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Adding synchronous sessions to asynchronous virtual exchange: Insights from the IVEProject



ADAM ROARTY ^a 

HÜLYA TUNCER ^b 

LIQING TANG ^c 

^a Rikkyo University, JAPAN
adamroarty@gmail.com

^b Çukurova University, TÜRKİYE
hulyatnrc@gmail.com

^c Tourism College of Zhejiang, CHINA
tangliq@tourzj.edu.cn

Abstract

The International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject) has been connecting students across multiple countries through asynchronous forums on a large scale since 2015. However, considering the variety of virtual exchange methods and the advantages they bring to the field of foreign language learning, there is an increased need to explore the pedagogical possibilities of combining asynchronous and synchronous modalities, particularly across multiple institutions and countries. This short article reports on a pedagogical innovation which involved adding synchronous sessions conducted over Zoom to the asynchronous IVEProject forums. The authors arranged eight weekly Zoom meetings in which students from China, India, Japan, Jordan, Palestine, Türkiye and Syria participated in May–July, 2021. After the final session, a survey was administered to participating students and their teachers to explore their experiences. The results show that the majority of students appreciated and benefitted from the opportunity to communicate synchronously with peers from other countries. The paper also reflects on the benefits and challenges of combining synchronous sessions alongside the asynchronous IVEProject forums, aiming to derive lessons learned from this project in the hope that this will aid future EFL instructors in creating engaging virtual exchange projects which involve participants from multiple cultures and countries.

Keywords: virtual exchange, intercultural communication, synchronous exchange, EFL

Introduction

In our ever-growing mobile and global world, people frequently find themselves communicating and working together with others from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such an understanding has motivated

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ed an increasing number of language teachers to create opportunities for developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the language classroom, with virtual exchanges being a particularly popular option in cases where physical mobility and face-to-face intercultural engagement are limited (Helm, 2015; Qu & Hagley, 2021). Many teachers and researchers alike now recognise that virtual exchange or telecollaboration “can be instrumental in language and culture learning, awareness raising, highlighting rich points, and development of ICC by providing learners with a variety of opportunities for both linguistic and cultural experiences” (Chun, 2015, p.17). This paper reports on an initiative called The International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject), which was established to offer EFL students opportunities for intercultural communication which are not readily available in their classrooms, while developing their ICC and language skills. The majority of interactions on the exchange are through asynchronous forums. However, in this paper we will detail a project which introduced synchronous sessions to the exchange.

In this short article, we detail the process of planning and carrying out the synchronous sessions and present an analysis of survey feedback from teachers and students on the benefits and challenges of this project. We also reflect on lessons learned from this project in the hope that this will aid future EFL instructors in creating engaging virtual exchange projects which involve participants from multiple cultures and countries.

The IVEProject

The IVEProject (The IVEProject, 2022) was started out of a desire to connect university students in Japan who did not have many opportunities to use English outside of a classroom setting with English as a foreign language (EFL) students from other countries. In particular, this was a problem at an institution in Hokkaido, Japan where the project founder, Eric Hagley, taught EFL to Japanese students. The first exchange took place between EFL students in Japan and counterparts in Colombia in 2006. Since then, the project has gradually expanded significantly. To date, more than 24,000 EFL students at over 100 institutions in more than 20 countries around the world have participated in the project. The project has also received financial assistance from a Japanese government grant to promote intercultural communication involving Japanese EFL students. By connecting students across multiple countries, the IVEProject aims to develop students’ English language skills, digital literacy skills, intercultural understanding, interactional confidence and foster students’ motivation to engage in intercultural interactions. This motivation is essential to the development of ICC (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Research on the IVEProjects run to date has found improvements in interactional confidence, and intercultural sensitivity, as well as enhancing students’ knowledge of both their own and other cultures (Bissett, 2021; Donnery, 2022; Hagley, 2016; Hagley, 2020; Hagley & Cotter, 2019). The project continues to attract interest from EFL instructors who struggle to create opportunities for their students to communicate interculturally. The authors of this paper, based in Japan, Türkiye and China, also faced this issue, which led to joining the IVEProject.

IVEProject 2021

In the 2021 IVEProject a total of 5,000 students participated from eleven countries. This included a variety of institutions specialising in different disciplines, but all students took some EFL courses as part of their studies. Students are only able to join the project under the guidance of an instructor. First, instructors register their classes and are then given access to the Moodle platform. Instructors are given induction training through the site and are sent messages through the teacher’s forum with updates on the site. Teachers are basically responsible for engaging their students on the platform and the on-site tools assist teachers and their students in posting as much as possible. For more details on how teachers are advised on how to use the site by the organisers, see Roarty and Hagley (2021) and Hagley and Green (2022). After students were registered by their instructors, they were assigned into multicultural groups of around 20 students and discussed four different topics over eight weeks. The 2021 exchange took place from May to July and featured the following themes which were changed every two weeks: “About us”, “Student life”, “The culture around us” and “Gifts in our culture”. Students could create new discussion topics related to the themes and then reply to other student posts. The Moodle platform allows students to post text, audio, images and video. Additionally, the site features an open forum which all 5,000 students could access. In this space, students could create

topics on any theme and reply to any posts.

Finally, having participated in previous exchanges, the authors decided to arrange synchronous sessions over Zoom to complement the IVEProject Moodle forums. Based in Japan, Türkiye and China, the COVID-19 pandemic had further limited opportunities for students to interact with people from different cultures and countries. There was also a desire to improve students' spoken communication skills and it was believed synchronous sessions with students in different countries would provide an opportunity to do this. Additionally, in a systematic review of 54 studies focusing on how different modalities and applications affect foreign/second language learners' ICC during online exchanges, Avgousti (2018) found that compared to the asynchronous mode, synchronous communication was more appropriate (because of instant feedback), more effective (for discussing cultural aspects), and more convenient. In synchronous sessions, it is possible to judge the reaction of the receiver which stimulates engagement and motivation in the learner (Hrastinski, 2008). It was, therefore, believed that synchronous sessions may enhance the benefits of the IVEProject for students, offering more chances to improve their ICC and language skills.

Participants

In total, eight teachers joined the synchronous sessions in 2021. The teachers were from China, India, Japan, South Africa (working online with students in Syria, Palestine and Jordan), Türkiye, the UK and the United States (working in Japan). These teachers contacted their own students already enrolled in the IVEProject and asked them if they wished to volunteer to participate in the synchronous sessions (described in the next section). A total of 56 students from seven countries (India, China, Türkiye, Japan, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria) participated in the sessions, with a maximum of 33 students in any one session. It had been intended for the same students to participate each week. Nevertheless, because of the voluntary participation, not all students joined each week. In addition, some other teachers expressed interest to join after the project had started and, in the interest of inclusivity, their students were also invited to join the sessions. The students ranged in abilities from beginner to upper-intermediate. The teachers did not use any validated framework to assess students' language proficiency levels. Instead, they used simple definitions to identify their students as beginner (hesitant to speak but can talk about simple topics), pre-intermediate (often make errors/slow to respond but can continue conversations), intermediate (can talk about many topics with some errors/hesitation) and upper-intermediate (can talk about most topics freely with only minor errors/hesitation). Students varied in majors. The students from Türkiye were training to be English teachers and the students from China were English majors, whilst students from other countries were majoring in other areas such as Economics, Sociology and so on, taking English courses as part of their university curricula. All students were studying at university, and ages ranged from 19 to 23 with the exception of one student who was 35.

Synchronous sessions: Planning and format

An initial post was made in the teacher's forum of the IVEProject about plans to conduct synchronous sessions over Zoom to coincide with the eight-week IVEProject in May to July 2021. The rationale for choosing Zoom was that the benefits of Zoom were documented in numerous studies especially in foreign language education contexts (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Tuncer & Karataş, 2021; Zaiarna, 2021), and after corresponding with teachers who replied to that initial post, Zoom was agreed to be the most suitable platform. Teachers were asked to complete details about how many students were likely to join, the available time slots, the English level of their students and the kind of topics they would like students to discuss in the meetings. A suitable time for the most teachers was selected, and the first meeting date was set. Prior to this, a meeting with teachers was arranged and the details of the format of the exchange were discussed and decided.

The Progressive Exchange Model (PEM) outlined by O'Dowd (2017) has been widely used in VE to date, and the meetings were planned to follow this model as it was deemed appropriate to gradually build the exchange. The PEM begins with an initial information exchange in which teachers and students get to know each other while understanding the platform of the exchange (in this case, Zoom). The second stage is comparing and analysing cultural practices which complement the IVEProject forums focused on sharing students' cultures. The final stage is working on a collaborative

project. This final stage provides students with an opportunity to produce meaning focused output, an essential stage of a language course (Nation, 2007).

Table 1 shows a plan for the weekly Zoom meetings, which consisted of two parts lasting roughly 30 minutes each. Additionally, an example plan for one session (week 4) has been included in Appendix A. As well as following the PEM outlined above, these sessions were planned around the four themes used on the asynchronous forums (About us, student life, the culture around us and gifts in our culture), but additional activities and discussion topics were also integrated to address issues that arose in the meetings. For example, it was decided to focus on communication styles in different cultures during the second meeting because of a number of communication breakdowns in the first meeting. Some of these issues included connection problems, different accents and differences in how active students were in joining discussions. These issues are discussed in more details later. Additionally, in the fifth and sixth meetings, students played word games together across Zoom in an attempt to build better relationships and the sessions concluded with a collaborative project in the seventh and eighth meetings where students created news stories together. There is little chance for students to collaborate over the IVEProject forums, so these final two meetings were thought to give students a chance to interact with the other members in a meaningful way, building on the cultural awareness gained in the prior meetings to successfully complete a project together.

Teacher roles within the meetings were also discussed. It was decided that after initial instruction from one leading teacher, the students would be split into small groups and the focus was on the students to use the instructions given (and starting questions on the given theme) to generate discussion among themselves. Teachers moved between groups monitoring and, if necessary, gave prompts to further generate discussion but it was decided teachers should allow the students to lead the discussions and where possible continue interacting among themselves. Students were emailed each week with the plan for the upcoming meeting as well as tips to ensure the meeting would be successful such as joining from a quiet environment, using communication repair strategies, trying to be active in group discussions, showing respect to other members and urged to contact the instructors leading the meetings if they had any problems or questions.

Table 1 *Multicultural synchronous virtual exchange schedule*

Week	Part 1	Part 2
1	Outline of project (General Room)	Breakout room discussion of hobbies and interests (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)
2	Discussion of hobbies and interests (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)	Discussion of communication style in different cultures (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)
3	Discussion of university entrance system in different cultures (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)	Discussion of life at university (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)
4	Discussion of asking questions in different cultures (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)	Task to create questions for the student survey in the IVEProject (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)
5	Discussion of cultural traditions and changing traditions (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)	Word game (General Room)
6	Discussion of gifts in different cultures (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)	Word game (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)
7	Discussion of how news is reported/how students get news (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)	Collaborative project to write a news story (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)
8	Discussion about fake news (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)	Collaborative project to create a fake news story (Breakout rooms of 3-4 students)

Investigating teachers' and students' perceptions

In this section, we describe the methodology used to explore teachers and students' perceptions of the impact of synchronous sessions used together with asynchronous forums involving EFL students from multiple institutions and countries. Previous research suggests synchronous virtual exchanges provide a richer variety of benefits than asynchronous exchanges (Abrams, 2003; Avgousti, 2018; Tanır, 2022), and thus our aim was to understand the reactions of students and teachers to the use of synchronous sessions in the already well-established IVEProject, which predominantly facilitates asynchronous virtual exchange.

We established the following research questions to facilitate this exploration:

1. What are the benefits, if any, of adding synchronous sessions to asynchronous virtual exchange?
2. What are the challenges, if any, in adding synchronous sessions to asynchronous virtual exchange?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through a post virtual exchange survey (Appendix B and C) which was developed by the researchers with the aim of collecting information about the perceptions of participating students and teachers on multicultural synchronous virtual exchange sessions. The survey was distributed electronically. In total, 20 students (nine from Türkiye, six from China, three from Japan and two from Syria) and five teachers (one each from Türkiye, China, Japan, South Africa and USA) responded to the survey questions. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), feedback from the surveys was analysed using a six-phase thematic analysis involving: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The researchers worked on the data individually for the first three phases and then they held online meetings to discuss the themes for the last three phases. In answer to the first research question, the main themes were students becoming more aware of other cultures and developing their linguistic skills. For the second question, the main themes were students having difficulty communicating smoothly due to technical issues, different accents, and different language proficiency levels. Reflecting on these themes, the researchers discussed how they may have improved the experience for participants. The following three sections provide details of the key findings from the project which have been separated into benefits, challenges and lessons learned.

Key Findings

Benefits of the synchronous sessions

The two most prominent benefits mentioned by students were learning about other cultures and developing their EFL skills. These were the most common answers to survey item #1 (*Why did you participate in the meetings?*) with 12 of the 20 students mentioning they wanted to develop their English skills, in particular, speaking skills, and 8 of 20 students making reference to learning about other cultures (see Example 1 below):

Example 1 (Türkiye, Male, 19)

"(I participated in the meetings) in order to improve my communication skills. Also I wanted to learn new things about other cultures."

In response to survey item #6 (*What do you think you learned from the experience?*), 10 of 20 students mentioned gaining new insight into other cultures and 7 of 20 mentioned improving their English skills (see Examples 2-4). Some example comments included,

Example 2 (Syria, Female, 24)

"I learn about culture and how celebrities, how they give gift and what they are favorite meals."

Example 3 (Türkiye, Female, 22)

"I learned more about other cultures viewpoints, festivals, ideas, cultures, language and traditions."

Example 4 (Japan, Female, 19)

"I learned that many foreign people speak English so fast and they proactively start a conversation and tell own opinions."

In the teacher survey, all five teachers mentioned that giving their students a chance to practice their speaking skills was one of the reasons they wanted students to participate, and it would appear this goal was at least partly achieved by some students. However, among students, learning first-hand about different cultures was mentioned more frequently than language gains in this project. It was also observed that students seemed to enjoy exchanges the most when they learned some new information about another culture, for example, they shared pictures of food they had cooked or eaten recently by holding up their phones or showing the food packaging. This resonates with Deng et al. (2021), for instance, who found that the students from China and America could observe "salient differences in their educational systems, culture and lifestyle" (p.765) in their cross-cultural online collaboration study, which increased their intercultural awareness. One other student also mentioned,

Example 5 (Türkiye, Female, 23)

"(I learned) lots of information about different culture, but most importantly, I learned that, all of us are same, we are human beings and we have in common same feelings every part of the world."

And to survey item #7 (*How has this experience changed your views of other cultures?*), 16 of the 20 students replied with something positive towards other cultures, for example,

Example 6 (China, Female, 21)

"I didn't know turkey students spoke English so well. And India, as I expected, has a lot of very different activities"

Example 7 (Türkiye, Male, 19)

"I used to have prejudice to some countries. However, it changed throughout the meetings. I enjoyed speaking with other friends. For example, I had a strict view upon Indian people such as their accent, lifestyle and so on. Thanks to (student name), I changed my view upon Indian people."

The students who did not mention any change commented that they already had some awareness of other cultures and no students commented that their views had changed negatively. Goldstein & Kim (2006) found that students holding prejudiced views are less likely to participate in study abroad programs which are likely to further improve students' language skills as well as ICC. The explicit mention of changing a "strict view upon Indian people" appears to offer some hope that virtual exchange may have some potential to reduce stereotypes and racial prejudices. The comment from Example 6 also shows that views about different countries or cultures may change through online interaction with members of those countries or cultures and example 5 shows that students may find common feelings and form connections with those from other countries or cultures through virtual exchange.

The benefits of the IVEProject in enhancing language skills and intercultural awareness appeared to be enhanced by the use of synchronous meetings. In response to question #9 (*What do you think is the difference between doing meetings on Zoom compared to communicating on the IVEProject website?*), 14 of the 20 students mentioned positives which mainly focused on the intimacy of the interaction and the speed, for example,

Example 8 (Türkiye, Male, age unspecified)

“[Synchronous meetings] create a more intimate or friendly environment.”

Example 9 (China, Female, 21)

“Without a doubt, (synchronous sessions are) more effective. We can see each personally, and share the feelings with each other”

Example 10 (China, Female, 20)

“It's more efficient than (the IVEProject forums). We could get our answers more quick and direct”

The increased efficiency and intimacy of synchronous exchange may allow benefits such as increased engagement, motivation and deeper understanding between students from different cultures as has been found in previous research (Abe & Mashiko, 2019; Avgousti, 2018; Barbosa & Ferreira-Lopes, 2021; Hrastinski, 2008; O'Dowd, 2006; Schenker, 2017).

Challenges of the synchronous sessions

One of the biggest challenges in arranging synchronous sessions involving participants from multiple countries was the time difference between the locations and differences in academic calendars. Unfortunately, this limited the number of students who were able to participate. For example, a teacher from Colombia expressed interest in joining the sessions with their students, but a suitable time could not be arranged with participants from Japan and China. A time which suited the majority of participants was set, and the same time used for every session. However, the sessions concluded in early July which was around exam season for students in China, which led to some students being unable to attend in the latter sessions.

After the sessions started, the most frequent problem, mentioned by 13 of the 20 students, was that students experienced some challenges in understanding the other participants' English either because of the accent or because of issues with grammar or vocabulary. As one student mentioned,

Example 11 (Türkiye, Female, 35)

“Different accents and varieties of English of others made me confused from time to time.”

Jenkins (2002) also found that differences in pronunciation accounted for the majority of misunderstandings between students from different language backgrounds. It should be noted that the level of students differed greatly, and this may have added to problems in understanding. Yet, this frequently mentioned challenge may be viewed as a necessary obstacle to overcome in intercultural exchange. One reason for the sessions being created was that students in the authors' classes are not often exposed to a variety of accents in real-time communication. Participation in online multicultural exchanges may therefore better prepare students for real-world communication in a globalised world. It has long been established that a variety of world Englishes exist (Jenkins, 2006), and to prepare students for cross-cultural communication and improve their ICC, attention should be paid to how pragmatic norms may vary across cultures (McKay, 2011). A missed opportunity in this project was not focusing more on the varieties of English present in the meetings to aid students in their interactions. This is one of the lessons learned which will be discussed in the next section.

The second problem mentioned by students was related to technical issues such as internet connection and microphone problems. This was mentioned by 6 of the 20 students. Unfortunately, this may always occur when attempting to connect students in different countries (see Dorroll et al., 2019 for discussion of such technical issues). Some students were unable to continue participating as the internet connection was unstable. Although it may have limited the number of students who could join the meetings, it was stressed that all teachers should ensure their students have a stable connection and later meetings had fewer technical issues because of this.

One final notable problem mentioned was that some students were often silent. As one student frustratingly commented,

Example 12 (Türkiye, Male, 19)

“No matter how hard I tried, the other students didn't talk much.”

This issue appeared to be due to perceived differences in English language proficiency. As mentioned earlier, some of the participants were training to be English teachers and thus had a much greater proficiency than those taking mandatory English courses unrelated to their majors. This caused frustration as the silent students were seen to be inhibiting the meeting. Yet the silence appeared not to be due to a lack of willingness to participate but rather due to students feeling intimidated and unable to join the conversation. Five of the 20 students commented that they had problems expressing themselves in English. There were three students from Japan who stopped participating in the meetings. When asked by their teachers why they no longer wanted to attend, they revealed that they felt their ability was not sufficient to be able to participate. In virtual exchanges, “[p]erceived differences in linguistic proficiency are important for students” (Healy & Kennedy, 2020, p.133). Therefore, it seems that instructors may need to provide further scaffolding prior to meetings in order to support their students in participating in multicultural exchange projects in order to avoid loss of confidence.

Lessons Learned

From the project outlined in this paper, we, as participating teachers, were able to learn a number of lessons on how to best prepare for such synchronous sessions. Below are the main factors which may have improved this project and may benefit similar projects in the future:

- Teach communication breakdown repair strategies
- Match proficiency level of students
- Ensure a suitable online environment
- Integrate participation to course grade

Teach communication breakdown repair strategies

As mentioned previously, the most common problem students faced was problems in understanding each other. The challenges detailed above included difficulty in understanding different accents, an inability of some students to express themselves in English and frustration at prolonged silences. Several communication strategies can assist students in overcoming these problems. Some students in this exchange employed repair strategies. After asking about the challenges they faced, students and teachers were asked in the post-exchange survey “What did you do to overcome these challenges?” To overcome problems in understanding, nine of 20 students commented that they asked for repetition. Other strategies included asking for explanation, trying to keep communication clear and simple, listening carefully and trying to familiarise themselves with different accents.

Communicative strategies “are an essential tool for English language learners to acquire as these strategies may help them resolve miscommunications as well as negotiate intelligibility” (Kaur, 2021, p.33). The synchronous sessions would have benefited from exploring potential communication problems and strategies to overcome communication difficulties prior to students joining the meetings. As mentioned, some of the main issues were understanding different accents and many students remaining silent so it would have been wise to raise these potential situations. In the second meeting, there was a focus on communication strategies, such as asking for repetition and clarification but time was limited. It would have been more effective if students were introduced to those communication strategies prior to meetings so that they could use them when encountering problems in understanding each other. Nakatani (2010) demonstrated that systematic teaching of communication strategies enhanced students’ abilities to negotiate meaning and improved their overall communicative competence.

In this project, in the weekly emails which were sent out to students prior to each meeting, some tips for effective communication including useful phrases which students could use in the meetings to repair any breakdowns were included. These included some of Rabab’ah’s (2013) strategies such as

asking for repetition (*Could you repeat that, please?*), clarification request and guessing (*What do you mean?/ Do you mean...?*), circumlocution (paraphrasing) and self-repair (*I mean.../What I want to say is...*). It may also have helped to have students do some controlled practice activities using these strategies in their classrooms prior to joining the meetings. This may have given students more confidence to fix any communication misunderstandings which occurred during the meetings. Further exploration of the cause of the misunderstandings in the meetings such as different accents, different uses of vocabulary or common errors may also have helped. Discussions were centred around different communication styles in different cultures in week two but exploring the different forms of English used by non-native speakers around the world may have helped students better understand the reason for some of the communication breakdowns and fix such problems.

Match proficiency level of students

A number of the issues with misunderstandings and communication breakdowns appeared to stem from the differences in language proficiency levels. In particular, the students from Türkiye were far more advanced than those from China or Japan. This led to some frustration (see example 12 above). As this project aimed to give as many students as possible the chance to participate, it may not be possible or desirable to completely match proficiency levels, but future projects may benefit from limiting major gaps in proficiency. For example, students could be roughly split into groups of beginners, intermediate and advanced, and matching students' language proficiency levels across participating institutions would also be desirable. Whilst the communication repair strategies mentioned above may have allowed students with different language proficiency levels to understand each other, the frequency of the breakdowns will increase if there is a large gap between student abilities. As Healy and Kennedy (2020) note, students are aware of these differences in proficiency levels, and this situation affects their feelings and thus participation. For instance, "[m]any of the Japanese students reported feeling nervous and anxious before the exchange that they were to take part in began, believing the level of their English to be insufficient for the activities proposed" (p. 133). In a similar vein, in this project, there were three students from Japan who stopped participating because they felt their language skills were not sufficient. Thus, minimising the gap in proficiency levels might have reduced negative feelings and allowed for smoother communication along with higher levels of consistent participation.

Ensure a suitable environment

Unfortunately, a large number of issues occurred in the first few meetings as students were either not in a quiet environment or their internet connection was unstable. Background noise and connection issues contributed to multiple breakdowns in communication which led to frustration. After the first meeting, participating instructors were emailed to remind students to join from a quiet place with a stable connection and prior to each meeting all students were emailed with the plan for the upcoming meeting and a reminder to join from a quiet room with a stable connection. Explaining the importance of a suitable environment prior to the start of the project would have reduced the issues experienced in the first meeting. Even by reminding students to mute their microphones while listening to the others can help reduce unwanted noise (Hansson, 2021). Smooth communication will be a challenge due to language and culture barriers so additional issues with connections or background noise will greatly impinge on any potential benefits which multicultural exchange may provide. Prior to the multicultural meetings, it would have been useful to have a test meeting which checked the connection and sound quality of each student. This check would have prevented some of the issues which were presented in the meetings.

Integrate participation into course grades

Focusing on the role of a virtual exchange as a valuable learning experience, O'Dowd (2018) suggests that "it should not be used as an 'addon' activity but rather as a recognised, credit-carrying activity which is valued and supported by university management" (p.11). If students do not gain credit, then participation is likely to be inconsistent as was witnessed in this project. Ideally, students would participate of their own volition, and this was the case with many of the students in this project but each week the students changed and the number who would attend was not known in advance. If

participation was integrated into course grades, then the numbers would be clearer, and planning would be easier. Additionally, students would be able to build better connections and learn how to communicate more smoothly if the participants were the same each week. Integration of virtual exchange into course grades is also recommended in the telecollaborative model of virtual exchange (Baroni et al., 2019) where students receive academic credit for a post-exchange project such as submitting an essay or making a presentation about the experience. The final few meetings of this project focused on a collaborative project between students where they wrote a news story together. However, this was not an assignment and students did not gain any credit for this. A potential idea would be for students to create a presentation at the end of the project focusing on something they had learned from this experience. Students then present this in their own classes and receive credit for the work. This should be clearly set out to students at the beginning of the project so they may set their own goals and think more about how their participation in meetings is working towards this end goal.

Conclusion

In the current study, the authors prepared and implemented synchronous sessions involving participants from multiple countries and cultures over an eight-week period. These sessions complemented the already established IVEProject which has been connecting students across the world in asynchronous forums. The added synchronous element gave students a chance to practice real-time spoken communication and to learn more about other cultures, but this came with a number of challenges such as connection issues, sporadic attendance and communication difficulties. Despite the challenges, students provided positive feedback that the synchronous sessions allowed them to form deeper connections with students in other countries and furthered their knowledge and understanding of other cultures. Several lessons were learned in how to maximise the benefits and minimise the potential issues of synchronous multicultural sessions. The solution can be but is not limited to teaching communication repair strategies, ensuring a suitable environment, matching students according to their language proficiency, and integrating participation into course grades. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to limit opportunities for activities such as studying abroad, synchronous multicultural exchange should be considered as part of a dynamic English course. If synchronous multicultural exchanges are carried out with careful attention, then they may provide EFL students with a rich environment in which to improve both their linguistic competence as well as their knowledge and appreciation of other cultures.

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Ethical considerations

Authors declare that participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained during all stages of the research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Week 4 Plan

International Exchange – Week 4 (Asking Questions)

Some students commented that more questions could help the discussion continue actively. In the next meeting, we will focus on asking questions.

To start, we will watch this video about asking good questions. If you can watch before the meeting, this will help you understand (sorry if this is not available in your country):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeJ03dDGICk>

Discussion 1

1. Can you give an example of an easy question?
2. Can you give an example of an open-ended question?
3. In your culture, is it normal for people to ask lots of questions? (for example to friends, parents, teachers)
4. If you have time, ask each other some questions to make a conversation!

After hearing some of your ideas, we will make some questions for the International Virtual Exchange Student Generated Survey. You can see information about this on the IVEProject website.

Discussion 2

1. What kind of question is best for a survey? (for example, an easy question with set answers or open-ended question)
2. What do you want to know about the students in other countries?
3. In your group, make some questions to add to the survey.

Vote

At the end of the meeting, we will vote for the questions to add to the Student Generated Survey.

Example questions prepared for Student Generated Survey of IVE Project

- 1 - Which continent would you prefer to live in? (Multiple choice)

North America
South America
Africa

Asia
Europe
Australia
Antarctica

2 - Which trait do you think makes someone a better person?

Purity
Generosity
Loyalty
Prudence
Confidentiality
Honesty
Affection

3 - How do you feel while interacting with a person from another culture?

Happy
Nervous
Excited
Scared
Comfortable
Other

Appendix B. Survey for Students

1. Why did you participate in the meetings?
2. Thinking about your answer to Q1, did the meetings meet your expectations?
3. What were the challenges you experienced in the meetings?
4. What did you do to overcome these challenges?
5. What could have helped you to overcome these challenges more?
6. What do you think you learned from the experience?
7. How has this experience changed your views of other cultures?
8. Did the meetings improve your English skills? If so, what skills could you improve?
9. What do you think is the difference between doing meetings on Zoom compared to communicating on the IVE Project website?
10. Would you be interested in joining an intercultural exchange again in the future? Why? Why not?
11. If you participated again, what would improve the experience?

Appendix C. Survey for Teachers

1. Why did you want your students to participate in these meetings?
2. Thinking about your answer to Q1, did the meetings meet your expectations?
3. What were the challenges for you and the students?
4. How did you overcome these or help students overcome these?
5. What more could you or the students have done?
6. What did you and the students learn from this experience?
7. How has this experience changed your views of other cultures?
8. Would you be interested in participating in this kind of exchange again? Why/Why not?
9. If you participated in this kind of exchange again, what would you do to improve the experience?