

Unexpected affordances of virtual exchange as teacher education: learning about, with, and from students in a conflict country

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Abstract

Virtual exchange projects with participants in countries in conflict can challenge future teachers to examine previous assumptions and prepare them to better meet the needs of others whose daily lives may be punctuated by violence. Through virtual exchange, participants are pushed out of their comfort zones through interactions with others whose geographic, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic backgrounds are different from their own. Through such projects, future teachers can gain both techno-semio-pedagogic knowledge and intercultural knowledge needed to take an asset-based approach toward cultural and linguistic differences. This article explores the perspectives of graduate students in TESOL who were paired with adult learners of English in Afghanistan for ten 90-minute synchronous online tutoring sessions. Data, in the form of written reflections submitted by the graduate students as a part of their coursework, offer evidence of shifts in participants' descriptions of cultural difference, knowledge about Afghanistan, content knowledge, and teaching online. These data suggest that through virtual exchange with participants in conflict countries, future teachers can gain invaluable professional experience needed to support students who live in places where they do not feel safe, students who have been forced to leave their homes, and students who have witnessed or experienced violence themselves.

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1. Introduction

Virtual exchange can play a vital role in teacher development, offering unique opportunities that could not be obtained through traditional teacher education (Dooly & Sadler, 2013). Through virtual exchange, participants come together with others whose geographic, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic backgrounds may be very different from their own (O'Dowd, 2015). In such projects, future teachers can engage in reflective practices (Lenkaitis, 2020), make connections to cultural topics (Jauregi & Banados, 2008), and develop greater global awareness (Lenkaitis, 2020; Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2018). Moreover, future teachers can develop technological skills (Zhang, Li, Liu, & Miao, 2016) and digital skills (Baroni et al., 2019), which may lead to increased confidence in technology integration in their own classrooms (Arnold & Ducate, 2006). Finally, projects in the virtual space bridge theory into practice (Lenkaitis, 2020), supporting knowledge of course concepts (Dooly & Sadler, 2013) and achievement of course outcomes (Jauregi & Banados, 2008). Authors of the EVALUATE report (Baroni et al., 2019), which examined virtual exchange projects at 34 initial teacher training institutions, propose that virtual exchange is “most effective when it forces learners and teachers out of their comfort zones and brings them to engage in linguistic, intercultural, and technological learning experiences which they would not usually be confronted with in their day-to-day learning” (p. 107).

This article explores the perspectives of future teachers who were pushed out of their comfort zones as participants in a virtual exchange which brought graduate students in a US-based TESOL program together with adult learners of English in Afghanistan for synchronous online tutoring sessions. The Afghan participants lived in a country in conflict (Strand & Dahl, 2010). When the data shared in this article was gathered, 2019-2020, the conflict in Afghanistan was one of the deadliest in the world for civilians (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2020). In 2020, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 10,392 civilian casualties, 3,403 deaths and 6,989 injuries as a result of the armed conflict. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), during the second quarter of 2020, civilian casualties increased by nearly 60% compared to the first quarter of the year, and by 18% compared to the same period in 2019 (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2020).

The lives of the Afghan participants described in this article were punctuated by the daily threat of violence. In 2019, violence in major population centers included assaults on Afghan government

buildings, foreign governments, and civilian targets such as international organizations (US Department of State, 2022). For the Afghan participants, taking part in the virtual exchange required navigating potentially dangerous city streets to access computers at educational centers, universities, or offices; most participants did not have internet in their homes. Even in public spaces, power outages and interruptions in the internet, participants' access to technology was further reduced by the fact that traveling late in the day was especially dangerous, particularly for women who were expected to be at home after dark.

The future teachers who took part in the virtual exchange were enrolled in a course on approaches to teaching grammar in context, for which I was the instructor. At the outset, my aim was to design a project that would provide my students with opportunities to reflect on and apply what they were learning in class. The decision to have the future teachers interact with learners online was a practical one, as many of the graduate students worked full-time and often drove over an hour to get to campus. Having participants teach in the virtual space eliminated the need for travel time while allowing the graduate students to gain experience incorporating technology into their teaching. When the project was just in the planning stages, I learned that a colleague was volunteering with a US-based nonprofit organization which paired adult learners of English in Afghanistan with tutors around the world. The organization needed tutors; the future teachers I was working with needed students. My colleague and I decided to collaborate and developed the virtual exchange described in this article.

2. Literature review

Research on virtual exchange has found collaborating with “‘real’ informants of the target culture” (O’Dowd, 2011, p. 350) can provoke cognitive conflicts in which participants’ established views, values, and beliefs become confronted (Lomicka & Lord, 2007; O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006), resulting in greater critical cultural awareness (O’Dowd, 2011) and increased global awareness (Lenkaitis, 2020; Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2018). Recent studies on intergroup contact in the virtual space include a project in which online interactions led to reduced intergroup anxiety between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (White et al., 2019); an examination of the role of E-contact and self-disclosure in improving Turkish-Kurdish interethnic relations (Bagci et al., 2021); and an exploration of cooperative video gaming as a means of increasing children’s intergroup tolerance in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Benatov, Berger, & Tadmor, 2021). A project which brought together teacher trainees from Turkey and the United States found that participants examined their own prejudices, revisiting and revising their preconceived notions of the other as they “learned to suspend their (dis)beliefs about their interlocutors’ cultures and started moving

toward dismantling stereotypes” (Üzüm, Akayoglu, & Yazan, 2020, p. 170). Studies have explored virtual exchange projects with participants in conflict countries (e.g. Bagci et al., 2021; Benatov et al., 2021; White et al., 2019) and international projects which paired future teachers with learners in other countries (e.g. Hilliker, 2020; Üzüm et al., 2020). Strand and Dahl (2010) point to the complexity of defining “conflict affected countries”, noting that factors to be considered include the length or nature of a conflict and numbers of resulting deaths or injuries, and their list of countries experiencing armed conflict includes Afghanistan. To my knowledge, virtual exchange in which future teachers collaborated with participants living in Afghanistan or other conflict countries has received scant attention.

Interaction with people from different cultures has been shown to spur critical engagement with otherness (Byram, 1997). In online collaborations, participants of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021) come together in the virtual intercultural borderlands (Minett, Dietrich, & Ekici, 2022). In virtual exchange, the development of digital literacy skills and intercultural communicative competence have been found to be interdependent (Fuchs, Hauck, & Müller-Hartmann, 2012; Hauck & Kurek, 2017). When compared with teacher education courses which rely on class readings and discussions, projects in which future teachers interact with participants from countries and cultures which are different from their own have been found to more deeply influence understandings of intercultural communication (Menard-Warwick, Heredia-Herrera, & Palmer, 2013).

The development of digital literacy skills and intercultural communicative competence have been found to be interdependent (Fuchs et al., 2012; Hauck & Kurek, 2017) in online collaborations. Cappellini and Hsu (2020) propose that through online collaborations teacher candidates can build ‘techno-semio-pedagogical competence’ (Guichon, 2012); that is knowledge and skills for applying relevant technology to pedagogical objectives. Using digital tools as part of virtual exchange, future teachers build links between theory and practice in online teaching (Cappellini & Hsu, 2020) as they experiment with new technologies and reflect on the implementation of these technologies in educational contexts (Desjardins & Peters, 2007). In the future, virtual exchange participants may draw on these experiences as they integrate technology in their own classrooms (Arnold & Ducate, 2006). Moreover, through virtual exchange, future teachers can develop the confidence and skills to design their own virtual exchange collaborations for their students (Dooly, 2020).

Virtual projects have been found to support future teachers’ knowledge of course content (Dooly & Sadler, 2013), as students put into practice what they are learning in their classes (Baroni et al., 2019). For example, an online collaborative project in which future teachers served as

conversation partners for Mexican learners of English offered teacher candidates opportunities to apply concepts and integrate challenging material they were learning in a linguistics course (Hilliker, 2020). In such projects, future educators work toward achieving course goals by putting theories and concepts into practice through authentic and hands-on experiences (Hart & King, 2007; Knight-McKenna, Darby, Spingler, & Shafer, 2011; Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, & Fisher, 2011), allowing them to deepen their understanding of content knowledge as they experiment with practices they can later implement in their own classrooms (Hilliker, 2020).

3. Methods

The virtual exchange project examined in this article paired US-based graduate TESOL students with adult learners of English in Afghanistan for online synchronous tutoring sessions; over the course of a 16-week semester, the pairs met for ten 90-minute sessions. The project was a collaboration with Pax Populi Academy, an initiative of a US-based nonprofit organization which worked with students and volunteer coordinators at educational advising centers in Mazar-e Sharif, Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat. Since August 2021 and the takeover of the Afghan government by the Taliban, the project has been suspended.

The project was embedded in a course in which future teachers were expected to gain insights into grammatical structures of English and to evaluate and implement different approaches to teaching grammar in context. As the Afghan participants in the virtual exchange had varying levels of proficiency in English, the graduate students were expected to conduct a needs analysis at the outset of the project and to center their materials and sessions on students' interests and needs. The participants had access to materials hosted on the Pax Populi learning management systems which they could use with their students. These materials included writing and discussion prompts, audio and video recordings, and readings; among the themes explored in these materials were education, music, academic success, and peace. During discussions with their classmates, the graduate student participants often shared suggestions for materials and activities. While the graduate students were encouraged to incorporate their growing knowledge of grammar forms and teaching approaches over the course of the semester, no restrictions were placed on the topics the future teachers were expected to cover in their lessons.

Before the project began, the graduate students were provided with readings and videos which explored topics such as the history of the Taliban, consequences of decades-long violence in Afghanistan, and existing limitations on access to education, particularly for girls. In addition, the graduate students took part in an orientation, led by a US-based representative of Pax Populi.

During this online session, the Pax Populi representative answered questions regarding logistics such as scheduling and accessing teaching materials. Participants were encouraged to establish relationships of openness and trust with their Afghan students; nonetheless, the Pax Populi representative suggested that graduate students not explore topics related to ‘religion or politics’ in their initial interactions. While no subjects were considered taboo, participants were urged to let their students initiate conversations regarding their experiences living in a country in conflict.

4. Data collection and analysis

As part of their course requirements, the graduate student participants each completed six written reflections; prompts for these reflections were made up of multiple questions. The data analyzed for this article come from the initial reflections, composed before the participants’ first meetings with their Afghan students, and their sixth and final reflections, submitted after the completion of the ten tutoring sessions. The reflections are those of 18 graduate students who took part in the virtual exchange in 2019 and 2020. Of these participants, 15 were female and three were male; they ranged in age from 21 to 55. The participants described their first languages as English (10), Vietnamese (3), Arabic (2), Ukrainian (2), and Mandarin Chinese (1). Over half of the participants had some teaching experience; none had worked with students from Afghanistan.

The Afghan learners were between the ages of 21 and 40; eight of the 18 participants were female. All had completed high school and some had undergraduate degrees. Their reasons for taking part in the tutoring project varied, as did their long-term goals. Some hoped to continue their education outside Afghanistan and saw English as a means not only to gain admittance to a university but also to qualify for a scholarship which would help defray the cost of their studies. Others were English teachers who sought to strengthen their linguistic proficiency to better serve their students and, perhaps, qualify for a promotion. Several of the Afghan participants were university students eager to supplement their classroom study of English. Out of concerns for their safety, which could be jeopardized if their identities were to become known, no reflections were gathered from the Afghan participants.

Before the project began, the graduate students were asked to reflect on what they knew or hoped to learn about students they would be working with, to share hopes and fears they might have, and explore links between the project and other courses they were taking. For this initial reflection, participants responded to the following questions.

- At this point, what do you know or what can you imagine about your student's first language, access to formal education, access to technology (including cell phones, computers, internet), and reasons for studying English?
- What are some things you hope to learn about your student that might make the tutoring experience more successful for both of you?
- What fears or concerns do you have about teaching English grammar, about tutoring, about teaching online, or about working with your student?
- What questions do you have about tutoring and specific expectations for this project?
- How does this tutoring project connect with the content of this course and/or other courses you have taken as part of your graduate degree?
- What you think you might (or hope to) gain (personally, professionally) from the project?

At the end of the project, the graduate students were asked to return to their first reflections to consider their initial responses and explore if or how their perspectives had changed. For this final reflection the questions were as below.

- What have you learned about your student's first language, access to formal education, access to technology (including cell phones, computers, internet), and reasons for studying English?
- What are some things you learned about your student that made the tutoring experience more successful for both of you?
- Did anything you learn make your interactions more challenging?
- What have you learned about teaching English grammar, about tutoring, about teaching online, or about working with your student?
- What would you tell a future student in this course about the tutoring and specific expectations for this project?
- How does this tutoring project connect with the content of this course and/or other courses you have taken as part of your graduate degree?
- What, if anything, have you gained (personally, professionally) from the project?

The project was intended to provide graduate students with opportunities to engage in experiential learning. However, an initial review of participant reflections offered evidence of unexpected affordances of collaborating with learners in Afghanistan. In addition to sharing examples of what they were learning about grammar and teaching in the virtual space, some of the future teachers described their tutoring sessions as opportunities to engage in intercultural communication

and to challenge assumptions about life in a conflict country. To learn more about the graduate students' perspectives, both at the beginning and the end of the project, the 18 initial and 18 final reflections were coded for references to the following themes: cultural difference, knowledge about Afghanistan, content knowledge (grammar), and teaching online.

5. Results

This results section enumerates the instances in which each of the following four topics was mentioned: cultural difference, knowledge about Afghanistan, content knowledge (grammar), and teaching online. Direct quotes from participant reflections are shared for each theme. Emphasis is placed on identifying evidence of changes in participants' perspectives.

5.1. Cultural difference

In their initial reflections, nine participants made references to culture or cultural difference. Four of the nine expressed a desire to learn about another culture through their interactions with their Afghan learners. One was concerned that her limited knowledge would lead her to do or say something to offend her student and saw it as her responsibility to learn more about her student's background. "I think that I need to do some research on locations and cultures", she wrote. "I do not want to discuss something with my tutee that is not appropriate". Four participants shared concerns that cultural differences might lead to misunderstandings. "Working with a student from another country will undoubtedly bring many difficulties and challenges because we are people from different cultures and countries", wrote one. "I am a little worried about how the communication will be with the tutee [...] or if some kind of cultural difference will cause a problem for us", wrote another.

Four participants made references to culture or cultural difference in their final reflections. Three of these graduate students described what they had learned about their students' cultures. For example, one wrote, "I expanded my worldview and learned a lot about a new culture for me". Of what she had learned about her student, one future teacher wrote not of difference but of commonalities; "I found out that we share the same values and aspiration for success", she shared. Only one participant referred to challenges she had faced, framing the tutoring experience as one she could draw on in the future. "When working with a tutee who has a different language and culture", she wrote. "I have to be more careful in learning and expressing information to avoid causing unexpected misunderstandings".

5.2. Knowledge about Afghanistan

Before the project began, the graduate students were asked what they knew or could imagine about their future Afghan students. Three participants wrote about technology, expecting that their students' access might be limited due to cost. Three shared data they had researched regarding formal education and literacy levels in Afghanistan; one participant wrote, "I learned that the state of education has been in deep suffering for quite some time". Two future teachers wrote about limitations placed on women's access to education. For example, one stated, "I know it is more accessible to males than females due to cultural and religious restrictions". One participant referred specifically to the Taliban, describing it as having "infiltrated the country for the past few decades". Only one graduate student referred to the impact living in a country in conflict might have on their students' lives, speculating that "teachers and students are easily in danger". This was the only direct reference participants made to dangers and potential violence the Afghan students faced as residents of a country in conflict.

In their final reflections, 11 future teachers reflected on what they had learned about Afghanistan. While she did not refer to Afghanistan as a country in conflict, one participant did use the words "terrorists" and "chaos", to describe the images she has seen in her reflection, she contrasted what her student had told her with the depictions in US media:

"I feel that I've learned a lot about Afghanistan that you wouldn't normally see [in] the media nowadays. The news tells us that it's full of terrorists and chaos, but my tutee made it seem like a truly beautiful country".

A second graduate student shared, "It was an awesome experience getting to know [...] my tutee and learning about her way of life in a country we hear a lot about on the news and one I don't know a lot about". Tying what she had learned about Afghanistan to greater insight into cultural difference, a third participant wrote, "I have learned about a country that I was very unfamiliar with; it was very eye opening to see how different our cultures are".

Having the opportunity to interact one-on-one with Afghan students offered participants concrete examples of the topics they shared in their initial reflections. For example, rather than generalizing about access to technology in Afghanistan, as several graduate students had before the project began, participants wrote specifically about the people they had worked with. "I [...] learned that [my student] does not have easy access to the internet and modern technology", one graduate student shared. Another wrote of her student:

“She had access to internet, but it was not that good. During the final two weeks of tutoring, she was unable to meet during our regular scheduled time, but we managed to work it out. She had a cell phone, but her entire family used it. The only laptop that she had was from her work and after six weeks into tutoring, they told her she could not use it for her tutoring sessions”.

In addition, two future teachers reported what they had learned from their students about inequities in access to education and the hurdles some women and girls have to overcome to pursue their studies. “I have learned that most women do not get education in Afghanistan”, wrote one participant. “[My student] told me that the women from her village don’t get education. Because she lives in a city, she went to school and college; she received a degree”. Another graduate student wrote of the person she had worked with; “She had difficulty studying in the public elementary school because education was, and is still, recommended for boys only”. Until she was a teenager, her Afghan student “at school dressed up as a boy sometimes”, this participant shared; when she took part in the virtual exchange, the student was “living alone at the dorm in the Capital to study medicine, away from her family”.

5.3. Content knowledge (grammar)

At the outset of the project, nine graduate students referenced course content in their reflections. One framed the project as an opportunity to learn more about grammar and how to teach it. The other eight worried that they were not prepared to teach grammar. For example, one wrote, “The main fear I have is feeling inadequate to teach [...]. When I taught overseas I had been put in awkward situations where a student asked a question and I didn’t know the answer”. Though she had taught before, this participant worried she would not have sufficient academic knowledge to answer her student’s questions. She was not alone in her uncertainty. “About grammar teaching”, a second participant wrote, “my concern is that I don’t know all the grammar terminologies”. A graduate student whose first language was Vietnamese worried she might make grammatical mistakes herself during her tutoring sessions. She wrote, “Because I’m not a native speaker so there are many fears that I have to face with such as the grammatically incorrect that I may make”. Her lack of confidence came not from her knowledge of course content but from her perception of herself as someone who was potentially less competent than her classmates who had grown up speaking English.

In their final reflections, 11 participants made references to grammar and grammar teaching, reporting increased confidence in their content knowledge; the Vietnamese speaker who had expressed concerns she might make mistakes made no references to challenges she had faced when

teaching grammar to her Afghan student. Two future teachers stated that the project had deepened their understanding of grammar. One wrote, “I reviewed areas that I felt shaky with so I would be better prepared. My grammar has improved through this course”. Another said her perspective on grammar had changed, writing, “through this course, we have learned that grammar is liberating; more than one form can express syntax”. Another participant wrote, “I have learned that teaching English grammar can be made interesting and fun for both teacher and student when it is based off a topic of interest to the student”. A third graduate student concluded:

“Teaching grammar in a way the students can’t apply and that the teacher can hardly understand is painful. But teaching them grammar they encounter naturally and can use is less terrifying for the teacher and more sensible for the student”.

Reflecting on what she had learned from the virtual exchange, one graduate student made an explicit connection between what she and her classmates had been asked to do and lessons she designed for her student; she wrote, “I have used some of the activities we have done in this grammar class in my sessions with my tutee”. Implementing these activities, she shared, “has taught me that it is okay if some activities work and others don’t”.

5.4. Teaching online

In their initial reflections, ten participants made references to teaching online; five of the ten expressed concerns. One participant described herself as “a little bit nervous”. A second graduate student worried that he might not have the pedagogical knowledge to craft lessons to meet his student’s needs. Though he was an experienced teacher, he worried about what it would be like to teach via videoconferencing:

“I am concerned with my teaching style online and how I will adapt going from classroom instruction to virtual instruction”.

Another graduate student shared concerns that she might not be able to teach as effectively online as she would in person. “Teaching online just bothers me a little because it’s harder to show, and I’m pretty good at showing”. Two future teachers expressed concern that their lessons might be interrupted by technical difficulties. “Sometimes the internet doesn’t work”, wrote one participant. “You will waste your time on fixing it and [the] teacher cannot finish the lesson”.

While five participants shared concerns about teaching online before the tutoring began, five framed the project as an opportunity to learn more about working in the virtual space. For example, one

graduate student wrote, “I hope to gain more experiences in teaching online, working with foreign tutees and applying technology tools in teaching (Zoom)”. Two participants expressed confidence in their abilities to teach online while acknowledging challenges that are inherent to interactions in the virtual space. One wrote:

“I have experience teaching online, so I’m not too worried about that. I can stay calm if connections are bad or if communication is a bit awkward because of a lack of visual cues that would be there if we were face-to-face”.

In their final reflections, ten graduate students addressed the topic of online teaching. All of these participants shared that they had learned more about teaching online as a result of the virtual exchange. One participant wrote “after the tutoring session, I can be able to use Zoom to teach online”, and another shared that “tutoring online is a new experience for me but I really enjoyed it”. Seven graduate students reflected on challenges of teaching in the virtual space. Of these seven, all reported that they had encountered technological problems while working with their Afghan students and shared how these challenges had affected their teaching. “The internet in Afghanistan was extremely poor, so it often interrupted the lesson, which made my lessons often longer than I expected”, one wrote. “Due to poor internet, classes were conducted without video, which makes eye contact impossible”, another shared.

Participants also reported that they had developed skills for effectively managing interruptions and learned how to be flexible when faced with technological challenges. One graduate student wrote, “I think that I learned how to better communicate with those that have limited access to internet”. Another participant shared the following reflection on her experience:

“I personally think that teaching online requires a lot more patience than face to face teaching; because the problems such as internet disconnection, sound quality or micro problems can interrupt our discussions or cause misunderstandings in communication at any time, both the tutor and the tutee must become more patient in repeating the lesson until it is certain that we understand each other correctly as well as summarizing the lesson particularly to avoid missing any knowledge. However, thanks to these difficulties, I became much more careful and patient”.

Participants’ willingness to adapt to challenging circumstances is illustrated by the experience of one future teacher who changed the schedule of her tutoring sessions to meet with her student at the time of day when the internet signal he relied on was the strongest. “We realized that the internet is better in the morning, so we conducted classes in the morning”, she shared.

6. Discussion

The data explored in this article examines the perspectives and experiences of US-based future teachers who participated in ten online synchronous tutoring sessions with adult learners of English in Afghanistan as part of a virtual exchange project embedded in a graduate-level course on teaching English grammar in context. Written reflections, composed over the course of the exchange, offer evidence of change in the participants' descriptions of their content knowledge and of teaching online. In addition, these reflections revealed unexpected affordances of collaborating with learners in a country in conflict, offering examples of shifts in participants' framing of cultural difference and their perceptions of a country they knew little about at the outset of the project, Afghanistan.

Throughout the virtual exchange, participants were engaged in intercultural communication (Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2018). Changes in participants' framing of cultural difference provide evidence that such interactions can lead to greater critical cultural awareness (O'Dowd, 2011) and increased global awareness (Lenkaitis, 2020; Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2018). In their initial reflections, half of the participants who made references to culture envisioned difference as a barrier to successful interactions. In contrast, at the end of the project all participants who wrote about cultural difference described it as something to be respected and even valued. These descriptions suggest a shift in participants' framing of difference from a potential barrier to communication to an asset (Hilliker, 2020). Taking an asset-based approach is a key tenet of culturally responsive teaching, defined by Gay (2002) as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). What participants learned about the importance of recognizing and incorporating students' culture into their teaching has the potential to shape their interactions with students of any background.

Interacting with students from Afghanistan created opportunities for participants to examine their beliefs about their interlocutors and question prejudices and stereotypes (del Rosal, Conry, & Wu, 2017; O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004; Tanghe & Park, 2016; Üzümlü et al., 2020) about their students' home country and about living in a country in conflict. For example, from their students these future teachers gained personal perspectives on topics they had only general knowledge about at the outset of the project, such as women's education and access to technology. In addition, several participants reported shifts in their perspectives of a country and culture they had associated exclusively with violence and terrorism before taking part in the virtual exchange. The reflections analyzed for this article did not contain explicit references to violence. Nonetheless, for the future teachers who took part in this project the reality of life in a conflict country became particularly stark when the Taliban assumed control of the Afghan government in August 2021. Among those who have been displaced, gone into hiding, or have fled Afghanistan are learners who participated in the virtual exchange

project described in this article. Some graduate students have maintained contact with and received updates from their former students.

In addition to offering a glimpse of what future teachers can learn from virtual exchange with participants in conflict countries, findings from this study support and add to those of previous research which found that future teachers can gain content knowledge through virtual exchange projects (Baroni et al., 2019; Lenkaitis, 2020). By providing opportunities for ‘applied learning’ (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009), the virtual exchange described in this article not only supported the future teachers’ knowledge of course concepts (Dooly & Sadler, 2013) but also allowed them to put theory into practice (Lenkaitis, 2020) and gain authentic and hands-on experience. In their reflections, participants shared explicit connections between the project and their achievement of their graduate course outcomes (Jauregi & Banados, 2008). As future teachers of English, the participants can expect to answer grammar questions from or design lessons for students of varying backgrounds and levels of linguistic proficiency. In their future teaching, they can plan to draw on lessons learned from activities, both those which went well and those which were less effective, that they used with their Afghan students during virtual exchange.

Like future teachers in other virtual exchange projects, these participants gained techno-semio-pedagogical knowledge (Cappellini & Hsu, 2020; Dooly & Sadler, 2013; Hart & King, 2007; Hilliker, 2020; Knight-McKenna et al., 2011; Levesque-Bristol et al., 2011). At the end of the project, the graduate students reported increased confidence in their technological (Zhang et al., 2016) and digital skills (Baroni et al., 2019). Teaching in the virtual space, they developed knowledge needed to implement technology in their own classrooms (Arnold & Ducate, 2006), to teach online, and to develop their own virtual exchange projects in the future (Dooly, 2020). Given the persistence of the digital divide worldwide (Muller & de Vasconcelos Aguiar, 2022), many of these future teachers may work with students who have limited access to technology. The flexibility and patience participants gained navigating the challenges of unreliable internet connections and power outages have the potential to inform their work with students anywhere in the world.

7. Conclusions

Around the world, future educators may be called on to work with students who live in conflict countries or in places where they do not feel safe, with students who have been forced to leave their homes or have witnessed or experienced violence themselves. For example, two of the participants whose experiences are shared in this article are from Ukraine, where they plan to teach after their upcoming graduations. Teachers with techno-semio-pedagogic knowledge, experience engaging

in intercultural communication, and insights into some of the challenges of living in a country in conflict will be uniquely prepared to help meet the needs of these students. For example, in the first five weeks following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, four million people were forced to flee (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Technology has played a role in maintaining continuity of education for refugee students as well as those still living in Ukraine; in March 2022, a UNESCO (2022) initiative began furnishing teachers and learners with computer hardware and digital learning contents. Establishing and maintaining collaborations with participants living in conflict countries means navigating challenges including limited access to computers or to reliable internet. The perspectives shared in this article provide powerful examples that these barriers can be overcome and that through virtual exchange future teachers gain invaluable professional experience as they examine previous assumptions and learn more about teaching, about the world, and about themselves.

8. Limitations and opportunities for future research

This article explores the perspectives of a diverse group of future teachers, speakers of Arabic, English, Mandarin Chinese, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese with varying levels of teaching experience in Japan, Syria, Turkey, the US, and Vietnam. A limitation of this study, however, is that it includes the voices of only half of the participants in the virtual exchange – those of the graduate students. Gathering data from learners in conflict countries poses profound risks and steps must be taken to protect the anonymity and the safety of participants. Nonetheless, future research on the role of virtual exchange in teacher education would be greatly enriched by the inclusion of the perspectives of both future teachers and of the language learners they collaborate with. In addition, as previous studies have found participants may use knowledge and skills developed through virtual exchange in their own classrooms (Arnold & Ducate, 2006), future research might explore the potential long-term impacts of virtual exchange through the observations of classes taught by or follow-up interviews with teachers who have taken part in such projects. For example, the graduate students described in this article could be asked whether they felt their participation in the virtual exchange helped prepare them to support students from conflict countries, refugees, and others who might have experienced trauma.

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