Connecting the disconnected: analysis of a virtual exchange during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion about the use of virtual exchange for the teaching and learning of languages. The project was designed as a Spanish language conversation exchange that connected students via synchronous Zoom sessions. Following a pilot semester that took place in spring 2019, the exchange was then repeated with a new group of students during the spring 2020 term, the same semester during which the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the world. The exchange took place over a two-week period and pairs were formed between students enrolled in a graduate level pre-service Spanish language program in Spain and undergraduate intermediate Spanish students in the US. Groups were asked to complete five topic-based conversation sessions. Individual exchange sessions were recorded and transcribed. Exchange participants also completed a survey about their experiences. Findings from the recorded sessions, transcript analysis, and surveys show that the virtual conversation exchange was successful and that difficulties such as technology and scheduling, both recurring issues that have been noted in previous studies of telecollaboration (Helm, 2015), were not significant barriers. Because the virtual exchange took place during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary focus of this study was to examine how students utilized the exchange as a way to stay connected during a time of mass disconnection.

Keywords: Spanish; pre-service; connection; pandemic; synchronous exchange; virtual exchange.

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1.   Introduction

In the spring of 2020, due to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus, the language teaching and learning landscape experienced an irreversible shift. Suddenly, computer-assisted language teaching became the central focus of virtually every meeting, email, and professional development conversation. In the broader evolution of language teaching and learning, this period of rapid reconfiguration has appropriately come to be referred to as a time of emergency remote teaching and learning (Jin, Deifell, & Angus, 2022). Unlike the online teaching and learning that had occurred before, this new pedagogical context was complicated by unprecedented levels of stress, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. For some, this caused a complete halt to the teaching and learning process. Others persisted, trying to salvage what was left of the semester by shifting to synchronous and asynchronous online delivery modes. For the most part, instructors were scrambling to find ways to maintain the very basic elements of their pedagogies in these new, isolated, and physically disconnected spaces. In our case, a recently established virtual conversation exchange helped us to achieve these goals of continued instruction.

Previous studies on virtual language exchange have shown them to be positive learning experiences for language learners. For instance, beginning Spanish learners reported improved language skills and cultural knowledge after participating in a combination of synchronous and asynchronous exchange activities (Marull & Swapna, 2020). Martinsen and Thompson (2019) also investigated the efficacy of virtual exchange for novice-level speakers and found that even for students with limited proficiency, exchange sessions led to increased levels of comfort and confidence when interacting with native speakers. Beyond linguistic gains, improvement in student intercultural competence as well as positive development of metrics related to improved global citizenship have also been well documented (O'Dowd, 2021). More recently, focus has shifted to a discussion about how online teaching and learning can be used to minimize unexpected disruptions to the curriculum (Gacs, Goertler, & Spasova, 2020). This paper offers a critical reflection of our virtual Spanish conversation exchange and shows how it successfully provided continuity of teaching and learning during what will likely be remembered as one of the most challenging semesters in our professional history.

2.   Context, objectives, and project design

In the spring term of 2020, a total of 38 students participated in the virtual conversation exchange, and Zoom synchronous videoconference sessions were used to connect students from the two participating institutions. Groups consisted of Spanish language students attending a regional university in the southern US who were paired with pre-service Spanish language students

enrolled in a graduate program at a university in Spain. For both the spring 2019 pilot and the spring 2020 exchanges, the Spanish language students in the US participated with the goal of practicing their listening and speaking skills while the graduate students in Spain participated with the goal of gaining practical teaching experience as pre-service language teachers. Other exchange models involving pre-service teacher candidates have shown that such experiences can be powerful and transformational (Cappellini & Hsu, 2020; Lenkaitis, 2020). The pre-service graduate students involved in the study were encouraged to be innovative, and session recordings revealed that many functions of the Zoom platform were utilized, including the share screen and chat features.

The virtual exchange was carried out as a practitioner-led model (O'Dowd, 2018) where both exchange partners participated in distinct but mutually beneficial ways. The partnership was formed as a grassroots initiative (Sebastian et al., 2020) that capitalized on a pre-existing relationship between the two participating institutions. Groups were assigned by the organizing partners and individual session schedules were set by the student participants. Each group was charged with completing a total of five synchronous exchange sessions over the span of approximately two weeks with individual sessions lasting about 50 minutes each. After providing the groups with a recommended curriculum to follow for each of the sessions and a brief orientation to the Zoom platform, the exchange sessions were completed without moderators or an external presence by the collaborating institutions. Participating students were told that the suggested conversation topics were optional and that they were free to explore other topics of interest based on how their target language conversations unfolded.

Individual exchange sessions were recorded and transcribed by the organizing faculty. Additionally, participant surveys were administered upon completion of the exchange. The following sections contain highlights from this data collection which was carried out with proper approvals from the US-based Institutional Review Board and with participants' signatures granting permission for recordings and dissemination of findings.

3.   Discussion of outcomes

3.1.   Overview of sessions

Although we provided student participants with suggested guidelines for the number and overall duration of sessions, some variation existed across the participant groups. Zoom recordings showed that groups completed a total of 85 exchange sessions with an average of 50 minutes per session.

Sessions were completed following a suggested series of conversation topics and optional prompts. The general topics for each of the sessions included personal introductions, school life, professional goals, everyday life, and places of origin. Table 1 shows a more detailed overview of each session including expanded prompts and ideas for conversation related to each overall topic.

Table 1. **Overview of exchange session topics and corresponding conversation prompts**

Session 1: Introductions	Basic personal information, likes and dislikes (books, foods, movies, activities), previous experiences with the target language and/or culture, experiences, and comfort level with technology
Session 2: School	Experiences at the different levels of school (primary, secondary, post-secondary education), professors, classes, favorite subjects, and comparing experiences in their respective academic programs
Session 3: Professional Goals	Future and/or current jobs and job interests, professional skills, job training, professional experiences, comparison of the employment outlook for young people in both cultures and countries, and discussion of job market trends and access to jobs
Session 4: Everyday Life	Daily schedules, schedules, habits, holidays, festivals, celebrations, traditions, use of social media, and use of technological tools and platforms
Session 5: Places of Origin	Where born, raised, and currently live, cities visited, kinds of houses where living/lived, linguistic and cultural characteristics of the community where residing, and using Google Street View to show each other some of these places

Each group was asked to follow these general topic guidelines or engage in other topics as their conversations developed naturally. Recordings showed that with this freedom, some sessions were used in more of a tutorial way with the Spain-based partner offering extra instruction for grammar topics, vocabulary learning, and cultural exploration. However, even when sessions moved from open topic conversations to language-focused tutoring, the language of the session was predominantly Spanish.

3.2. Transcript and video recording data

Because the exchange took place during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of groups utilized the beginning of sessions to discuss what life was like for them during this difficult time. The following examples have been translated into English to emphasize the content of the conversation rather than the nature of the language used between the conversation partners. The excerpt below shows how part of a session was used to discuss class disruptions caused by the pandemic.

> **Spain Student 1**: Every week they extend it and say that it will be more time. So, I don't know. But, for example, they have suspended classes. We won't have classes until September.
> **US Student 1**: Also online? Do you have classes online?

> **Spain Student 1**: Yes, more or less. I do. It's just that I was finishing up and I only had about four classes which are online now.

Other groups discussed specific feelings of disconnect as part of the quarantine and isolation requirements during that time. The excerpt below is representative.

> **Spain Student 5**: How are you?
> **US Student 5**: Doing well. And you?
> **Spain Student 5**: Good [laughs]. Well, I'm in quarantine.
> **US Student 5**: Ah, right. It's not fun, right?
> **Spain Student 5**: No, it's not fun. How many days do you all spend in quarantine?
> **US Student 5**: Um, too many. I'm not keeping count.

The following group's brief discussion about isolation is similar in tone:

> **Spain Student 8**: Do you know when you all will go back to in-person classes or not yet?
> **US Student 8**: Not yet.
> **Spain Student 8**: We are still isolated too.

The words *quarantine*, *isolation*, and *suspended* reveal the general sense of disconnect that was caused by COVID-19. In addition to disconnectedness, one group mentioned specific emotions such as fear and sadness during their exchange sessions. The following excerpt is illustrative.

> **Spain Student 19**: How are you?
> **US Student 19**: Um, I feel OK, but I am afraid.
> **Spain Student 19**: Yeah, afraid, sure.
> **US Student 19**: Of this, virus, I don't know. Everything in my life has changed. One of my classes uses Zoom but for all others we have to write everything and I don't speak with my friends in the class. It's sad. I don't think I learn very well online.
> **Spain Student 19**: I understand. For me, too, it's new – the system of learning online. And, it's different. It's more complicated.

In a subsequent session, the same group talked about ways to safely get outside of their apartment, but the same sense of uneasiness can be noted in their questions about local safety protocols.

> **US Student 19**: I like to run to campus and back to my apartment but it's very sad because there aren't any students on campus. It's very empty.

> **Spain Student 19**: Empty, right. Where are all the students?
> **US Student 19**: No one can live on campus because of coronavirus. Also, there aren't any professors working on campus so…
> **Spain Student 19**: They're not working? Are they working from home?
> **US Student 19**: Yes. I don't know if I'm allowed to run on campus but…
> **Spain Student 19**: Is it possible that it's prohibited to run there? That it's prohibited to run on campus?
> **US Student 19**: Yes, I think it does not matter because I'm not going into any university buildings. I hope it's OK.

Another group talked about the difficulties of transitioning to online learning. Although using Zoom in this way was new for many of the students, both the survey data and transcript analysis suggested that most groups were able to manage the technology successfully.

> **US Student 20**: At my university classes are on Zoom.
> **Spain Student 20**: You use Zoom for all of your classes?
> **US Student 20**: Yes.
> **Spain Student 20**: In Spain they've canceled all classes but we have many more cases. But still, it's not clear if classes will continue, we still don't know [laughs].
> **US Student 20**: Yeah, my professors, I don't know, they don't know how to use Zoom very well.

Most of the time, the discussion about COVID was carried out in Spanish with the Spanish student helping the US student navigate the difficult and complex vocabulary. Still, despite limited proficiency, groups overcame these linguistic barriers to express care and empathy for one another in simple, but heartfelt, dialogues. The following exchange is representative of these brief and simple moments of showing care for one another.

> **Spain Student 18**: I think that right now, the most important thing is to be safe, take care of yourself, and avoid this virus. Everything else is secondary.
> **US Student 18**: Yes.

In another group, with a US students' elevated proficiency level, they were able to discuss the pandemic in more detail. The following excerpt is from their second conversation session demonstrating how the students used the session to ask how their partner was managing the onset of the pandemic and unique challenges they were facing in each of their countries at the time.

Spain Student 14: And how are you in general? Everything OK?

US Student 14: Um, well, today I just got a call that we might be changing the hours of the store because there are a lot of people that are starting to quit working because they're very scared of being outside, so… they're not sure if we're going to have work so I'm a little stressed but…

Spain Student 14: Right, I can imagine. I don't know if you know but here in Spain the situation is really bad because of the coronavirus pandemic, and I can't return to my country now because the borders between countries are closed and you can't move. You can't leave or enter and that stresses me out a lot. We don't have classes. We don't have university activities or anything like that. So, I'm here, shut in, and I can't return to my country. So, and I don't know for how long it will be like this…

US Student 14: Yeah…yeah.

Although the US student's proficiency was a limiting factor, they were able to use what language skills they had attained to share what they were experiencing in a way that strengthened the social bond between the two partners. Another group mentioned that even though many activities had ceased because of the pandemic, the virtual conversation exchange was able to continue without disruption because it was online.

US Student 7: All of the, everything is closed. Everything except for supermarkets and, yeah…

Spain Student 7: Here, supermarkets, pharmacies, to buy medicine, and hospitals. And people who have to keep working like in transportation, the drivers, only the most basic things.

US Student 7: Yes…

Spain Student 7: Well, that's OK because our sessions are all online so we don't have anything to worry about [laughs].

These pandemic-focused dialogues were typically brief and took place during the first few minutes of the sessions. Most groups had already completed two or three sessions before the discussion about the pandemic starts to show up in the transcripts, likely due to the timing of when COVID-19 started its aggressive spread throughout the world. At no point were groups specifically instructed to discuss the pandemic, nor were they asked to integrate their experiences into the regular exchange sessions. Rather, these spontaneous moments of concern among group partners emerged naturally, without any sort of orchestrated prompting by the exchange administrators.

3.3. Survey results

In addition to the transcript data, a survey was administered to the US student participants. Although completion of the survey was not mandatory, a total of 17 participating students completed the survey resulting in a response rate of approximately 37%. The survey itself consisted of eight Likert questions which utilized a five-point scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) as well as four open-ended questions. The results of the Likert scale questions are included in Table 2.

Table 2.   Summary of five-point Likert scale survey questions: one (strongly disagree), five (strongly agree)

Survey Question	Mean Score Scale: 1-5
I enjoyed participating in the virtual conversation exchanges.	4.88
My knowledge of the language allowed me to participate meaningfully in the virtual conversation exchange.	4.29
My knowledge of the culture allowed me to participate meaningfully in the virtual conversation exchange.	4.24
Using the technology was challenging for me.	1.59
Using the technology seemed challenging for my partner.	1.53
My partner was skilled at explaining concepts pertaining to language and culture.	4.71
My desire to travel and/or study abroad increased because of my participation in the virtual conversation exchange.	4.65
Scheduling conversation sessions with my partner was difficult.	1.82

The open-ended questions of the survey were included to better understand the general strengths and weaknesses of the exchange and to inquire about specific technological challenges that the student participants may have encountered. Those questions and representative examples of student participant responses are included in Table 3.

Table 3.   Summary of open-ended survey questions and representative sample responses

Survey Question	Representative Sample Responses
What did you like most about participating in the virtual exchange program?	"Getting to practice my Spanish skills in a judgment-free space". "I liked how it made me more confident in my speaking and get the feel of a realistic conversation". "All of it. Learning, cultural exposure, contact, practice, everything".

What did you like least about participating in the virtual exchange program?	"It was often difficult to schedule meetings". "It was a little nerve wracking and I was worried about making mistakes at times". "I wish we would have met more". "How long it was".
Were there any unexpected challenges you encountered during your participation in these programs?	"I was unaware of some slang terms that are common in Spain, but my partner was helpful in explaining them to me". "The pandemic". "No, it was so fun".
Thinking about the technological aspects of the exchange, what seemed to work well and what was problematic?	"Screensharing was an asset, this allowed the conversation to graduate from a FaceTime type of interaction to a more scholarly environment. I think that worked really well. It was sometimes hard to hear my partner, and sometimes it was hard for her to hear me, but I think that has more to do with the technological medium of the conversation than anything else, which is unavoidable but not nearly a dealbreaker". "The connection would fail sometimes, but that was the only main issue I had". "Zoom worked really well. My partner used Padlet to share assignments and presentations and that worked out well for the both of us".

Average response rates for the Likert scale questions indicate that students mostly found the exchange to be enjoyable, effective, and they had minimal problems with navigating the technological aspects of the exchange platform. Of particular interest, students responded very favorably to the question asking if their interest in study abroad had increased due to their participation in the virtual exchange. Despite the participant's comment in Table 3 about the difficulty of scheduling, the average response to the survey question about scheduling suggests that this was not an overly challenging task for the majority of groups. One reason for this may be that we allowed group partners to work out their own schedules rather than making those decisions ourselves. What we did not anticipate was having the chance to observe student interaction in a virtual exchange during the onset of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. And so, in addition to being able to report on the general success of the particular model of virtual exchange we carried out, we were able to examine student learning as it took place during one of the most difficult semesters any of us has ever experienced.

4.   Conclusion

The survey and transcript data indicate that the virtual exchange was an effective learning experience. Transcription data showed how groups used the virtual conversation exchange sessions

to check-in on one another during the early days of the pandemic. These moments of genuine care and concern, although limited by language proficiency, showed how the virtual exchange provided a way for students to feel connected during a time of massive disconnect. Similar insights into how students used these virtual learning spaces to mitigate feelings of loneliness and uncertainty have been noted by Yeh, Choi, and Friesem (2022) in their study of Flipgrid as a way to keep students connected when face-to-face learning was restricted.

In addition to our own efforts described here, educators throughout the world employed a myriad of innovative ways to keep teaching during the pandemic. Likewise, students mustered impressive levels of courage to continue to learn when so much about the immediate future was uncertain. Fortunately, prior to the onset of the pandemic, we had the mechanisms in place to be able to record these moments where students, despite their limitations with linguistic and cultural knowledge, expressed care and concern for one another during the early days of the COVID outbreak.

As we are all painfully aware, the COVID-19 pandemic caused massive disruptions with virtually every aspect of the human experience. In the spring of 2020, class delivery methods were abruptly altered and, in many cases, even came to an unanticipated early conclusion. Those that were able to press on did so under extreme duress, making use of underexplored virtual and hybrid teaching formats and pedagogies. Our own institutions were not immune to these effects. And yet, the virtual conversation exchange highlighted here provided a way for students to maintain contact with each other in a virtual learning environment that was largely unaffected by the worldwide pandemic. Our students used these sessions to maintain normalcy during an unprecedented time of disruption. As the transcript data has shown, they checked in on each other, expressed genuine concern for one another, and then got to work on the learning task at hand. Furthermore, survey data reinforced the notion that virtual exchange can be a powerful way to reduce time and space and to connect student populations that may not have the chance to do so otherwise. Our findings indicate that virtual exchanges can be effective ways to teach and learn, even in the most challenging of times.

What we have learned from this experience is that these grassroots exchange initiatives require mutual, long-term commitment and flexibility in order to overcome the unexpected. In our case, the unexpected challenge was a worldwide pandemic, and such flexibility was paramount to the success of the project. Still, others may encounter unanticipated problems with participant attrition, a change in institutional partners due to staff rotation, or disagreements over curriculum including logistical details such as number and duration of sessions. To overcome such challenges, what has worked for our exchange has been consistent and open communication among all stakeholders involved. An immediate next step for our project, and one that we would highly recommend for any grassroots exchange partnership, will be a series of in-person meetings involving institutional

organizers to reflect and improve upon this important virtual collaborative initiative. This level of commitment requires great amounts of time and energy but the result, as we have shown here, is a unique teaching and learning experience that can provide communicative connections, even in moments of unexpected disruption.

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