

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

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The article presents an overview of the theoretical foundations of virtual exchange or telecollaboration as a practice implemented through computer-mediated communication, with the help of which there is interaction between people located in remote areas. From the point of view of learning foreign languages, it is a powerful tool that involves the formation of a number of competencies, in particular, intercultural and communicative ones. In addition, virtual exchange is considered a cost-effective way of language learning that can replace physical mobility programs. In recent years, models of virtual exchange within the framework of the Lingua Franca approach have developed in response to important global issues. There are two styles of communication in virtual exchange: synchronous, which occurs in real time, and asynchronous, which occurs with a time delay. Also, this article examines three types of pedagogical mentoring, which are designed to guide and coordinate the interaction and cooperation of students during virtual exchange sessions. Mentoring practice in the course of preparation for the event is aimed at anticipating and mitigating potential problems that may arise in the process of virtual interaction. Mentoring during a virtual exchange event includes a variety of practices, such as mentoring on technical issues, role rotation, collaboration, asking for clarification, discussing content, linguistic and telecollaborative adaptability, etc. Pedagogical mentoring observed after the video conference aims to survey students about their acquired experiences and conclusions, which can be informative for coordinators to review and take into account to improve further virtual interaction.

Key words: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, pedagogical mentoring.

Будз І. Ф., Нісаноглу Н. Г. Теоретичні основи віртуального обміну

У статті представлено огляд теоретичних засад віртуального обміну або телеколлаборації як практики, що реалізується через комп'ютерно-опосередковану комунікацію, за допомогою якої відбувається взаємодія між людьми, що перебувають на віддалених територіях. З погляду вивчення іноземних мов, це потужний інструмент, який передбачає формування низки компетентностей, зокрема міжкультурної та комунікативної. Крім того, віртуальний обмін вважається ощадливим способом вивчення мови, який може замінити програми фізичної мобільності. Останнім часом моделі віртуального обміну в рамках підходу Lingua Franca розвивалися у відповідь на важливі глобальні проблеми. Існує два стилі спілкування у віртуальному обміні: синхронне, яке відбувається в реальному часі, та асинхронне, яке здійснюється із затримкою в часі. Також у цій статті розглядаються три типи педагогічного менторства, які призначені для спрямування й координації взаємодії та співпраці студентів під час сесій віртуального обміну. Менторська практика в процесі підготовки до події має на меті передбачення й пом'якшення потенційних проблем, які можуть виникнути під час віртуальної взаємодії. Менторство впродовж заходу віртуального обміну передбачає різноманітні практики, наприклад наставницькі вказівки щодо технічних питань, чергування ролей, співпраці, прохання про роз'яснення, обговорення змісту, мовної та телеколлаборативної адаптивності тощо. Педагогічне

менторство, яке спостерігається після відеоконференції, має на меті провести опитування студентів про їхній набутий досвід і висновки, які можуть бути інформативними для координаторів, щоб переглянути та врахувати їх для вдосконалення подальшої віртуальної взаємодії.

Ключові слова: віртуальний обмін, телеколаборація, педагогічне менторство.

In the context of reforming higher education in Ukraine, the training of students requires new approaches, innovative forms and methods to develop key competencies, including the ability to effectively communicate with representatives of other cultures. Covid and other global cataclysms such as military conflicts are driving the search for advanced tools of learning involving Internet technologies, on-line studying, blended learning, etc. This issue is especially acute in relation to foreign language learning (FLL), as restrictions on student mobility have affected the fostering of a number of important competencies such as intercultural and communicative.

One of the forms of FLL that has been gaining momentum in recent years is virtual exchange (VE) or telecollaboration. Its increasing popularity, as well as the peculiarities of organizing VE sessions, the special mentoring role of teachers/coordinators make this scientific discussion relevant.

Since this form of education is relatively new to the Ukrainian educational space, the purpose of our research is to study the conceptual and theoretical characteristics of VE for better understanding of the organizational process during telecollaboration, as well as the world experience of mentoring.

One of world-known researchers of VE is O'Dowd, R. In a number of his explorations, O'Dowd, R. examines the history of the formation of VE, the factors that determined its popularity, considers VE as a way of internationalizing the classroom (2017), carries out a quantitative content analysis of educational results of VE (2021).

A group of scholars, namely O'Dowd, R., Sauro, S., & Spector-Cohen, E., investigates the role of pedagogical mentoring during VE (2020). Gutiérrez B. F., Glimäng M. R., Sauro S., & O'Dowd R. (2022) study the peculiarities of preparing students for intercultural communication online. Avgousti, M. I. carries out a systematic analysis of the formation

of intercultural communicative competence during VE (2018).

In 2021, a group of scholars (Gutiérrez, B. F., Glimäng, M. R., O'Dowd, R., & Sauro, S.) supported by the Stevens Initiative developed a mentoring guide for virtual exchange teachers that includes strategies to help students achieve successful intercultural communication during synchronous and asynchronous online exchange.

In general meaning VE, or telecollaboration is a practice of online FLL and involves interaction and collaboration with partners from geographically distant locations, while at the same time promoting linguistic, intercultural and digital competences [1]. Such collaboration can be carried out as an integrated part of the language course and under the guidance of educators or expert facilitators.

Several factors contribute to the growth of interest in VE as a form of FLL, among them are: high economic and environmental costs of study abroad programs, and physical immobility during the global pandemic or military conflicts. These factors made VE a sustainable and low-cost model of international language learning to serve as an alternative or complement to physical mobility programs. By the way, VE is also gaining organizational and governmental support. In Europe Erasmus + Virtual interaction was established, a flagship program that integrated virtual interaction to broaden the reach and scope of the Erasmus + program [2]. In the United States, Stevens initiative is committed to expanding the virtual exchange field, connecting young people across continents and cultures, providing training and support for educators and institutions that are interested in VE [2]. Also, there is a growing interest in online platforms that provide 'readymade' virtual exchange experiences for students. These platforms work in various ways, but the majority connect second language learners with native speakers via videoconferencing sessions, usually for a price that can be paid by the university or the students directly [2].

The models of VE in the FLL are based on two approaches: bilingual-bicultural and Lingua Franca. There are such models in FLL: E-tandem (when two native speakers of different languages communicate aiming to learn the certain language), telecollaboration (when online interaction integrates groups of students from geographically remote areas) [2]. The emphasis of telecollaboration is “on developing intercultural awareness and other aspects of intercultural communicative competence, in addition to developing linguistic competence” [1, p. 13]. The VE models of Lingua Franca approach focus on global social and political issues in an increasingly polarized world that seems to be characterized by conflicts, inequalities, and injustices.

While some may argue that intercultural competence and language skills may best be learned by immersion in the host culture, the reality is that many students simply don't have an opportunity to travel abroad or to engage with people from diverse backgrounds, and even more so since the outbreak of the coronavirus or other cataclysms such as military conflicts. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) can provide that opportunity. The realities of the current world that demand a new set of abilities through which students can grow interculturally and be successful are the driving force behind virtual exchanges.

Among these abilities are:

- interpersonal communication and knowledge of cultures;
- the digital competence;
- the capacity to cooperate and collaborate with people from different backgrounds [3].

Videoconferencing and chat dialogues on instant messenger are two examples of synchronous communication, which takes place in real time both verbally and in writing. Asynchronous communication is any verbal or written exchange that takes place on a time-delayed basis. Discussion boards and email exchanges are components of this sort of communication [4].

One of the important factors of successful collaboration is the involvement of virtual exchange coordinators, namely their ability to navigate the communication of participants, solve

unforeseen problems, support and encourage students, etc. that points to a crucial role of the educators and their mentoring.

O'Dowd, R. et al. define pedagogical mentoring as “the strategies and techniques that teachers use in their classes to support students' learning during their online intercultural projects” [5, p. 146]. Pedagogical mentoring requires certain skills in using appropriate mentoring patterns by teachers and can be used to improve their students' online interaction and collaboration [6].

The researchers expand the study on the following types of pedagogical mentoring: mentoring that occurs before a VE event starts; mentoring that takes place during a telecollaboration; mentoring that is observed after videoconferencing [5].

Before organizing a VE event educators may ask themselves questions like these:

- Do my students know how to use any synchronous communication software and how to use it?
- Are my students aware of key rules of communication in the online environment?
- Do my students have enough skills to successfully participate in online intercultural interaction?

In case the instructors answer the above listed questions positively, they can move on to the next step, otherwise, they are prone to non-success [4].

The aim of the first type of mentoring is “to anticipate issues and mitigate lack of interaction and communication that might arise during the VE” [5, p. 154-155]. This stage might include enhancing potential participants' digital and organizational skills to be able to communicate online with foreign partners properly [6]. Introducing options in advance like sharing a screen, changing slides, playing videos, taking screenshots, raising a hand, doing a survey, renaming, etc. while having preliminary online sessions would be extremely beneficial for all the participants. Besides, high quality connection and equipment is a key to successful communication. Previously identified problems with the students' microphones and cameras can be solved by their replacing or fixing before the event.

In addition, educators can motivate their students to agree in advance on delegating

the roles they are going to have during an upcoming virtual meeting [4]. For example, group leaders, speakers, a teacher's assistants and others can be chosen so that it will be less stressful for the participants, and the flow of the VE will be more harmonious. Discussing with the students visual elements of the banner to advertise the event will strengthen cooperative spirit between two parties. In addition, involving the students into creating it will increase their self-confidence, sharpen computer skills and make them realize the importance of the upcoming event.

It is a good idea to introduce a program of the event including a brief description of designed tasks to the students beforehand. As a result, it will smoothly guide them through all the pre-planned activities and help educators to coordinate the process more effectively. Furthermore, 'an alternative plan' can help to avoid unnecessary risks due to technical problems or some other failures [7, p. 32]. For instance, in case a student can't share his/her screen for showing slides to others, teachers can present it instead if they collect the creative works beforehand. Any task displayed on a screen can be replaced by an extra task in case of technical incapability.

Gutiérrez, B. F. suggests the following practices for mentoring that takes place during a VE event: mentoring guideline for technical difficulties, mentoring guideline for turn taking, mentoring guideline for cooperation and inclusion, mentoring guideline for asking for clarification and negotiation of meaning, mentoring guideline for linguistic and telecollaborative adaptability and others [4].

For example, in the case of a bad connection and as a result being unable to understand what your students' interlocutors say, VE teachers should remind the participants to ask their international peers for clarification at proper time not to interrupt them. Mentoring guideline for asking for clarification means encouraging students to ask for clearing up and explaining the meaning of words/sentences that are unknown to them to keep a productive conversation. Mentoring guideline for cooperation and inclusion provides for finding common ground that can be achieved by asking follow-up

questions to express interest in interlocutors and things they talk about [4].

Pedagogical mentoring of the third type (that is observed after videoconferencing) can be implemented in order to collect students' reflections on learning experience and conclusions [6]. Firstly, reflections are always an efficient source of self-development, self-learning, self-awareness for students. Secondly, reflections can be informative for instructors providing them with a vast deal of observations, insights, conclusions to be reviewed and considered for refining further online interactions.

Ware, P. D. and Kramsch, C. call on instructors to analyze and discuss with the students their online communication concerns and misunderstandings in order "to develop a critical awareness of language and to reflect on the ultimate goals of language education" [8, p. 192]. Despite the above listed advantages, educators should be extremely cautious and considerate with pointing to the errors or issues to vulnerable students. In addition, while post-event pedagogical mentoring the educators can focus on intercultural issues and poor e-competences that were observed during the communicative process [5].

Summarizing the analyzed material, the following conclusions can be drawn, namely:

studying in the conditions of education reform, technological progress, global changes due to different cataclysms requires the use of modern forms of learning, in particular, learning English as a foreign language, and virtual exchange is effective one;

virtual exchange or telecollaboration in synchronous or asynchronous formats has advantages in the fostering intercultural communicative competence in response to limited student academic mobility;

pedagogical mentoring can be considered as shaping the students' competencies and polishing their skills by the teachers during online interactions;

regardless of the type of pedagogical mentoring, each of them presupposes avoiding unexpected issues and advancing gained experience based on the students' gaps or errors.

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