

# Challenges and other feedback: Integrating intercultural learning in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

This mixed method case study explored globalization and complex relationships through a virtual exchange project between students from Germany and Colombia in upper intermediate level English classes. We believed by providing a space for online conversation, written collaboration and discussion, students would enhance their plurilingual and pluricultural competence as well as their communicative competences through the medium of English as an international language (EIL). The aim was also to enable students to investigate cultural complexity and to develop cultural curiosity. Taking into account plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC) and the efficacy of virtual exchanges for language learning, we used a series of tasks for students to participate in a wide range of activities of varying complexity regarding German and Colombian culture for a six-week exchange. Students self-assessed their written and spoken online interactions as well as their perceived skills in mediating texts and communication based on the recently added descriptors in the Companion Volume to the CEFR. They also rated their plurilingual and pluricultural competences on a PPC scale at both the beginning and end of the project. Results demonstrate that there is value in implementing virtual exchange projects in which students reflect on and increase their awareness of these concepts also suggesting that pairing students with international students rather than L1 speakers of the language has a potentially positive effect on students' anxiety level and communicative competences.

**Keywords:** Virtual Exchange; Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence; Intercultural Communication; English as an International Language (EIL); Foreign Language Learning; NNS-NNS interaction.

## 1. Introduction

Languages cannot be learned in isolation, and language learning helps promote a healthy exchange of ideas across borders (Council of Europe, 2001) to a variety of other language speakers in a multitude of communicative events (Council of Europe, 2018). In today's global and pluricultural world, to benefit thoroughly from such exchanges, learners need to be in contact with others who do not represent their current homogenous language-learning situation. Abrams (2002) stresses that instructors should aim at supporting students of foreign languages by helping them "recognize their own complex cultural microcosms, and [...] offer learners ample opportunities to develop skills to investigate cultural complexity (how to ask questions, what questions to ask), and to promote cultural curiosity (the desire to ask questions)" (p. 142).

In such a context, telecollaboration (Warschauer, 1996) can improve students' language skills development and promote intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as well as multiple literacies (Avgousti, 2018). Ke and Suzuki (2011) point out that the advantage of a non-native speaker to non-native speaker (NNS-NNS) constellation, as opposed to a NNS-NS (native-speaker) constellation, is that students are more likely to focus on intelligibility and intercultural comprehension rather than language forms. Some research findings suggest that students seem to be less anxious when communicating with NNS in virtual exchanges and feel that there is mutual support (Guarda, 2013). What is more, most interactions involving English as a Lingua Franca happen between non-native speakers of English (Seidlhofer, 2005). For these reasons, the authors decided to implement a NNS-NNS dyad.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC)

Whilst PPC was mistakenly considered to be two different entities in the past (Galante, 2018), it is now perceived as one single construct. The CEFR defines PPC as “the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168). It also specifies PPC as

the ability to call flexibly upon an inter-related, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire to [...] express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another, bring the whole of one’s linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 28)

Due to the new descriptors in the CEFR Companion Volume, alternative language pedagogies such as virtual exchanges might improve students’ PCC in communicative interactions (Galante, 2018).

### 2.2. Virtual exchange

In an era of globalization, virtual exchanges are one of the tools computer-assisted language learning (CALL) offers to support students in acquiring the skills necessary to deal with an increasingly more complex world. Virtual exchange is a means of communication by which geographically dispersed students of language communicate with each other with the purpose of developing their foreign language linguistic competence and their intercultural competence (Belz, 2003). Initiatives such as *UNICollaboration* aim at supporting educators in Higher Education in Europe, and beyond, to establish virtual exchange projects in order to help students “develop 21st century attitudes and skills such as empathy and tolerance, critical thinking, intercultural awareness and foreign language competences and digital literacy” (Unicollaboration, n.d, para. 1).

Much research has analyzed affordances of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) for language learning. Gläsman (2004) stresses that SCMC prepares learners for communicating in real time with real people. Due to video chatting, for example in *Skype*, the exchange is dynamic (Pellettieri, 2000) and can be interactive (Schenker, 2017). SCMC video-chat can positively affect student motivation (Yamada, 2009) and the literature points at students’ perceived gains in linguistic and intercultural competence (Tian & Wang, 2010). Virtual exchange projects have shown that students develop their learner autonomy (e.g. Fuchs, Hauck, & Müller-Hartmann, 2012) and that the attitude of both teachers and students towards this kind of learning is highly positive (Helm, 2015). The present study sought to analyze how the virtual exchange enhanced learners’ perceived plurilingual and pluricultural competence as well as their communicative competences through the medium of English as an international language.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does virtual exchange enhance students’ perceived plurilingual and pluricultural competences?
2. How does an intercultural exchange enrich students’ perceived communicative competence?

## 3. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method case study design. In the context of this design, thirty-one students (three separate English classes participated in the cultural exchange. Due to the disparity in numbers, two English classes in Germany were teamed up with one class in Colombia. Participants received detailed instructions at the start of the project and were expected to carry

out specific tasks as suggested in the outline (see Appendix A). They were also instructed to work together to achieve the outcomes. There were few asynchronous tasks set, and the students schedule their synchronous meetings. Students used *Zoom* (video conferencing) as their meeting place, and these meetings were consequently scheduled, recorded, and placed into assigned and separately accessed Google folders. Students were expected to participate in the exchange, so the exchange was included in student evaluation and grades. Participation in the study was considered outside their classroom obligations, and each student signed informed consent prior to beginning.

Six questionnaires were administered. Three questionnaires were completed at the beginning of the project and three at the end. The post-qualitative questionnaire was written by hand or on a PC, whereas all other questionnaires were mainly completed on students' mobiles or on PCs. The questionnaires were developed in English because of the relatively high level of English amongst the students.

### 3.1. Participants

The 31 participants in the present study are learners of upper intermediate English living in either Germany or Colombia. Most have German (and a German dialect) or Spanish as their L1. There were also two South Korean and one French participants. The students were between 16 and 30 years of age with the majority of them being under 20 ( $n= 18$ ). Almost all of them have been studying English since they were children (6 to 10 years old). Their current majors included Automotive System Engineering, Business Administration, International Business, and Mechanical Engineering. Appendix A gives an overview of the tasks and the timeframe for this project.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

Various instruments were used to collect data. The demographic survey included two open-ended discussions regarding current perceptions of students' own plurilingual and pluricultural competence (Galante, 2018). The self-assessment comprised of rankings regarding the descriptors found in the area of the *CEFR Companion Volume: Written and online interaction and mediation (of text and communication)* (Council of Europe, 2018). The plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC) scale introduced by Galante (2018), contained 24 statements in which students marked in Likert scale, from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree, their perceptions of each. A post-survey to obtain students' perceived ideas about the virtual exchange and the use of English as the medium of communication culminated the project. Data analysis consisted of using descriptive statistics as well as qualitative categorizations that helped identify key themes within student commentary regarding PPC and their communicative competence.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Plurilingual open-ended discussion

Student responses to the statements provided to them revealed ideas within languages, variation, and proficiency. Table 1 demonstrates the variety of answers from the participants.

**Table 1.** Plurilingual discussion responses.

Languages	Variation	Proficiency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Spanish, English, German, and French.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I know different accents in English and Spanish.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>My proficiency level is not the same in all</li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I speak 5 languages.</li> <li>• I speak my native language (Spanish).</li> <li>• I have a good level of english and I'm learning know more than 2 languages.</li> <li>• No, because I only use German and English.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many variations that English has.</li> <li>• Differences between English spoken in different countries.</li> <li>• I know the different variations of Spanish expressions in my country depending the region.</li> <li>• My capacity to identify variations according to regions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I speak English more fluent than French.</li> <li>• I can at least speak the basic things in all these languages but I don't have the same fluency.</li> <li>• I can speak perfect Korean, English like a 7-year-old US kid and Japanese at the same level of a kid who is about to start the first step.</li> <li>• I know three languages but I speak one better than the other.</li> <li>• I don't speak them with total fluency.</li> </ul>
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*Note:* The statement reads, "A plurilingual person is someone who knows two or more languages, but does not necessarily speak them at the same proficiency level, for example one language can be more fluent than the other. A plurilingual person is also someone who knows variations in the same language, for example, the way a language is used in different regions of the country or in other countries. Do you consider yourself a plurilingual person? Yes or No? Why do/don't you think so?" (Galante, 2018, p. 297).

Some students demonstrated clear knowledge of many languages; others stated they knew one, but were working on other languages. They also demonstrated understanding of variations within languages and their abilities to recognize such varieties. With regard to proficiency, participants were quick to identify the differences with their proficiency of the languages they speak. These results revealed that, accordingly, they understand their role as social agents (Abrams, 2002; Council of Europe, 2018) and are aware of their knowledge toward other languages. 4.1. *Pluricultural competence open-ended discussion.* Student responses to the pluricultural statement revealed both positive and negative responses. Some of the students replied, for example:

- *Absolutely! We have a different culture which would be unusual in Germany. I always switch myself between these two cultures to come along with the person I am talking to. Also, you forget your culture from your relatives because you live in Germany and slowly adopt their culture*
- *I am a pluricultural person because I can identify differences and similarities between regions here in my country. I can also say what are some of the similarities and differences between my country and other countries I have visited before, and I can easily adapt to the other cultures.*
- *Yes, I consider I am a pluricultural person because I am interested in learning about other cultures. I also think i know about more than two cultures.*
- *Yes, I do. I was involved in a multicultural experience for one year at my university. It was a program called Global Peer Program. It helped me to develop my multicultural skills and understand the values and beliefs from others cultures.*
- *I've been studying about cultural differences and also analyzing cultures in other countries and in other regions of the same country like Colombia. According to this statement, I am a pluricultural person.*

There were also some less positive comments regarding pluricultural competences. Some examples include:

- *I don't. I've been living in the same country and city since i was born, so I haven't been in deep contact with other cultures. I might know some facts, behaviors and information about multiple cultures around the world (specially the culture of the countries that speak the languages that I am learning and also regions in my country) but i haven't adopt and implement them to my lifestyle at all.*
- *I don't think so that i am a pluricultural Person because i don't know that much about other cultures and regional cultures in Germany*
- *In Colombia we have some culture differences between regions, I know that, but I don't consider myself a pluricultural person because I don't know other cultures different from the colombian one.*
- *I just know the german culture.*

Again, the participants' affirmative responses demonstrate motivation and experiences with which they learned or obtained their knowledge of other cultures. The responses also show that students are aware and feel competent with the stated skills. The negative ideas demonstrate that though they may feel less competent as they comment about not traveling around, but they do mention an awareness of other cultures. Students recognize their active roles both positively and negatively (Abrams, 2002; Galante, 2018).

#### 4.2. Self-assessment

As stated previously, the self-assessment survey had three parts. To eliminate confusion, the investigators limited the *CEFR Companion Volume: Written and online interaction and mediation (of text and communication)* (Council of Europe, 2018) level descriptors to the participants. Students selected the statement that applied to them the best from B1 level to the C1. The students felt the most comfortable as a B2 learner in each of the categories, and the least comfortable in mediating communication as 43.3 percent of the students ranked in B1 (see Table 2). The post-self-assessment numbers do not denote much change between the students' perceived competences. More students, however, claimed C1 in written and online communication, and there was a notable shift in mediating communication from B1 to B2 competence level. This could result from becoming used to the format and assignment itself. It also demonstrates the participants becoming comfortable with each other (Guarda, 2013).

**Table 2.** Results of self-assessment survey (Pre- and Post-).

<b>Written and online interaction</b>						
		<b>Pre-Self-Assessment</b>			<b>Post-Self-Assessment</b>	
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>CEFR</i> <i>level</i>	B1	9	30,0	B1	10	32,2
	B2	15	50,0	B2	13	41,9
	C1	6	20,0	C1	8	25,8
	Total	30	100,0	Total	31	100,0
<b>Mediating communication</b>						
		<b>Pre-Self-Assessment</b>			<b>Post-Self-Assessment</b>	
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>

CEFRB1 level	B1	13	43,3	B1	6	19,4
	B2	10	33,3	B2	19	61,3
	C1	7	23,3	C1	6	19,4
	Total	30	100,0	Total	31	100,0
<b>Mediating a text</b>						
		<b>Pre-Self-Assessment</b>		<b>Post-Self-Assessment</b>		
		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
CEFRB1 level	B1	8	26,7	B1	8	25,8
	B2	20	66,7	B2	22	71,0
	C1	2	6,7	C1	1	3,2
	Total	30	100,0	Total	31	100,0

#### 4.3. PPC scale

The application of the PPC scale as introduced by Galante (2018) was given at the beginning and end of the project. The PPC is a scale with 28 items, 14 culture and 14 language, in which students are able to measure their current perceptions to the items in the scale. Galante (2018) points out that the items in the scale represent the pluricultural and plurilingual competences and both knowledge and use of languages and cultures are taken into account. The scale was adapted to fit the context and 24 statements remained. Table 3 exhibits results for both the pre- and post-tests.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics for PPC pre- and post-tests.

Statement Number	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
1	3,78	1,06	3,81	1,16
2	1,78	1,16	1,54	,76
3	3,36	1,06	3,54	,92
4	3,89	,73	3,90	,90
5	1,93	1,01	1,68	,79

6	3,89	,83	4,35	,66
7	4,25	1,10	4,42	,88
8	2,28	,76	2,06	1,06
9	2,39	,91	2,16	1,15
10	1,07	,26	1,39	,98
11	2,07	1,15	1,90	,97
12	4,89	,31	4,45	1,05
13	4,43	,87	4,32	,97
14	3,71	1,01	4,13	,77
15	2,75	1,14	2,48	,85
16	2,32	,81	2,16	,93
17	4,57	,63	4,48	,68
18	1,93	,94	2,32	1,10
19	2,57	1,13	2,64	1,37
20	2,75	,84	2,32	,94
21	4,00	,94	4,38	,71
22	4,71	,46	4,68	,54
23	3,10	,95	2,87	1,33
24	3,96	,79	4,19	,87

Note: Pre-test  $n=28$ ; Post-test  $n=31$

Unfortunately, we were unable to distinguish between the two groups prior to the participants taking the pre-test, so the comparisons were not compiled. However, three of the statement items did demonstrate some change that could be discussed and recognized as possibly meaningful.

Item 14, for example, “It is easy for me to talk to people from other cultural backgrounds, and discuss similarities and differences in points of view” reveals  $M=3.71$  for the pre-test to a  $M=4.13$  for the post-test. In addition, Item 20, “When communicating with people from other cultural backgrounds, it’s difficult for me to explain misunderstandings and misinterpretations” shows  $M=2.75$  for the pre-test to  $M=2.35$  for the post-test. Furthermore, item 21, “I am able to recognize some languages other people speak if they are similar to my first language (e.g., same language family)” demonstrates  $M=4.00$  for the pre-test to  $M=4.38$  for the post-test. These slight shifts could represent students becoming comfortable with each other and their own language learning experiences (Seidlhofer, 2005). Also, students demonstrate

improvement in language skills and ICC changes (Avgousti (2018); Warschauer 1996) indicating a stronger lean towards cultural curiosity and pluriculturalism and plurilingualism (Galante, 2018).

#### *4.4. Post-Qualitative survey*

The post-qualitative survey adapted from Müller-Hartmann, O'Dowd and Colleagues from the EVALUATE team (2017) (see Appendix B) consisted of six open-ended questions and seven measurement statements for improvement to be rated on a Likert Scale.

In the questionnaire, students were asked about how working collaboratively with international partners influenced their learning experience. Interestingly, some students commented on the project as being an alternative or better way of learning. One Colombian student, for example, pointed out that “sharing [...] with a person from another culture about the cultural dimensions of Hofstede [...] is definitely not the same learning process when you memorize this topic in class, and when you share the different experiences with a person from another country.” Another Colombian student stated that the project “let me learn in a new and creative way”. Another student favored it to their speaking practice in class (“It is a better way for practicing speaking than just a normal class”). One student called it a “didactic experience”. Some students stressed its authenticity: “You could learn dealing with different cultures in order to achieve a common goal”. Another student stated: [...] I had to deal with the differences in the time zone and a really busy person” and one student pointed out “I think this is training for real life”.

When students had to decide whether their confidence in using the foreign language had improved because of the project, all students except for one (who felt their confidence got worse) thought that their confidence had “much improved” or “improved a little”. Several students stated in the qualitative part that they felt more confident speaking English after the project (e.g. “Once I started to talk with her [...] I feel good because I was understanding what she said and the conversations flowed. I think now I’m not afraid of having conversation in English”.) Interestingly, some of the students’ confidence was possibly enhanced by the fact that they talked to other NNS of English as opposed to NS. For instance, one German student commented that, when talking to NNS “[...] it’s easier to talk free and you feel allowed to do mistakes.” Similarly, a Colombian student stresses that, when talking to NNS, “I am aware of the mistakes I make and we correct each other with more confidence. In this case, the other person understands what it feels to make a mistake.” Another student in Colombia points out that in NNS-NNS interaction, “[...] we are both in the same situation [...] [and] nobody is in disadvantage, compared to the other one.” These comments suggest that there may be value in choosing NNS speakers to manage students’ anxiety level. This is in line with findings in the literature regarding NNS-NNS dyads in virtual exchanges (Guarda, 2013).

## **5. Conclusion**

To answer our original questions whether the virtual and intercultural exchange enhanced and enriched students perceived plurilingual and pluricultural competences as well as their communicative competences, we can see that the arrangement certainly changed the idea and knowledge of how students perceived themselves and how they fit into the role of a social agent. The results demonstrate that there is value in implementing virtual exchange projects in which students reflect on and increase their awareness of these concepts. Participants also felt more confident using the foreign language at the end of the project. Consequently, the project also suggests that pairing students with international students rather than L1 speakers of the language has a potentially positive effect on students’ anxiety level and communicative competences. Future studies would include varying the groups throughout more than 2 countries as well as including a problem-based task which the teams could work together to solve.

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#### Appendix A: Weekly task calendar

Week	Overview	Activity(ies)
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic: Getting to know your partner</li> <li>• Mode: Synchronous (20-30 minutes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students create a list of 10 questions to ask partner regarding their life and culture.</li> <li>• Students interview <i>each other via Zoom (Must record the session and upload in assignment folder)</i>.</li> <li>• Pre-survey</li> </ul>
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic: Holidays, festivals, and activities</li> <li>• Mode: Synchronous (20-30 minutes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students discuss holidays, festivals, and activities they enjoy, what they are about, what they do, what is typical in terms of eating etc.</li> <li>• They discuss the similarities and differences between the two countries.</li> </ul>
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic: Cultural orientation</li> <li>• Mode: Asynchronous and synchronous (20-30 minutes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will first do the Self-assessment (Mapping your Cultural-Orientation-Sheet)</li> <li>• <a href="https://www.uwb.edu/getattachment/globalinitiatives/resources/intercultural-competence-tool-kit/mapping-your-cultural-orientation.pdf">https://www.uwb.edu/getattachment/globalinitiatives/resources/intercultural-competence-tool-kit/mapping-your-cultural-orientation.pdf</a></li> <li>• For more information on the different categories, see p.18-27: <a href="https://sites.psu.edu/.../Cultural-Competency-Presentation-2016.pptx">sites.psu.edu/.../Cultural-Competency-Presentation-2016.pptx</a></li> <li>• Students then discuss the differences (e.g. low/high-context culture, monochronic/polychronic culture, individualistic/collectivistic, egalitarian/hierarchical etc.)</li> </ul>

Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic: Student life</li> <li>• Mode: Synchronous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students prepare questions for their partners about student life.</li> <li>• Students then have a discussion on student life, tuition fees, part-time jobs, job perspectives, future plans</li> </ul>
Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic: Students prepare a presentation on a topic</li> <li>• Mode: Synchronous (20-30 minutes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students investigate assigned topic (one of 6 from Hofstede's 6-D model) and prepare a presentation.</li> <li>• <a href="https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/">https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/</a></li> </ul>
Week 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic: Cultural Dimension</li> <li>• Mode: Depends on students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students present the results of their topic discussed in week 5.</li> <li>• Students review two other assigned presentations and give feedback using provided feedback sheet.</li> <li>• Post-survey</li> </ul>

#### Appendix B: Post-qualitative survey

1. Does it make a difference whether you talk to native speakers or non-native speakers of English when you participate in a project like this? Why/why not?
2. What were your expectations? In what way has this project met and not met your expectations?
3. Please describe how doing this project collaboratively with international partner(s) affected your learning experience.
4. Given your online interactions with students from another country, describe any key changes in how you would approach dealing with someone with another cultural background.
5. How did you feel about the fact that your conversation was video-recorded?
6. How (if at all) has your ability to use a foreign language developed during the exchange? **Ability to understand:**
  - much improved
  - improved a little
  - no improvement
  - has got worse
  - not sure
7. How (if at all) has your ability to use a foreign language developed during the exchange? **Fluency in speaking:**
  - much improved
  - improved a little
  - no improvement
  - has got worse
  - not sure
8. How (if at all) has your ability to use a foreign language developed during the exchange? **Grammatical accuracy:**
  - much improved
  - improved a little
  - no improvement

- has got worse
  - not sure
9. How (if at all) has your ability to use a foreign language developed during the exchange? **Accuracy of pronunciation:**
- much improved
  - improved a little
  - no improvement
  - has got worse
  - not sure
10. How (if at all) has your ability to use a foreign language developed during the exchange? **Range of vocabulary:**
- much improved
  - improved a little
  - no improvement
  - has got worse
  - not sure
11. How (if at all) has your ability to use a foreign language developed during the exchange? **Confidence in using the foreign language:**
- much improved
  - improved a little
  - no improvement
  - has got worse
  - not sure
12. How (if at all) has your ability to use a foreign language developed during the exchange? **Ability to interact with foreign language speakers:**
- much improved
  - improved a little
  - no improvement
  - has got worse
  - not sure
13. If your foreign language use has not improved, can you explain why the exchange did not help you in this way?
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