Chapter 3
Enhancing Intercultural Language Learning Through Virtual Exchange and Technology–Mediated Task–Based Language Teaching:
A Case Between Japanese and Australian Primary Schools

Shinji Okumura
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9131-6603
Bunkyo University, Japan

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of virtual exchange (VE) on Japanese primary students' English language learning and intercultural understanding using technology-mediated task-based language teaching (TMTBLT) principles. Conducted with 134 fifth graders from Kanagawa, Japan, and 133 students from Victoria, Australia, the project employed Padlet for asynchronous interaction. Results indicate that VE significantly enhanced Japanese students' motivation, engagement, and positive attitudes toward other cultures, aligning with Byram's intercultural competence (IC) framework. The project also promoted practical language use and intercultural understanding,

resonating with Japan's ministry of education (MEXT) goals of integrating technology into education. Despite challenges such as scheduling conflicts and technical issues, the VE initiative demonstrated the transformative potential of technology in fostering global citizenship and intercultural competence in primary education. This research offers valuable insights for educators and aligns with post-COVID-19 educational advancements.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual exchange (VE) represents a pivotal educational approach in foreign language learning, uniquely integrating the principles of technology-mediated task-based language teaching (TMTBLT) with online intercultural collaboration, as highlighted by González-Lloret & Ortega (2014). By intricately weaving language learning tasks with emerging technologies, VE not only offers a dynamic platform for online interaction and collaboration among learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021) but also embodies a transformative tool in language education, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era (Bali et al., 2021; Commander et al., 2022; Risner, 2021).

Despite its transformative potential, VE can present affective barriers such as foreign language anxiety (Fondo & Jacobetty, 2020). However, research suggests that students generally exhibit a positive attitude towards VE, especially within the framework of international projects (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). Moreover, VE significantly impacts teachers' professional development, providing them with valuable experience and opportunities for methodological innovation (Gutiérrez & O'Dowd, 2021).

Recent studies have underscored the potent combination of TMTBLT principles within VE programs, emphasising its transformative power in language learning and intercultural exchange (Ceo-Difrancesco, et al.,2019; Ondarra, et al., 2020). High-immersion experiences in virtual reality have been particularly effective in enhancing intercultural understanding and empathy (Hilliker, 2020; Martinsen, 2019). Additionally, VE has been found beneficial in Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages (TESOL) teacher education (Hilliker, 2020) and for novice language learners (Martinsen, 2019).

In this context, this study aims to explore the impact of VE, underpinned by TMTBLT principles, on Japanese primary students' English language learning and intercultural understanding through a multimodal asynchronous activity employing Padlet, a digital tool supporting interactive learning. By shedding light on this relatively unexplored aspect of VE, particularly in primary education, this research aligns with recent shifts in foreign language teaching methods catalyzed by the

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