

Virtual exchange as a curriculum tool in EFL higher education for the development of intercultural competences, social awareness and global citizenship

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Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education cannot limit itself to the competent use of grammatical rules, phonology, and lexical accuracy, but it must offer students the opportunity for real encounters that aid their development of intercultural communicative competences, social awareness, and global citizenship—connecting the Global-North and the Global-South. This paper provides a qualitative study for the achievement of this result through the incorporation of a virtual exchange curriculum in the EFL higher education curriculum. The research was conducted at Universidad de Las Americas in Quito, Ecuador, in partnership with Columbia University in New York City. 26 Ecuadorian students, ages 19 to 25, were examined to determine their development. The study found that through intercultural online interactions and collaborative work, the Ecuadorian students developed intercultural communicative competence, social awareness, and a sense of global citizenship. These findings advocate for the adaptation of virtual exchange in EFL higher education curricula to optimally prepare students for a globalized and multicultural world.

Keywords: Virtual Exchange, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Global Citizenship, EFL, Global-North and Global-South

Introduction

Social systems across the globe are becoming rapidly interconnected due to the ever-increasing internationalization of environments through the use of the internet and the adoption of transnational standards for work, education and daily life activities (EAIE, 2020). This highlights the importance of fostering global citizenship within the classroom, in order to help students develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)—understood as the ability to engage with cultural diversity, human rights, and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2013).

Universities across the world must provide a foreground for this interconnectedness between Global-North and Global-South—developed western countries, and developing countries—through the incorporation of ICC in their curriculum; thus, fostering a global citizenship that does not only instill awareness, but transforms the learners into entities of change for their society based on collaboration with members of other cultures, addressing problems that are common for both societies (Byram, 2008).

It is here where the incorporation of virtual exchange (VE) plays an important role in joining students from different cultures and geographical locations for academic purposes. According to O'Dowd et al. (2019), this exchange cannot be successful by simply engaging students in virtual exchange. There must be a structural development through stages, monitored and moderated by the instructor; otherwise, the development of intercultural awareness can become superficial. Additionally, there needs to be a credit-bearing component within the process to elicit full engagement from students.

This study seeks to answer the following question: How does the integration of virtual exchange into the EFL higher education curriculum contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence, social awareness and global citizenship in students from the Global-South?

Literature review

Virtual Exchange is a tool that allows students to interact appropriately with each other without having to leave their home (Dolcini & Phelps, 2022). For VE to work effectively, it must rely on four axes described by Neuner (1994): the first is to develop awareness of one's cultural identity, the second is the ability to understand that everyone has their unique cultural background that shapes their worldview, the third refers to empathy to understand different perspectives, and the fourth is the embrace of tolerance for ambiguity in order to surmount difficult situations, especially when there could be emotional reactions—the last one is particularly important in the practice of VE.

To meet these standards, O'Dowd and Ware (2009) divided the application of VE for higher education into three stages: (1) information exchange, (2) cultural comparison and analysis, and (3) collaborative work for a final product. When these stages are properly executed, students can be expected to develop abilities for agreement on outcomes in transnational teams, negotiation of meaning, and critical analysis to collaborate in diverse groups.

These abilities are referred to as Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). ICC is a skill that relies on intercultural attitudes, knowledge and dexterities to critically evaluate one's own culture as well as others' (Byram, 2020; Gustine et al., 2025). ICC involves empathy, curiosity, openness, skill of interpretation and

critical thinking (Romero-Archila, 2025), and it is imperative for the development of global citizenship and the dialogical connection between the Global South and the Global North.

A VE framework that helps illuminate this dialogic connection is COIL, Collaborative Online International Learning (Beelen et al., 2021; Montgomery, 2019; Rubin, 2017). COIL has been bringing about what Montgomery (2019) calls the new “Southern” knowledge—a new opportunity to break away from traditional hegemonies and open up a space for new ways of learning, knowing, being and relating—known as the Third Space (Jørgensen et al., 2020).

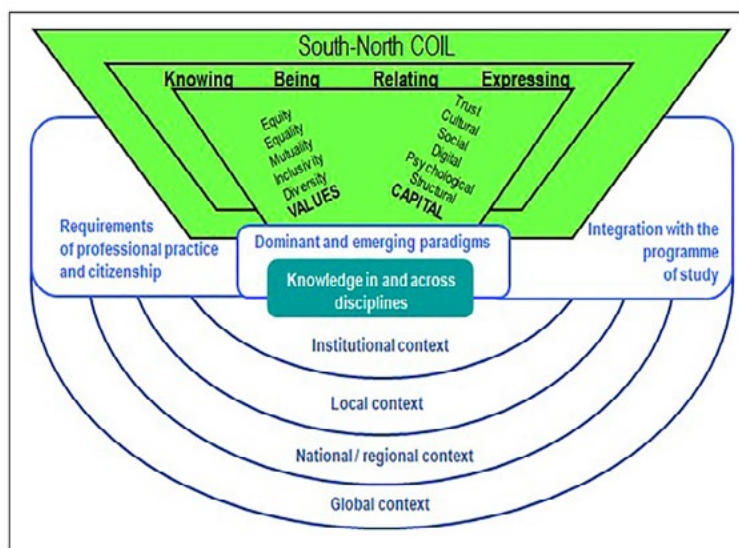


Figure 1: *A Conceptual Framework of Third Space COIL Exchange* (Note: Taken from Wimpenny, K., Finardi, K., Orsini-Jones, M., & Jacobs, L. Knowing, being, relating and expressing through third space global south-north COIL: Digital inclusion and equity in international higher education (2022). *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(2), 285.)

The graphic in Figure 1 shows that for a Third Space to exist, the hybrid experience needs to balance the academic requirements with values such as equality, mutuality, inclusivity and diversity, while acknowledging the global, local and institutional contexts of all participants. Within this framework, VE becomes a space where global citizenship is enacted through interaction, shared meaning-making and collaborations that impact society.

Methodology

This study adopted a small-scale qualitative design to examine how virtual exchange contributes to the development of intercultural competences, social awareness and global citizenship in an EFL higher education context for undergraduate students from the Global South in Ecuador. The virtual exchange was

conducted between Universidad de las Américas (UDLA) in Ecuador and Columbia University in the United States, during the fall semester of 2025.

In the present context, UDLA is a private university located in Quito, Ecuador, where English is primarily taught as a foreign language (EFL), and all students must pass six classes, from A1 to B2, as a graduation pre-requisite.

A B2 English class of twenty-six students from UDLA was paired with a B2 Spanish class of thirteen students from Columbia. The participants were from different academic majors, ages 19 to 25. Thirteen groups were formed, each consisting of two students from the Global South (UDLA) and one from the Global North (Columbia). The virtual exchange program was embedded within the course through a non-official curriculum adaptation, in which selected course assignments were replaced by credit-bearing VE tasks.

The virtual exchange lasted six weeks and was conducted through the institution's online platform, Microsoft Teams. Participants from both universities were responsible for agreeing on meeting times and documenting their sessions in a shared Microsoft Excel logbook. Students were expected to meet one hour per week to fulfill the credit requirements. After every session, participants produced a reflective response based on their interaction. In addition, they collaboratively developed a final project aligned with the COIL principles of virtual collaboration, technology integration, and interdisciplinary learning.

Following the standards of VE presented by O'Dowd and Ware (2009), the participants' interactions were divided into three different stages:

Stage 1: information exchange and trust-building (Week 1)

Stage 2: comparison and analysis of cultural practices and social issues (Weeks 2–5)

Stage 3: collaborative production through a joint podcast (Week 6)

The topics discussed each week progressed from personal, to intercultural, to social and global:

Week 1: Introduction, personal and academic life

Week 2: Digital life and cultural identity

Week 3: Education and learning styles

Week 4: Art and colonial heritage

Week 5: Customs and traditions

Week 6: Gender, inequality and social justice—Collaborative podcast

In accordance with the VE principle of faculty collaboration, instructors from both institutions regularly monitored the weekly meetings, analyzed the students' reflections, and provided feedback to guide subsequent interactions, offering cultural and linguistic insights that supported respectful and effective discourse.

Data sources were gathered through three main tools: (1) video and audio recordings of student reflections, natural conversations, and the collaborative podcast; (2) a pre-and-post questionnaire using a Likert scale; and (3) short open-ended reflective questions. Four groups were randomly selected for an in-depth analysis of their development throughout the three VE stages.

The data sources were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach that combined deductive and inductive coding procedures. Deductive coding was informed by the theoretical framework of VE and ICC (Byram, 2008; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009), while inductive coding was conducted without predetermined categories, allowing patterns and meaning to emerge from the students' data.

The exchange was conducted under a mutual commitment to data protection and participant anonymity. Both universities operated according to a coordinated understanding of informed consent, ensuring that data use for research and non-commercial purposes adhered to the internal policies and legislative standards of both institutions.

Findings

The findings of this research were organized around four interrelated themes that showed how intercultural communicative competence, social awareness and global citizenship were enacted through interaction, reflection and collaboration during the three stages of virtual exchange.

Theme 1: Intercultural self-awareness and identity construction

The Pre-and-Post-questionnaire results (Q1–Q3) showed that students' awareness of how culture shaped opinions and identities went from 78% to 91%. Interest in other cultures, which was already high (82%), rose to 87%, going from passive curiosity to active engagement. Also, their confidence to share their own culture showed a substantial increase from 69% to 95%.

During the video analysis, students consistently positioned themselves culturally in comparison (Ecuador vs. U.S.), recognizing how context (education, technology, traditions, geography) shapes identities and worldviews. For example, one participant noticed, "In Ecuador classes are more traditional, while in the U.S. students learn through discussions" (Group 2, Stage 2), demonstrating awareness of how institutional culture influences practices.

In the reflective questions, most students indicated strong intercultural self-awareness and pride in their local culture. For example, one student wrote, “I learned that I should love my culture more.”

Theme 2: Pragmatic development and intercultural politeness

The Pre-and-Post-questionnaire results (Q5) showed the development of IC, from a limited awareness of how language use needs adjustment in intercultural contexts (69%) to a strong recognition of the need to adapt language, tone, and politeness across cultures (87%).

The video analysis showed students frequently negotiating meaning through clarification, paraphrasing, questioning and collaborative reasoning, constructing knowledge together. For example, students sought confirmation and shared understanding by asking, “It’s like capitalism? Or no?” (Group 4, Stage 2 art discussion) and “What exactly is the holiday?” (Group 4, Stage 2 Día de los Difuntos).

The reflective questions exposed that learners recognized that politeness, tone, and cultural norms differ across cultures and may lead to misunderstanding—showing an awareness beyond grammatical understanding. One student wrote, “Differences in politeness and tone can cause misunderstandings,” and another expressed, “They may also offend in some way, even if it’s not their intention.”

Theme 3: Negotiation of meaning and dialogic interactions

Students indicated clear progress in dialogic skills and intercultural ethics, as evidenced in Pre-and-Post-questionnaire results (Q6), moving from uncertainty about disagreeing with people from other cultures (65%) to a substantially greater confidence in expressing respectful disagreement (86%).

This development was evident during the video analysis, where students felt free to express disagreement as part of collaborative meaning-making. For instance, during an art discussion, a student from Ecuador stated, “I don’t think that is art,” to which another participant responded, “Really? It depends on the person” (Group 4, Stage 2 art debate).

Theme 4: Global citizenship, and social awareness

The Pre-and-Post-questionnaire (Q7, Q8, Q9, Q11) showed an increase in global and social responsibility, from 78% to 87%, reflecting a strong sense of obligation towards global and social issues. Participants’ self-identification as global citizens also increased from 47% to 91%. Additionally, students’ valuing of diverse voices and pluralistic thinking went from 69% to 87%, demonstrating openness to multiple perspectives.

During the video analysis of the final outcome, participants exhibited openness toward diverse thinking and the promotion of inclusivity. One group stated, “we all want to reassure somebody that it’s fine to be the way they are, to think what they want to think” (Group 1, Stage 3).

The reflective questions revealed reductions in preconceived stereotypes and increased recognition of diversity within and across cultures. As some students expressed, “I realized that many stereotypes are not true,” “My way of doing things isn’t the only correct way,” and “They are different, but also very similar to us.”

Students also displayed heightened awareness of global issues, linking these concerns to empathy and global responsibility, as reflected in statements such as, “Global problems require empathy and cooperation,” and “Hearing real experiences made global issues feel more real.”

Additional finding

During a final survey, students expressed that the credit-bearing component motivated them to take the activities more seriously and helped them reflect more deeply. Importantly, the survey showed that the grading component was not perceived as a source of anxiety or pressure.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that when VE is embedded into the EFL higher education curriculum, and is guided and moderated by instructors, it aids the development of intercultural self-awareness, pragmatics and ICC (O’Dowd et al., 2019; Romero-Archila, 2025). Throughout the study, the participants were able to break some preconceived stereotypes, develop empathy and understanding of other cultures, and learn to see themselves as responsible members of a global community, to which they are accountable.

Pedagogical implications

For EFL educators, this study evidenced that there is no need for an entire curriculum reform in order to incorporate VE in a study program. However, it is necessary that the virtual exchange rely on a credit-bearing component in order to elicit greater engagement and motivation from students. It was also evident that global citizenship was not something taught, but a byproduct that emerged from the application of the three VE stages. Additionally, when assessing VE assignments, instructors must take into account communicative intent, collaboration, and intercultural engagement, as well as linguistic accuracy (Dolcini & Phelps, 2022).

Conclusion & limitations

This paper demonstrated the development of intercultural communicative competence, social awareness, and global citizenship in EFL higher education through the incorporation of a virtual exchange curriculum, intentionally guided by an instructor. The research evidenced the progression of four dimensions: self-awareness, pragmatics, meaning negotiation, and the emergence of global citizenship as an organic outcome

of VE interactions. The curriculum followed the three stages proposed by O'Dowd and Ware (2009) for the use of virtual exchange, and the collaborative online international learning (COIL) framework. Finally, further research needs to be carried out on the efficacy of VE curriculum adaptation with lower proficiency levels, as well as a closer examination of the development of students from the Global-North at Columbia University.

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