


RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

BAAL–Cambridge University Press Seminar 2024 – Virtual exchange as an equity, diversity and inclusion- compliant approach to language education: A Global South–North research-informed seminar

Marina Orsini-Jones 

Coventry University, Coventry, UK
Email: m.orsini@coventry.ac.uk

(Received 3 September 2024; accepted 4 September 2024)

1. Introduction

As discussed by Hauck (2023), virtual exchange (VE) is a research-informed practice and a strong catalyst in advancing the internationalisation of the higher education (HE) curriculum, known as internationalisation at home (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015; O’Dowd & Beelen, 2021). VE is emerging as an innovative approach to the development of valuable twenty-first century competences for language learners, language teachers and trainers, such as intercultural communicative competence (ICC, Byram, 1997) and critical digital literacy (Bilki et al., 2023). VE originated in the field of language learning and teaching and other terms are still used to define it in language education (e.g. telecollaboration, teletandem; see O’Dowd, 2018, p. 2), but unlike these other terms, VE has now been adopted by disciplines other than language studies, because of the equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)-centred way in which it can support the internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) through IaH. VE differentiates itself from other types of online learning because of, as stressed by O’Dowd (2022, p. 13), these key characteristics: it involves (1) technology-based interaction; (2) engagement with members of other cultures/countries; (3) integration into curriculum; (4) facilitation and support by educators or experts; (5) a strong (but not exclusive) focus on the development of soft skills and intercultural competence; and (6) a student-centred, collaborative approach to learning. As a result of the advancements in synchronous videoconferencing technology triggered by the COVID 19 pandemic, VE offers a novel and dynamic knowledge-sharing space, supporting the cross-disciplinary development of intercultural competence across shared multicultural and multilingual learning environments, using internet-based tools and online pedagogies.

The Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) project defines VE as (n.d.):

. . . a practice, supported by research, that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. Virtual Exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology.

2. The seminar

This seminar directly addressed EDI concerns and reported on VE as a liminal and fluid “Third Space” (Wimpenny et al., 2022) that promotes substantive equality and supports the integration of pluralistic perspectives and citizenship attributes in the applied linguistics HE curriculum. The seminar sought to decenter the conceptualisation of ‘Internationalisation of the Curriculum’ (Leask & Bridge, 2013) through a non-Eurocentric lens. It aimed at opening up a Global South–North dialogue and discussing decolonial perspectives on knowing, being and relating in language education theory and praxis, supported by VE.

VE is gaining traction as a sustainable, equitable and transformational postmodern approach that allows for powerful intercultural knowledge-sharing, while also fostering the acquisition of transversal skills such as resilience, flexibility and respect for ‘the other’ (Wimpenny et al., 2022). The seminar, however, also provided the opportunity to debate whether or not issues of digital inclusion/exclusion are adequately addressed in VE theorisation and practice in the field of language education and beyond (Hauck, 2023). It discussed how a critical internationalisation perspective (Hauck, 2023; Stein & Andreotti, 2021) could address unequal access.

The seminar was delivered in hybrid mode, and attended by 55 participants, 24 of whom came in person to the Languages Centre at Coventry University. Attendees joined from HE institutions located both in the UK (e.g. Birmingham, Coventry, Leeds, Open University, Northumbria, Stirling and Warwick) and around the world (e.g. Algeria, Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Finland, Kuwait, Italy, Portugal, South Africa, Switzerland, Spain, The Netherlands and Türkiye). The audience included tenured academic staff, early career researchers, doctoral students and learning technologists; this provided an opportunity to reflect on the seminar topic from a variety of learning, teaching and research viewpoints. Participants were invited to discuss examples of research-informed South–North VE curricular implementation in applied linguistics and knowledge-share on VE in an interdisciplinary way.

The objectives of the seminar¹ were to:

1. Introduce participants to innovative student-centred decolonised and inclusive approaches to VE curricular integration in language education.
2. Foster a discussion on how to facilitate a critical approach to the theorisation of VE bringing in different voices from the Global South and the Global North from both VE language specialists (Satar, Hauck, Finardi, Salomão and Hildeblando Júnior) and from a VE expert in another discipline (Jacobs).
3. Invite participants to practise the design of their own VE curricular intervention and/or share their existing VE projects.
4. Foster a reflection on how VE can support the development of EDI-informed curricular interventions.
5. Knowledge-share on how the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be integrated in VE-supported language education.

After my welcome and introduction to the event, Professor Rachel Wicaksono – Head of the School of Education, Language and Psychology at York St John University, renowned applied linguist and British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) membership secretary – introduced BAAL and its activities.

The first speaker was Dr Mirjam Hauck, Associate Head of School, Internationalisation, Equality, Diversion and Inclusion, Open University and President of the European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning (EuroCALL), with her talk: ‘Language education for critical global citizenship through virtual exchange’. Dr Hauck pointed out that while VE practices can promote EDI, VE is not inherently equitable and inclusive. It can reproduce colonial power dynamics, perpetuate existing exclusion/inequalities and even create new, digital inequalities (Satar & Hauck, 2022). She proposed

her model of critical virtual exchange (CVE) and asked the audience to analyse VE case studies in her workshop and discuss whether or not their features reflected a CVE approach.

Dr Müge Satar, Reader in Applied Linguistics at Newcastle University, reported on the results of her recent research on VE: ‘An inclusive and multiliteracies-informed virtual exchange pedagogy through digital cultural artefacts’. She illustrated how the co-creation of digital artifacts in VE can promote inclusion and stated that language educators need to go beyond digital and multimodal literacy, and develop critical digital literacy (CDL) (Bilki et al., 2023). She invited the audience to reflect on how topics such as family, friends and folklore can be addressed at a deeper intercultural level, avoiding stereotyping ‘the other’.

After the lunch break, the co-tutelle (Coventry University/Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo) doctoral student Carlos Alberto Hildeblando Júnior provided a VE ‘taster’ based on his thesis work (Hildeblando Júnior, 2023): ‘Practising VE ‘in action’ with VETSDELTA (Virtual Exchange as a Third Space to Decolonise ELT) – Topic: Native-speakerism’. Participants worked in Zoom breakout rooms to carry out tasks. Each group reported in writing on a shared Padlet wall and then fed back orally on their exchange in the interesting plenary feedback session that followed. The audience gave very positive feedback on this VE taster. Participants who were new to VE stated they were inspired to adopt this pedagogical approach in their practice.

Professor Dr Ana Cristina Biondo Salomão, Assistant Provost for International Affairs, from the Universidade Estadual Paulista and coordinator of the Brazilian Virtual Exchange Program (BRaVE), delivered an interactive lecture-workshop on ‘Global-South/North perspectives on VE pedagogical models’. She challenged the audience to reflect on bias in South/North exchanges, starting with an analysis of world maps that often misrepresent the Global South. She then illustrated very powerful interdisciplinary VEs led by Global South institutions², where, for example, students reading medicine in the UK and Brazil discussed their different approaches to epidemiology. Participants commented that the examples provided illustrated how the United Nations SDGs can be embedded into South–North VEs to address global challenges.

Dr Kyria Finardi, Postgraduate Lead at Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES), Brazil, President of AILA and pioneer in the decolonisation of ELT, in her talk ‘Post-pandemic virtual exchange as a third space for English teacher education: Reflections on South–North technology-supported encounters and challenges’, discussed how VE offers a transformational third space (Wimpenny et al., 2022), supporting the cross-disciplinary development of intercultural competence across shared multicultural and multilingual learning environments. She illustrated a British Academy/Leverhulme funded research project that investigates how VE can empower women³. She also invited the audience to reflect on the potential (and challenges) inherent to the integration of a combination of VE and AI into the HE curriculum, illustrating some of the issues arising with AI-generated pictures (one of the Brazilian philosopher and pedagogue, Freire). The discussion that followed focused on the VE/AI interface.

Dr Lynette Jacobs, Acting Director and Research Portfolio Lead in the Office for International Affairs at the University of the Free State in South Africa (a VE expert not involved in language education) led the round table with very thought-provoking questions, for example: ‘As linguists, could you give consideration to how to ‘depower’ English in VE?’. An interesting discussion followed. Dr Finardi proposed the use of the intercomprehension pedagogical approach in language education VEs (Guimarães et al., 2019), rather than translanguaging, to foster an appreciation of languages as linguistic repertoires instead of named languages. Dr Hauck pointed out that translanguaging and intercomprehension are only mutually exclusive if we understand language education within the written/oral dichotomy, excluding the wider semiotic ‘armoury’ available for communication purposes, particularly in VE in the digital age, which offers a variety of digital communication modes, as illustrated by Dr Satar in her talk. Dr Salomão reported that BRaVE tries to promote the use of translanguaging, which is fluid, and the use of Portuguese in exchanges with Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa; however, she also mentioned that decolonisation can sometimes be challenged from within in the Global South, as some of her Brazilian colleagues would prefer to work with

institutions in the Global North and use English only in VE. Dr Jacobs challenged us further, proposing we destabilise English by carrying out VEs in languages other than English that VE participants are not familiar with. The discussion was concluded by Dr Satar, who suggested that it would be difficult to remove the power from English, but that learners could be made aware of the symbolic power of English in a critical way through VE and reflect on what actions they could take to destabilise it.

Notes

1. See: <https://baal-cup.coventry.domains/>
2. For example: <https://www.fmb.unesp.br/#!/noticia/2178/brave-brazilian-virtual-exchange-internacionalizacao-em-casa>
3. See: <https://female-voices.coventry.domains/>

References

- Beelen, J., & Jones, E. (2015). Redefining internationalization at home. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European higher education area* (pp. 59–72). Springer.
- Bilki, Z., Satar, M., & Sak, M. (2023). Critical digital literacy in virtual exchange for ELT teacher education: An interpretivist methodology. *ReCALL*, 35(1), 58–73. doi:10.1017/S095834402200009X
- Brazilian Virtual Exchange (BRAVE) (n.d.). Universidade Estadual Paulista "Júlio De Mesquita Filho" (UNESP). São Paulo State University - International. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from <https://www.international.unesp.br/#!/study/virtual-exchange-program/>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) (n.d.). *What is Virtual Exchange?*. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from <https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/>
- Guimarães, F. F., Mendes, A. R. M., Rodrigues, L. M., dos Santos Paiva, R. S., & Finardi, K. R. (2019). Internationalization at home, COIL and intercomprehension: For more inclusive activities in the Global South. *SFU Educational Review*, 12(3), 90–109. doi: 10.21810/sfuer.v12i3.1019
- Hauck, M. (2023) *From virtual exchange to critical virtual exchange and critical internationalization at home*. Diversity Abroad. Retrieved September 1, 2024, from <https://www.diversityabroad.org/DIVaPublic/GIE-Archives/GIE-Sp2023/GIE-Sp23-Article-1.aspx>
- Hildeblando Júnior, C. A. (2023). Virtual exchange as a third space to decolonise ELT (VETSDELTA) project: Report on its first action-research cycle. In M.Orsini-Jones, C. A. Hildeblando Júnior, A. Cerveró-Carrascosa, S. Di Sarno-García, & A. Aik (Eds.), *Discussing global citizenship in language learning and teaching – symposium proceedings* (pp. 42–49). Coventry University. https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/78493516/Hildeblando_Junior.pdf
- Leask, B., & Bridge, C. (2013). Comparing internationalisation of the curriculum in action across disciplines: Theoretical and practical perspectives'. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 43(1), 79–101. doi:10.1080/03057925.2013.746566
- O'Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: State-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1(1–23). doi: 10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1
- O'Dowd, R. (2022). *Internationalising higher education and the role of virtual exchange*. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315393704
- O'Dowd, R., & Beelen, J. (2021). *Virtual exchange and internationalisation at home: Navigating the terminology*. Retrieved September 2, 2024, from <https://www.eaie.org/blog/virtual-exchange-iah-terminology.html>
- Satar, M., & Hauck, M. (2022). Exploring digital equity in online learning communities. In A. M. Sousa Aguiar de Medeiros, & D. Kelly (Eds.), *Language debates: Digital media* (pp. 270–290). John Murray Learning.
- Stein, S., & Andreotti, V. (2021). Global citizenship otherwise. In E. Bosio (Ed.), *Conversations on global citizenship education: Research, teaching and learning* (pp. 13–36). Routledge.
- Wimpenny, K., Finardi, K., Orsini-Jones, M., & Jacobs, L. (2022). Knowing, being, relating and expressing through Third Space Global South-North COIL: Digital inclusion and equity in international higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(2), 279–296. doi: 10.1177/10283153221094085

Cite this article: Orsini-Jones, M. (2024). BAAL–Cambridge University Press Seminar 2024 – Virtual exchange as an equity, diversity and inclusion-compliant approach to language education: A Global South–North research-informed seminar. *Language Teaching* 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144482400034X>