Effects of Virtual Exchange in the EFL classroom on Students' Cultural and Intercultural Sensitivity

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Abstract

Some aspects of simple Virtual Exchange (VE), such as it not being academically challenging enough, have been criticized in the past (Ware & Kramsch, 2005; O'Dowd, 2016). However, students with very limited language skills often cannot realize all the advantages of VE. Nevertheless, there are many positives they can attain when participating in simple VE. Since 2016, almost 17,000 beginner level EFL students and some 300 teachers from 15 countries have participated in the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject). They interact online using English as a lingua franca on a Moodle platform. In each 8-week exchange researched, students completed pre- and post-questionnaires measuring their intercultural sensitivity and understanding of their own culture. The surveys incorporated components from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000) and a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2011). Mean scale scores showing the significance of differences were checked using the non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test for hypothesis testing of repeated measurements on a single sample. This paper looks at the results from 2 separate VE in 2016 and 2017 when 303 and 264 Japanese students, respectively, completed the questionnaires. Improvements in students' intercultural sensitivity, appreciation of other cultures, interactional confidence, and motivation to learn the L2 resulted. Discussion of the implications of using VE with beginner level EFL students follows.

Keywords: Virtual Exchange, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competence, EFL

Introduction

Becoming able to communicate in English with people in other countries is one of the main goals for most students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Teachers try to ensure their students can communicate in English, by striving to find the right balance between quality input (Krashen, 1985) and comprehensible output (Swain, 1985), whilst also encouraging their students to be a part of the communication through negotiating meaning therein (Long, 1996). However, in the past, most students studying EFL in non-multicultural environments had few opportunities to use the language they were studying to interact with people from other countries and/or cultures. Chances to produce output and to negotiate meaning with other users of English were limited to those in the classroom. Without opportunities to interact on the international stage, EFL often

became an academic activity with few chances to use English in real-world communicative events, nor were there chances to interact with a foreign culture. "Real" communication between people who needed to use English to communicate was difficult to find in such environments. The Internet changed that.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) was first extensively outlined by Hiltz and Turoff in 1978 and research on CMC soon followed. Baron (1984, p. 123) noted a number of studies that had shown that changes in modality brought on "different sorts of linguistic (and resulting attitudinal or social) behavior". Actual online communities also began to flourish in the 1980s where communication was the goal. Rheingold (1993) described "The WELL" and the benefits and culture of that community which began in 1985. He also outlined the intercultural exchanges that took place between those in various countries via the Japan-based TWICS community. CMC was not without problems though, and Aoki (1995, p. 208) noted that cultural misunderstanding could also occur in CMC. Though text-based CMC might reduce "discriminatory communication patterns" she warned that it would be "dangerous to assume … the people you are communicating within cyberspace have the same cultural background (as you)". CMC became a viable means of communication but one that was different from face-to-face communication. These examples of CMC included elements of language and culture but were not specifically aimed at students studying in those fields. It followed that foreign language teachers would see that CMC could be utilized in their classrooms too.

Chun (1994, p. 28), saw benefits from CMC for her students studying German that included them "taking a more active role in discourse management" whilst Kern (1995) and Warshauer (1996) also saw benefits that included increased and better-quality language use in addition to more equitable turn-taking. Cahill and Catanzano (1997) noted that their CMC students improved their Spanish written work in both quality and accuracy to a greater extent than students participating in a normal class. These studies were all done in a CMC setting but none were international. The modality of communication may be seen as the source of the changes in student behavior.

Perhaps the first large scale international CMC project was the World Bank-funded "World Links for Development" that began in 1997. Bhatnagar et. al. (2003) noted that students believed their communication skills and understanding of culture improved due to their participation in it and teachers involved in the project also believed they had benefited greatly. O'Dowd and Lewis (2017, p. 9) noted the history of some other early international CMC projects that were relatively small in scale but had some benefits for the students participating in them. Research into the intercultural aspects of online international exchanges developed at this time too, with the Cultura Project (Furstenberg, et. al., 2001) being one of the first CMC projects to be international in scope and, because students were interacting in a truly international setting and being introduced to ideas and information from people in a different culture under the supervision of expert facilitators, improvements in intercultural understanding followed.

To this point, this paper has been referring to online exchanges as "CMC" as that is what early research mostly referred to. However, as many researchers in the field will know, there are many terms for online exchanges. From this point on, as governments and much of the more recent literature is using it, the term "Virtual Exchange (VE)" will be used. International VE flourished at the beginning of the 21st century in both language and non-language related fields. The Erasmus program promoted Virtual Mobility (VM) to both supplements and take the place of physical mobility between universities

throughout the European Union. Projects such as TeaCamp (2010), which promoted the cross-cultural dimensions of CMC, were born from this. The benefits of these VE and VM have been outlined (Tereseviĉienė et. al. 2011) but all of the aforementioned projects required students to have quite a strong command of English or the language in which the VE was being carried out before they could participate fully.

For the beginner or pre-intermediate EFL students, international VE is a daunting prospect but one that can make the study of English far more engaging and real for the learner. This, in turn, can make it more interesting (Hagley & Thomson, 2017) and because of that, motivation to learn the language can increase (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994). Teachers of beginner EFL students wanting to participate in VE can see the benefits therein but also have to be aware that VE for beginner level students can result in students resorting to "a written exchange but in the form of a spoken chat" (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, p. 199). It is also true that due to the students' underdeveloped language skills, many of the topics used in beginner level VE are limiting. Teachers would do well to note O'Dowd and Ritter's (2006) suggestions of how to better carry out VE too. However, if the choices are: no intercultural exchange; or having a simple one that is enjoyable but not as deep and meaningful as perhaps could be the case; or one that is not possible to participate in because it is too difficult, then many teachers will choose the simple one that is enjoyable for their students.

Not all VEs need to "engag(e) students in virtual exchange on issues of political, historical, and social importance" (O'Dowd, 2016. p.278) either. Students with limited language skills are often not able to actively participate in such engagement and would become demotivated if forced to. Offering students the chance to experience a foreign culture in a non-threatening environment is a good way for cultural acclimatization (Hagley, 2016) to take place. It can be a precursor to and motivation for participation in more in-depth exchanges. Such VE are called "simple VE". These are VE where students, who have limited language skills, interact with students from other countries on topics that are non-threatening, simple in linguistic level, and hence relatively easy to participate in. Such exchanges can also be showcases for the common humanity that exists across cultures – something that seems to be forgotten in many sections of society of late. Sensitivity toward other cultures may also well develop. Hammer, Bennet, and Wiseman (2003, p.422) "use the term ''intercultural sensitivity'' to refer to the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences, and ... use the term ''intercultural competence'' to mean the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways." They "argue that greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence" (ibid). Simple VE may very well increase intercultural sensitivity and have other benefits. This research attempts to demonstrate that this is the case.

The Current Study

The International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject) was born from the author's desire to have his students use the English they were studying, at a regional university in Japan, to interact with EFL students in other countries. As there were very few foreigners in the regional city where the project formed, international online exchange was the only option available to the author to ensure his students could

communicate in English with students in other countries. The author emailed a language teachers' mailing list in early 2004 and received a reply from a teacher in Colombia who was working at The National Vocational Training Agency (Spanish: SErvicio Nacional de Aprendizaje) (SENA). That year a small class to class exchange began between our two classes using a Moodle platform. The first exchange was popular with students and as time passed the number of classes increased. When the author presented on the exchange at conferences around Japan many other teachers showed interest and wanted to join. In 2015 the author went to Colombia and the SENA held a workshop for Colombian teachers who wanted to join the exchange too. Such was the interest that in the fall of 2015 the pilot IVEProject, to test the platform for a large-scale exchange included 35 teachers and 869 students from Japan and Colombia. Though there were problems, the overall positive feedback received was such that the IVEProject continued and expanded. For the exchanges in the spring of 2016 and 2017, there were 1463 active students from 4 different countries in the former and 2388 active students from 8 different countries in the latter, though in both the vast majority were from either Colombia or Japan. Students who were signed up for the exchange by their teachers but did not log on were excluded and thus are not included in the above figures as they were not active.

The IVEProject takes place on a Moodle platform. Teachers send the organizer their students' information and then students are put in groups by the organizer. A student in university "A" in Japan is partnered with a student in SENA center "A" and students from other countries. The students are sometimes partnered based on their majors and any other information that may be of importance. Teachers are given access to free online training courses and tutorials and students can freely access tutorials to help them around the site too. Hagley (2016) goes into more detail on how the exchange is carried out but to put it simply, students use Moodle forums to exchange information in text, audio, and/or video formats in English on very simple topics that are related to basic parts of their culture. This can be done in class, out of class, on computers, or any internet-enabled device. Students use the language they are studying in class to interact with peers in other countries and sometimes in other parts of the countries they are in. Teachers monitor the forums and give feedback to students. Assessment is left up to the individual teachers. Participation is free of charge as the project operates with financial support from a JSPS KAKEN grant.

This type of simple VE was chosen as the vast majority of the students participating were at a beginner level of English or pre-intermediate and had linguistic difficulty in trying to interact in English on difficult topics. The topics chosen in these particular exchanges were: Introductions, My home town, Events in our lives, and Future Plans. An open forum was also available. These topics tied to many of the classes' syllabi for their English communication or writing classes as they are common topics in many basic English texts. The exchanges went for 8 weeks. This relatively short period is because Japan's academic year is very different from most other countries and the window in which VE can occur is just 8 weeks.
To evaluate how the IVEProject would affect the students involved, this study tried to gauge the following:

Q1. What effect, if any, did the IVEProject have on Japanese students' basic understanding of their own culture?
Q2. What effect, if any, did the IVEProject have on Japanese students' basic

understanding of their partner's culture?

Q3. What were students' overall impressions of the IVEProject?

Participants

The participants for this research were Japanese students. 644 students participated actively from 16 universities throughout Japan in the spring of 2016 under the guidance of 20 teachers from those institutions. 1098 students participated actively from 25 universities in 2017 under the guidance of 30 teachers. Of these 456 Japanese students completed the pre-survey and 406 completed the post-survey with 303 completing both surveys in 2016. In 2017, 755 students completed the pre-survey whilst only 362 completed the post-survey with 264 completing both surveys. Information was slow to be sent out for the 2017 post-survey and, as students had already completed the exchange, survey completion rates dropped due to this. Results from only one year of such exchanges may be due to one-off conditions, a unique group, or a number of other factors. If the results are the same for two years in a row with different participants in each group, the chances of the results being random are reduced. This is why two years of data are supplied.

Students' majors varied greatly. Some were studying to complete degrees in engineering, other students were studying degrees such as medical services, economics, commerce, veterinary science, psychology and other majors too. A small number were taking it as a part of a course in their first year of an English degree. A small number were taking it as a part of a course in their first year of an English degree. The students had completed six years of English education at junior and senior high school, though much of this was in a grammar-translation setting, hence their communicative competence was limited. All students were participating in a course that was compulsory and would count toward their graduation. Some teachers gave participation in the exchange a large weight of their final grade whilst others offered it initially as an "extra" activity. Some teachers integrated it into their syllabus more closely than others. After the exchange finished, some teachers asked students to create presentations on their findings from the exchange whilst others had their students "become" students from the partner country in role-plays as part of every class and in the speaking part of their final exam. Other teachers, as noted, did not follow up with their students. Needless to say, many different learning situations were able to incorporate IVEProject. As the author can only speak and write in English and Japanese, he did not attempt to survey the other countries' students.

With so many students participating, of course, there was a large variation in the number of posts and replies in addition to the volume in each of these. Students, on average, posted once to each of the topics and made, on average, three replies in each of the topics. Again, on average, 60 words were used in each post/reply for an average total of three posts and ten replies for an average total of almost 650 words used. Each student viewed other students' posts, replies, and their own on average 80 times. These numbers suggest students were looking at the posts/replies two or three times a week and posting or replying once or twice a week on average with the majority of them also adding multimedia to their posts/replies. As mentioned, they could do this either in class or outside of class.

Method

Pre- and post-exchange surveys were carried out using the Moodle questionnaire module to try and ascertain if there were any changes to students' understanding of both their own and other cultures. As noted in the abstract, the surveys incorporated components from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000), that measure respect for cultural differences and interaction confidence. Segments of the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric (Rhodes, 2009) which evolved in a large part from the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) were also used to attempt to show at which stage of the intercultural sensitivity developmental process the students were in.

The pre-survey was carried out in the first week of each exchange and the post-survey in the last week (though in 2017 it was carried out the week after the exchange finished resulting in a lower completion rate). Students thus completed the surveys before doing any follow up activities that their teachers may have organized. The results from the surveys were exported to a csv file. The information from the csv file was then transferred to SPSS version 22 for Mac.

Survey responses were given via a 6-point ordinal Likert scale where pre- and post-responses were matched using students' IDs. 1 was "strongly agree" through to 6 "strongly disagree". Mean scale scores for pre- and post-testing of each construct were attained. The significance of the difference of these was checked using the non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test for hypothesis testing of repeated measurements on a single sample. Many researchers will use the t-test for this, however, the data here, as in the many cases where t-tests have been done in the past, is ordinal, and being so, should preclude it from t-test application. T-tests were also carried out though and produced very similar results though they are not shown here.

A separate survey was carried out at the end of each exchange asking students more general questions about the VE and their feelings toward it and any outcomes they believed were achieved. This same survey has been carried out at the end of all the exchanges done since 2016 as we attempt to find ways to improve the exchange. There are a variety of questions asked in this survey and some don't pertain to this study, but rather the exchange overall, and are hence left out of the discussion. This survey used a 4-point ordinal Likert scale to gauge overall satisfaction in the exchange and other self-reported changes. 168 students completed it in the 2016 exchange and 186 completed it in the 2017 exchange. It was anonymous and voluntary. As noted, each of these exchanges was carried out with different students. Showing results from consecutive exchanges reduces the chance that the results from either one were random.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows results from an analysis of the 2016 and 2017 data. The same questions were asked in 2017 as in 2016. Some of the changes in students' understanding of their own culture and other cultures are significant $p < 0.05$ (Burns, 2000).

Table 1

Effect on understanding of culture 2016/2017

Statement	Pre-mean score	Post-mean score	Cohen's *d*	Z (based on medians)	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)*p* value
1. As long as we all speak the same language, there's no problem.					
2016	4.10	4.21	.05	-1.33	.18
2017	4.07	4.08	.01	-.25	.805
2. My country's culture should be a model for the rest of the world.					
2016	3.07	3.19	.07	-1.71	.08
2017	3.11	3.06	.04	-.57	.569
3. People in other countries don't value life the way we do in my country.					
2016	2.90	2.79	.05	-1.21	.23
2017	3.89	3.93	.03	-.58	.566
4. I really know my own culture and can explain it to others.					
2016	3.74	3.65	.06	-1.45	.15
2017	3.81	3.67	.14	-2.25	.024
5. Foreigners probably can't understand my country's culture.					
2016	4.37	4.15	.13	-3.18	.001
2017	4.56	4.45	.10	-1.62	.106
6. I think it is important for me to learn about many other cultures.					
2016	1.71	1.90	.13	-3.10	.002
2017	1.82	1.85	.03	-.45	.656
7. I would feel comfortable even if there are many foreigners around me.					
2016	2.91	2.98	.05	-1.23	.218
2017	3.13	2.90	.18	-2.91	.004
8. When living in a foreign country you should take on all the customs and culture of that country.					
2016	2.77	2.82	.04	-.90	.37
2017	2.96	2.83	.10	-1.80	.073

9. My country's culture is very different to other countries'.					
2016	2.74	2.84	.06	-1.59	.11
2017	2.69	2.89	.20	-2.38	.017
10. I know the taboos in my country's culture and can explain them to others.					
2016	3.66	3.52	.09	-2.26	.024
2017	3.61	3.45	.14	-2.31	.021
11. I can say what I really feel more openly in a foreign language than in my own language.					
2016	3.78	3.62	.08	-2.06	.040
2017	3.81	3.49	.22	-3.10	.002

Effect on Japanese students' basic understanding of their own culture

In answer to the first of the research questions, the results suggest both groups of students showed gains in the knowledge of their own culture. In both the 2016 and 2017 cohorts, there was a change to the mean scores about statements on the students' own cultures. For example, more students agreed with the statement "I really know my own culture and can explain it to others" after the project had finished, though it was not a statistically significant result in 2016, it was in 2017. This is further confirmed as students agreed more with the statement "I know the taboos in my country's culture and can explain them to others" after the project finished, with statistically significant improvements in both years.

Effect on Japanese students' basic understanding of their partner's culture

The answers to statement one "As long as we all speak the same language, there's no problem" are quite strong in the "don't agree" at both the pre- and post-periods in the project. This outcome suggests that students are not "in denial" of cultural differences (Bennet, 2011) at the beginning, and though the change is not statistically significant, they are further away from denial on the spectrum after the exchange. However, in questions two and three we can see that the Japanese students are leaning toward "cultural difference in a polarized way – us and them" (Bennet, 2011). Students' answers to statement five suggest that, though they are not strongly polarized, the exchange may have made them a little more so, as their answers to the statement "Foreigners probably can't understand my country's culture" showed a movement toward a more polarized view of their own culture in both years. This continues to be shown in statement nine by the fact that students believe their culture is very different from other cultures – though not as much so after the exchange is complete.

Another interesting outcome is seen from statement six where students feel they may not need to know about other cultures as much after the exchange as before. More

research would have to be done but this could be due to them having less fear of other cultures after participating in the IVEProject and thus believing it might not be as necessary to learn about them. However, this could also be due to 'the illusion of commonality' (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, p. 200) being developed and so teachers need to be aware of this and ensure reflection activities are a part of the syllabi that include VE.

Interaction confidence (Chen, & Starosta, 2000) seems to be quite high with students feeling that they "would feel comfortable even if there are many foreigners around" them. Though there was a very small change in the 2016 exchange suggesting otherwise after the 2017 exchange students seemed even more confident than before with a statistically significant change in 2017 that had a larger effect size than most of the other results. In these examples, the effect size is almost always very small ($d < 0.2$, Cohen, 1992, cited in Burns, p. 168), though here it was almost a medium effect ($0.2 < d < 0.5$, Cohen, 1992, cited in Burns, p. 168). Interaction confidence increases are further highlighted by students' replies to the statement "I can say what I really feel more openly in a foreign language than in my own language." which showed both a statistically significant change in both years as well as having a moderate effect size in 2017.

What were students' overall impressions of the IVEProject?

Table 2
Results from the end-of-exchange general feedback survey

Statements	2016 % that agree or strongly agree	2017 % that agree or strongly agree
1. I think the virtual exchange was beneficial to learning English.	87	83
2. I didn't learn anything about the other country.	26	20
3. The virtual exchange took too much time to do.	45	42
4. The virtual exchange web site was easy to use.	60	58
5. I felt nervous participating in the virtual exchange.	45	68
6. I feel like I started to understand the lives of the people in the other country.	78	76
7. I wanted to learn English more because of the virtual exchange.	57	61
8. I posted regularly on the forums.	46	44
9. I didn't want to exchange information with the students in the other country.	15	11
10. The topics in the virtual exchange were good.	81	81
11. I'm more interested in the other country now because of the virtual exchange.	73	76
12. I changed my view of the other country because of the	62	63

virtual exchange.		
13. I would like to do another virtual exchange in the future.	65	76
14. I will keep in contact with people I met in the virtual exchange in the future.	11	14
15. I had no trouble finding my forum posts.	61	58
16. I didn't need any help from the teacher when I am writing on the forum.	58	46
17. I regularly received replies from students in the other country	50	45

As shown in Table 2 it is quite obvious that students considered the VE a worthwhile component of their EFL classes. A very large majority (87% and 83%) believed the VE was beneficial to learning English and it was, to a lesser degree, motivating for them to do so, as can be seen from responses to the statement "I want to learn English more because of the exchange". Students were also very keen to interact with students in other countries. To ensure participants were reading the questions this was written in the negative. Very few students did not want to exchange information with students in other countries and a strong majority also wanted to do such VE again in the future. When it came to doing that interaction, participants did struggle with less than half considering themselves to have posted regularly and similar numbers feeling they received regular replies. However, as noted, students did post and/or reply, on average, two or three times a week. For non-English majors, this is a significant amount. In future surveys, "regularly" will have to be more clearly defined.

Interest in other countries' cultures seems to have increased too as can be seen by the answers to statements 2, 6, 11, and 12. The actual content of the exchange, though very simple, was very well received by the students (statement 10) but improvements need to be made to make it even easier to use (statement 15). Students didn't seem to think it was too much work either. The exchange was a short, small part of an English class so it would be somewhat surprising if students were able to strike up long-lasting friendships with limited language skills. That between 10 and 15% of students stated they would keep in contact with their VE partners is encouraging.

Further considerations

To be able to appreciate another culture, one should have an understanding of one's own culture first. As has been outlined in the results there is quite strong evidence to suggest that this VE has improved students' knowledge of their own culture and appreciation of other cultures. There is some evidence to suggest that students increased their interactional confidence when interacting with others from a different culture too. Results also suggest that students increased their knowledge of their partner countries and that they believe the exchange is good for their EFL learning though the effect size throughout the research into this particular VE is relatively small. When thinking of the reasons for this, time is one matter that needs to be addressed. Is an 8-week exchange

really enough time to make a difference in the way students view culture? Most of the students participating in this VE had one 90-minute class a week with only a small part of that class-time being set aside for the VE. Many students did some interaction outside of class too but this was limited. The small amount of time spent in the exchange produced results that were similar in both exchanges where this research was carried out suggesting a higher probability that they were not random, but more time is likely needed to ensure students have the chance to better interact with their partners. More time would, I believe, increase the effect of the VE.

Another area that requires more research is how many countries should be involved in a VE for optimum success. As Lewis et al. (2011) note, "A drawback for bilateral partnerships is an inherent risk that participants will see themselves and their partners as "representatives" of a given culture." Some research has been done in multi-national VE settings (Hauck, 2007; Stickler & Emke, 2011) but these have mainly been in dual or multi-lingual VE. The results above seem to confirm that students in simple VE do become more culturally polarized. These outcomes have many implications for exchanges to come. The vast majority of the students that participated in the IVEProject were in groups with students from only two countries – Japan and Colombia. The topics that were covered were ones that lent themselves to showing the differences between the countries and this is very possibly why the increase in polarization occurred. Some of the students in the VE outlined in this paper were able to participate with students from more than one country. Their responses, as opposed to those who only interacted with one country, is an area of study that needs to be looked at in the coming exchanges.

In hindsight, Chen & Starosta's survey could have been used in its entirety for the first survey as it covers many other aspects of intercultural sensitivity that would have been of interest, and yet it is not aimed at VE students. This is an area that needs more research to be carried out and a scale that better measures change for a VE context created.

For the IVEProject, there is also much to learn from this research. Incorporating tasks that are simple but can further enhance students' cultural sensitivity whilst also reducing the polarizing effects of simple VE should be one goal. Offering students the opportunity to reflect on their interactions and sharing those reflections within the exchange may be one way of doing this.

Limitations

Though this research shows some positive aspects, as well as noting some negative ones of simple VE, it has some limitations. As noted, the pre- and post-surveys were made quite short in the hope that more students would complete them – which, however, leads to less reliability as construct validity cannot be tested. In addition, as there were only one or two questions for each construct used, scale reliability tests are not applied here. Another area that should have been taken into consideration was when the post-survey was to be carried out. Though not all teachers would have done so, many did do a reflection activity after the exchange. It is likely that, had students taken the survey after that, results may have been different particularly regarding the issue of increased cultural polarity. In future research, students who are in groups where there are more than two countries' students participating also need to be separated in the results so that a comparison can be made between them. In addition, a better understanding of the students'

progression along Bennet's (2011) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity would have been gained had more statements regarding the acceptance of and adaptation to differences been included. In addition, there were occasions when results were different between the years. Statements 2, 3, 7 and 8, can be seen to be more closely tied to situations where students physically travel to another country and are thus probably more open to variation when the interactions are virtual rather than physical. In future research on VE, as mentioned, statements pertaining to students' online interactions need to be developed and included.

Conclusion

Certainly, as has been noted by O'Dowd & Lewis (2016), students can indeed gain a great deal more from VE if their language level is advanced. However, VE also has benefits for students whose language development is not yet advanced. This study notes that students with low levels of English ability increase their interactional confidence, intercultural sensitivity, knowledge of their own culture, gain motivation to learn English, and are more interested in other cultures after participating in simple VE. Admittedly the study confirms what others have noted, in that simple VE can seem to make students more polarized in their views of theirs and other cultures yet they feel encouraged to interact more with students from other countries.

This has obvious pedagogical significance for educators. First and foremost, as Dewey (1910) notes "we do not learn from experience, we learn from reflection on experience", it is imperative that teachers having their students participate in simple VE also includes time for reflection. Follow up activities on why polarization occurs would also help students overcome the polarizing tendencies simple VE seems to have. Once students have developed their language skills, educators should offer their students other forms of VE that could further develop intercultural sensitivity. To allow more students to have access to VE, it would also be useful if there were more access to free and relatively easy to use simple VE such as the IVEProject.

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