virtual language exchanges supported by clear guidelines and a structured pedagogical design can enhance undergraduate learners' language skills and cultural growth. The study contributes to existing research by demonstrating the consistency of these outcomes across cohorts and institutional contexts, and by highlighting the dynamic links between affective, linguistic, and cultural dimensions. These results support the integration of virtual language exchanges as a sustainable and effective component of internationalization at home in higher education since they offer students opportunities for authentic interaction and sensitivity to cultural diversity without physical mobility. Therefore, they can promote multilingualism and intercultural understanding, the keystone of democratic societies.

REFERENCES

- Canals, L. (2024). "It was like a mental Erasmus!" Perceptions of language learning and intercultural understanding in an e-tandem virtual exchange. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 7, 60–83. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.7.41056>
- O'Dowd, R. (2021). Virtual exchange: moving forward into the next decade. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(3), 209–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1902201>
- Villegas-Paredes, G., Canto, S., & Rodríguez Moranta, I. (2022). Telecolaboración y competencia comunicativa intercultural en la enseñanza-aprendizaje de ELE: un proyecto en Educación Superior. *Portalín*, 38, 97–118. <https://doi.org/10.30827/portalín.vi.21446>
- Hagley, E. (2020). Effects of virtual exchange in the EFL classroom on students' cultural and intercultural sensitivity. *Computer-Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal*, 21(3), 74–87. <https://callej.org/index.php/journal/article/view/312>
- Iglesias, M., & Tarazona, C. (2023). Second Language Acquisition and Cross-Cultural Awareness Using Flipgrid in Higher Education. *rEFLctions*, 30(3), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v30i3.267906>
- O'Regan, V., Le Baron-Earle, F., & Batardière, M.-T. (2023). Erasmus Speaks: Bringing internationalisation online. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 6(SI-TransferableSkills), 26–36. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.6.39207>
- Tabuchi, K., Kobayashi, S., Nakagawa, Y., & Roberts, J. (2026). Effects of virtual exchanges on learners' affective and speaking outcomes. *Language Learning & Technology*, 30(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/73664>
- Yeh, H.-C., Qi, G. Y., & Yang, S.-h. (2024). Beyond borders: Telecollaboration for internationalization at home in tertiary education. *Distance Education*, 45(2), 334–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2024.2338713>