Integrating Virtual Exchange into SLA Classrooms: A Kolb-Based Preparation–Reflection Model

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Virtual Exchange (VE) into Second Language Acquisition (SLA) classrooms through a Kolb-based Preparation–Reflection model. A three-week VE involving 12 U.S. and 33 Japanese students was conducted to examine how structured preparation, guided mediation, and video-based reflection can enhance language and intercultural learning. Qualitative analysis of student reflections revealed common challenges such as time constraints, anxiety, and unequal participation. The proposed model mitigates these issues through pre-exchange video analysis, teacher-facilitated mediation, and post-exchange reflection, fostering learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness. Findings suggest that experiential and reflective frameworks can connect classroom instruction with authentic global communication, offering practical guidance for sustainable VE integration.

Keywords: Virtual Exchange, Second Language Acquisition, Intercultural Competence, Curriculum Integration.

1 Introduction

The question of raising language proficiency levels with second language learners, especially at the beginner level, remains a significant challenge. Currently, Virtual Exchange (VE) is known as a helpful way for students to acquire another language and intercultural competence. However, in many cases, VE is often implemented as a one-time special event, a sort of festival-like experience, and it is not integrated continuously into the school curriculum, especially in the case of beginner language learners. This is due, in part, to the need to adapt the exchanges to the unique circumstances of each class. This study explores the limitations of VE and proposes a model applying a virtual exchange model derived from Terada et al. (2019) that integrates VE into SLA classrooms more effectively by addressing challenges such as time constraints, teacher workload, and student preparedness.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Virtual Exchange

In today's globalized world, students need to have communication skills in a foreign language. However, SLA instructors face a challenge in developing these skills and cultural awareness due to the limitations of the classroom environment. A lot of SLA classrooms consist of only monolingual students, and financial constraints and obstacles such as the COVID-19 pandemic have made it difficult for students to gain international experience and interact with other cultures. Nevertheless, Virtual Exchange (VE) provides an affordable and efficient way for students to experience the world without leaving their homes. O'Dowd (2021) clarified the definition of the virtual exchange:

Virtual exchange (VE) is an umbrella term used to refer to the different ways in which groups of learners are engaged in online intercultural interaction and

collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. (p.1)

By incorporating VE into the language curriculum, students gain authentic intercultural experiences that enhance their linguistic abilities, digital literacy, and global competence.

2.2 Benefits of Virtual Exchange

2.2.1 Authentic Communication with Target Language Speakers

There are several benefits of virtual exchange. First, VE leads to authentic communication with target language speakers. Through spontaneous communication, students experience the challenges of communicating in a foreign language such as negotiating meaning, interpreting gestures and other non-verbal cues that are essential for communication in different cultures. Since interpersonal communication is spontaneous, conversational partners must listen to interpret what the other speaker says. Shrum and Glisan (2016) argue that conversational partners often find it necessary to negotiate meaning with one another or to interpret meaning. Negotiation means asking for repetition, clarification, confirmation, or indicating a lack of understanding. Lindholm and Myles (2019) also argue that understanding and experiencing integration with native speakers of the target language is of great significance for students. By interacting with target language speakers, students can compare their own experiences. They illustrate that misunderstandings can occur when relying only on direct translation. If people depend on direct translation, they cannot read between the lines, and meaning may be lost. Therefore, students need to understand the contextual and cultural meanings behind the words and phrases they are learning.

2.2.2 Raising Students' Autonomy

Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) point out that "learning does not take place in a vacuum and 'independence' does not necessarily imply learning on one's own. Interaction, negotiation, collaboration, etc., are important factors in promoting learner autonomy" (p. 377). This implies that the phrase "autonomous learners" does not mean that students have to learn entirely on their own or in isolation.

VE can raise students' autonomy by improving cognitive self-monitoring and raising motivation. Many researchers discuss how to encourage autonomous learning in language learning. Green et al. (1997) explain that "learners develop metacognitive awareness of the recursive nature of the learning process, which, in turn, is likely to help them to evolve into effective lifelong learners" (p. 226). This means enhanced self-awareness of thinking is crucial for boosting learner autonomy, and it helps uplift their intrinsic motivation to keep learning language themselves as a form of ongoing self-improvement.

In the context of VE, this recursive nature of learning becomes visible through continuous interaction and reflection. When students communicate with their partners, they receive immediate feedback, notice misunderstandings, and adapt their language use accordingly. Each exchange allows them to evaluate and refine their strategies, creating a cyclical process of learning, reflection, and improvement that fosters greater autonomy.

Also, some research shows that VE requires learner autonomy to promote multimodal and multiliteracies learning. Maina et al. (2017), who discuss how online collaborative learning can be integrated in a flipped classroom, showed that virtual exchanges need peer-to-peer collaboration. This requires constructive collaboration, which stimulates learner autonomy and promotes autonomous learners.

By developing self-monitoring and increasing motivation through interaction with others, VE can promote autonomous learners who actively manage their own learning process.

2.2.3 Enhance Intercultural Awareness

These days, the need for cultural awareness is increasing around the world. Winkelman (2005) mentioned that awareness of cultural differences and their influence on how people act is the basis of intercultural effectiveness. The author mentioned that "Cultural self-awareness includes recognition of one's own cultural influences upon values, beliefs, and judgments, as well as the influences derived from the professional's work culture" (p. 9). Intercultural awareness is essential not only for working abroad or working with foreigners but also for working effectively in one's own country, where employees, clients, or community members may come from diverse cultural backgrounds, including immigrants. For example, the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (2014) created a guide to help providers and administrators understand the role of culture in the delivery of mental health and substance use services. They also argue that because of cultural complexity, it is no longer a 'one-size-fits-all' environment. This idea applies not only to healthcare but also to education, where students and teachers interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Students in the classroom may have this multicultural experience in the workplace or in their daily lives, even if they do not go abroad in the future. That is why connecting classroom learning with students' personal and workplace experiences, as well as fostering cultural understanding, is so important. However, even though the importance of teaching culture is widely recognized, it presents several challenges in practice.

Byram and Kramsch (2008) discuss the reasons why teaching culture is difficult. First, the teacher's own stereotypes, derived from information from TV shows or books, can affect their teaching. As they tend to have a limited knowledge of culture, it may have given them a different perspective of the culture and could also reinforce stereotypes. Second, understanding culture requires knowledge of its historical background, yet many teachers have limited historical knowledge. This can make it difficult for them to explain cultural practices accurately or to contextualize cultural behaviors for their students. Third, it is difficult to learn about cultures without real experience of the culture of the target language.

To address this limitation, some recent studies have explored the potential of virtual exchange as a way to provide authentic intercultural experiences without the need to go abroad. Some case studies show that through virtual exchange, students can connect with people from other cultures and develop intercultural awareness. For example, O'Dowd (2021) examines 13 virtual exchange projects and finds out what they have learned through virtual exchange by coding their reflections. The author found that the top three things they learned were "knowledge of partner cultures", "Openness to cultural otherness" and "Focus on linguistic form." This research shows that through virtual exchange, students can learn about the culture of others. Rubin and Guth (2022) show another example of how the virtual exchange brings authenticity to such moments of global learning, emphasizing the need to let international communities tell their own stories and serve as important primary sources for knowledge construction. Through virtual exchange, students not only understand stereotyping culture, but they can understand through a real experience by sharing each student's own story, and this can raise their cultural awareness. In a study by Rubin and Guth (2022), the authors implemented a questionnaire for teachers asking them why they wanted to use VE in language learning. In the results, their top reason for using VE was raising their students' cultural awareness.The results indicate that teachers clearly recognize the importance of developing intercultural competence, yet they also acknowledge the difficulty of teaching culture only within the classroom. Therefore, VE can be seen as a valuable tool that supports teachers in overcoming this challenge by giving students opportunities to experience real intercultural communication. In this sense, VE not only promotes language learning but also plays a key role in fostering genuine intercultural understanding.

2.2.4 Delivering International Learning to a Greater Number of Students

Learners in small cities or areas with very few native speakers often face challenges in accessing environments where they can actively use the target language. Similar challenges exist for learners of other languages or subjects that require interaction with experts or native communities. For example, learners of Japanese

living in small cities or areas with very few Japanese speakers may find it difficult to interact with native speakers. According to PEW Research Center (2021), the top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas had the largest Japanese populations in 2019. Nevertheless, students who do not live in these large cities often find it difficult to access an environment where they can speak Japanese with members of the Japanese-speaking community. Consequently, VE can create opportunities even if students live far away from a Japanese community or big city. It helps students in small communities connect with people from around the world.

Moreover, financial or social accessibility will be a problem for several students. Historically, students who have financial difficulty cannot study abroad, which has been a major way to use the target language actively Due to financial constraints, some students may be unable to participate in study abroad programs, resulting in few opportunities to actively use the language they are learning. Also, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students who can participate in study abroad programs has lowered. In the United States, a mere 1.9% of undergraduate students have studied abroad (Open Doors, 2021).

In education, it is always important to give equity. However, historically, some groups of people have been physically, socially, or economically disadvantaged in comparison to others. At the same time, digital mobility can encourage equal learning. Sabzalieva et al. (2022) show that virtual approaches have "excellent potential to open access and opportunities to students who would otherwise be unwilling or unable to travel due to physical, social, or financial reasons" (p. 15). This suggests that students who wouldn't have a chance to talk with native speakers can have a chance to do so through virtual exchange. Furthermore, VE can also open our classrooms to cultures or geographical regions that are not easily accessible for physical, financial, or safety reasons.

3 Research questions

This study investigates the challenges that SLA students face in Virtual Exchange (VE) and introduces a Kolb-based Preparation–Reflection model as a pedagogical framework to address these challenges. Based on this aim, the study focuses on the following questions:

1. What challenges do SLA students face when participating Virtual Exchange?
2. How can a Kolb-based Preparation–Reflection model mitigate these challenges while fostering learner autonomy and intercultural competence?

4 Methodology

Qualitative surveys are an essential tool for collecting students' perceptions of their experiences, as they allow for "depth of inquiry into complex processes, individual experiences, and concepts that are difficult to quantify" (Limberg et al., 2021, p. 220). As Tomita et al. (2021) explain, qualitative survey research allows researchers to understand topics from participants' perspectives. Additionally, Braun et al. (2021) highlight the value of online surveys as a qualitative research tool. In this study, student perception surveys provided feedback on language learning and cultural exchange experiences. Conducted as part of a Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement (QA/QI) activity aimed at enhancing the curriculum, this project was determined not to require Institutional Review Board (IRB) review.

4.1 Participants and Context

Students enrolled in intermediate-level Japanese courses at a midsized university in the midwestern United States (n=12) participated in this study. The courses emphasized linguistic proficiency in speaking, listening, and reading, and were conducted in a regular face-to-face format. Eleven students' first language (L1) was English, and one student was Spanish. These 12 students were paired with 33 native Japanese-speaking students from Japan for a three-week virtual exchange.

During this program, the primary goal was to practice language skills and engage in cultural exchange.

4.2 Data Collection and Procedure

At the end of the program, participants were asked to complete a survey reflecting on their VE experiences. The online questionnaire, administered via Google Forms, included 19 open-ended questions in English, allowing students to provide paragraph-length responses. Questions focused on perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Participation was optional, and students could withdraw from the study at any time. The survey was administered in the final week of the three-week exchange, after students had completed all VE activities, enabling them to reflect on their experiences throughout the program.

4.3 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Analysis of the qualitative survey responses followed the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Words, phrases, and concepts were compared systematically to identify patterns and emergent themes across students' experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach allowed themes to arise directly from the data, providing insights into the challenges students faced and the effectiveness of the VE activities.

All coding was conducted solely by the primary researcher. To ensure trustworthiness, a detailed audit trail of the coding process, including reflective memos documenting the evolution of categories and analytical decisions. To mitigate potential researcher bias, the final thematic structure and supporting data were subjected to peer debriefing with a supervising professor, who provided critical feedback on the interpretations and challenged the coherence of the developed model.

5 Results

To address Research Question 1 (RQ1), this section reports the findings from student questionnaires and teacher observations regarding the implementation of the Virtual Exchange model. Analysis indicated that students perceived the exchange as rushed due to limited time.

5.1 Lack of Fruitful Exchange Due to Time Constraints

Students reported that within the 50-minute session, the need to complete several tasks resulted in the actual time for communication being severely restricted. This time constraint, primarily caused by the significant time difference between the partner institutions, was identified as a major difficulty.

5.2 Nervousness of Unexpected Conversations and Problems

Students reported high levels of nervousness when speaking in the target language with native speakers and having to interact with strangers. This nervousness was often worsened by the unpredictable nature of the conversations and the potential for technical difficulties or unexpected problems. Some students noted that these factors added stress to the experience.

5.3 Reduced Corrective Feedback as Students Become Friends

The data suggested that the exchange often lacked sufficient corrective feedback. As students developed friendships, the balance of power in their relationships made it more difficult for partners to offer explicit corrections. This reduction in feedback was identified as a drawback, limiting opportunities for language acquisition.

5.4 Value of the Exchange Varied by Interlocutor

The students' learning experiences and the perceived value of the exchange are dependent on the partner's language skills, cultural understanding, motivation, and engagement level. The difference results in some students receiving less valuable or equitable experiences than others.

6 Discussions of the findings (RQ1)

To address RQ1, this section examines the challenges faced by SLA students in VE (as presented in Chapter 5) and interprets these findings with reference to existing literature.

6.1 Lack of Fruitful Exchange Due to Time Constraints

One of the biggest difficulties of virtual exchange is how to secure the time for both schools. According to Healy and Kennedy (2020), who explain the problems of VE, it was mentioned that it is difficult to coordinate counterpart's schedules, considering different working hours, academic cultures, time constraints, and time zones. The findings in Chapter 5 confirm that the 15-hour difference between Japan and the USA, limiting exchanges to 50 minutes, is a major issue. Furthermore, Ware's (2005) study, which found that American students were less enthusiastic about participating due to time constraints, supports the idea that the amount of time available for an exchange is key to its success. Ware (2005) also indicates that the shorter the time is that students spend on VE with one another, the less fruitful the exchange. This issue requires dedicated extra time from the teacher and creates pressure for student time management.

6.2 Nervousness of Unexpected Conversations and Problems

The finding of student nervousness aligns with the nature of VE. Thorne (2003) argues about developing a conceptual framework for understanding how intercultural communication and the online contexts make "compelling, problematic, and surprising conditions for additional language learning" (p.38). Especially in the Virtual Exchange's context, Kurek (2015) and O'Dowd (2013) mentioned VE as the most complex and unpredictable of computer-assisted language pedagogies. The difficulty for students is not being able to predict what may happen during a conversation. Many students are nervous about speaking in the target language with native speakers and talking with strangers. Krashen (1985) described how a learner's psychological filter related to

attitudes affects their success in language learning. Helm (2013) proposes a dialogic model for telecollaboration, arguing that tensions need not be avoided, and that impromptu conversation is the key to the virtual exchange. Therefore, nervousness is also a natural thing, and the impromptu nature of virtual exchange is a good characteristic for language pedagogy. Teachers can reduce stress during preparation by addressing technical issues. Dooly (2008) explained that providing students with key insights on technology use may be very beneficial for them to "be in control of technology and not slaves to it" (p. 23). Designing classes for teaching technology before the exchange starts, such as how to share their screen or how to record their meeting, can help students feel more confident and contribute to a smoother interaction.

6.3 Reduced Corrective Feedback as Students Become Friends

The finding of reduced corrective feedback is consistent with known issues in peer-to-peer language exchanges. Virtual exchanges often lack the structured corrective feedback essential for enhancing students' learning. Bower and Kawaguchi (2011), who searched how much corrective feedback occurred in an online exchange situation, show that "corrective feedback was provided at a very low rate" (p.59), assuming that participants do not wish to interrupt the flow of conversation. This shows a downside to virtual exchange, as students could not receive enough feedback. Zourou (2009) points out that the symmetrical power relationship of eTandem tends to lead to less corrective feedback than studies with an asymmetrical power relationship (native speaker/non-native speaker or teacher/learner). While friendship is a positive characteristic, the equal balance of power formed with partners makes corrective feedback more difficult.

6.4 Value of the Exchange Varied by Interlocutor

The challenge of varied exchange quality is rooted in individual differences in language skills,cultural understanding, or background. As Chapter 5 revealed, the value of the exchange is dependent on the students' interlocutor. Konishi (2021) observed that communication in a case study was hindered because one student's target language skill and motivations were completely different from their counterpart's. The argument that successful virtual exchange requires pairing partners of roughly equivalent skill levels is

often difficult to implement due to differences in educational contexts. Despite this challenge, possible methods exist to prepare students to do virtual exchange in a way that they can still communicate effectively with varying levels of cultural and language knowledge.

In summary, the primary challenges identified include time constraints, unequal participation, and student anxiety related to interactions with unfamiliar peers and technical difficulties.

7 The Kolb-Based Model: Mitigation and Implications (RQ2)

To address RQ2, this section examines how the Kolb-based Preparation–Reflection model can help SLA teachers mitigate these challenges and promote learner autonomy and intercultural competence in Virtual Exchange.

7.1 Theoretical Foundations and Model Development: Terada et al.'s Guided Reflection (2019)

In terms of remedies for these types of problems, we can look to an article written by Terada et al.'s Guided Reflection (2019). This study was written about a project to improve the discussion management skills of Japanese language learners. In this project, to improve students' discussion-leading skills, they suggested several activities. It was based on experimental learning by Kolb (1984) and it helps students raise metacognition and motivation. Before the students start their activity, as a preparation activity, students watch a video recorded during last year's class, and they discuss the problems that arose from the conversations in the videos and how they could be resolved. In the main activity, one student is a discussion leader. In the reflective activity, the discussion leader will watch a video recording of the activity and annotate their reflection in their reflection sheet. Also, this study mentioned the reflection process becomes deeper with interaction with others. Therefore, after the discussion activity, the DL student will do a one-on-one reflection session with their teacher. At the end of the project, the reflection activity helps students raise their metacognition, and it helps their Japanese-language skills to improve.
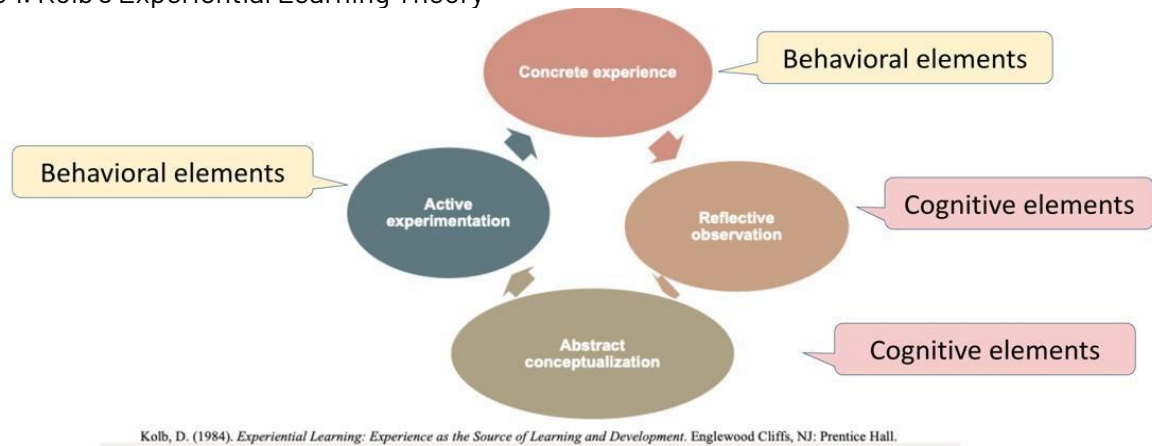
Based on previous studies and practical experiences, Terada's discussion model has implications for language learning in Virtual Exchange (VE) and appears to support the development of students' metacognitive language skills through reflective analysis of recorded videos. Although the sources are reliable, most of them are done on a small scale and not so many studies can be found in other contexts. Also, this study was only conducted on advanced learners. Therefore, this study investigates the applicability of Terada's model in the context of Virtual Exchange, following the approaches proposed by Lenkaitis et al. (2020) and Terada et al. (2019).

7.2 Model Components and Mechanisms : Developing a Model of VE Based on Kolb (1984) and Terada et al. (2019)

To solve the challenges of VE, the model was developed based on Terada et al. (2019) and Kolb's (1984) framework. This theory discusses how individuals learn through their experiences and how this learning can be applied in various settings. Kolb's theory of experiential learning is different from other learning theories in that it emphasizes the importance of concrete experiences in the learning process.
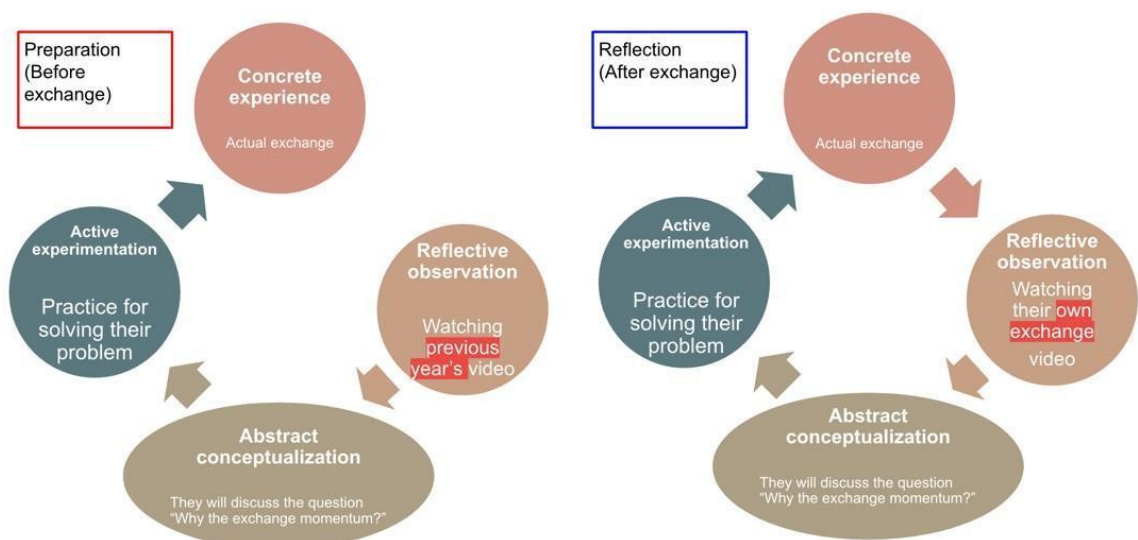
According to Kolb, learning is a cyclical process that involves four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This process differs from other learning theories that focus on either behavior or cognition alone. Kolb's theory integrates both cognitive and behavioral elements and emphasizes the importance of reflection and experimentation in the learning process. He not only conducts experiments but also does reflective observation, which is important. Through reflective observation, students develop metacognitive skills by reviewing and evaluating their experiences.

Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Based on Kolb's theory, the Preparation and Reflection models were made for VE. These are both about watching videos, but the difference is at the reflective observation stage. In the preparation model, students watch previous years videos and prepare for the actual exchange. This helps them prepare for their exchange. On the other hand, In the reflection model, students watch recordings of their own exchanges to evaluate their language use, interaction strategies, and cultural understanding, identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Figure 2. Preparation and Reflection Model Based on Kolb (1984)

7.3 Preparation Phase: Support for Student Learning Prior to Exchange

There is a huge difference between letting students' study freely or letting them express themselves freely with support from the teacher. The teacher should be involved in the lessons. Sauro and Chapelle (2017) indicates that "Teachers of VE must be prepared to mentor students in the development of "langua-technocultural competence". This concept refers to the integrated ability to use language effectively while navigating cultural norms and employing digital tools. In other words, students not only need linguistic skills and cultural understanding, but also the ability to communicate appropriately through technology-mediated platforms.

To foster learner autonomy, the teacher's support of their preparedness is crucial. O'Dowd et al. (2020) also mentioned that "pedagogical mentoring in virtual exchange involves providing students with examples or models of effective or appropriate online interaction strategies before they engage in online interaction with their partners" (p.149). Therefore, in this model, to prepare for their lessons, students can see previous students' videos and have time for discussion, and they can prepare for speaking the language itself. Nissen (2016) indicates that face-to-face sessions were to prepare students for their online interaction and to analyze students' experience in virtual exchange. For example, the videos can show how they can ask for the repetition and the timeline for the exchange with their classmates and/or teachers. It can help students struggle less.

Also, teachers can use an asynchronous exchange platform. Also, teachers can use an asynchronous exchange platform. Nowadays, such platforms are widely used to facilitate collaborative learning, allowing students to engage in discussions, share ideas, and create video content at their own pace. The ICT tool Flip, developed by Microsoft (formerly known as Flipgrid), has recently become an important resource for fostering social and collaborative learning. Research has shown that Flip can effectively facilitate social learning, enhance students' video content creation skills, and promote the development of learning communities (Hanh & Huong, 2021). It helps them to do icebreaker exercises before the exchange, allowing them to understand each other and

helping them to no longer feel like "strangers." These activities can be a remedy to help lower the affective filter for students.

7.4 Reflection Phase: Raising Metacognitive Skills through Video Reflection

In the exchange, students watch videos from a prior class and their own recorded video, too. Through watching video, students can raise their metacognition. Corrections can be made, through watching their recorded video again. Watching videos can help students understand what their mistakes were and identify the barriers of their exchange. O'Dowd et al. (2020) mentioned "It is vital to underline to students that communication breakdowns and reflection and learning and not as failure of the learning process."

In this reflection, students will engage in several instances of languaging (Swain, 2006). Through these experiences, they can develop deeper insights as they reflect on their own learning.

It also can connect the importance of the interaction. In the first reflection, students might not reflect on themselves in a deeper way, but in the last, because of the interaction and using the teacher's scaffolding, they can do deeper reflection. Cunningham (2016) also mentioned "Integrating extracts and recordings of students' own online interactions into class interaction as learning 'rich points' emerge' ".

7.5 Group Mediation Phase : Mitigating Inequality

Elstermann (2022) mentioned peer group mediation sessions are workable for virtual exchange content. While students do virtual exchange projects, teachers set a time for group mediation. After interacting with other countries' students, they do discussions inside of the classroom. For beginners, it is difficult to conduct discussions, so they use their L1 language. The teacher's role here is to control and guide discussion. O'Dowd (2015) mentioned that the teacher's support such as reflecting upon culturally contingent patterns of interaction in follow-up classroom discussions is important. Through this activity, students are able to share their experiences, leading to a better quality and more equitable education and experience that is not limited by their partners.
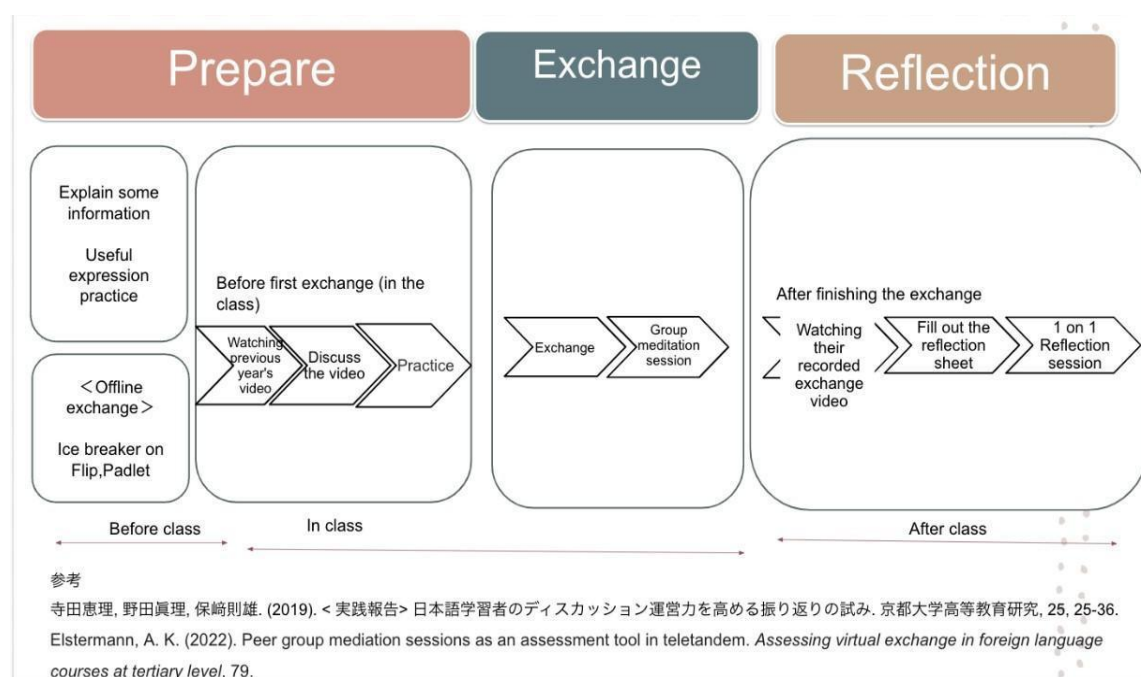
7.6 Whole Virtual Exchange Model

The results for Research Question 1 revealed that while students perceived the virtual exchange as a valuable opportunity to practice communication and learn about different cultures, they also faced challenges such as unequal participation, anxiety when speaking with unfamiliar partners, and insufficient preparation time.

To address these challenges identified in RQ1, a new virtual exchange model was developed based on experiential learning theory (Kolb,1984) and reflection framework (Terada et al., 2019).

This is the virtual exchange model specifically designed for this study. As preparation, students watch the previous year's video and practice the target grammar in advance. Also, doing an ice breaker before they start the exchange helps students relax and calm their nerves before speaking in front of strangers. After the exchange, students will do the group mediation session. It helps them to raise their metacognition and will lead to an opportunity for the same quality of experience as their classmates not matter who their partner was. Lastly, as a reflection, they will watch their recorded exchange video. By watching their recorded video, they raise their own metacognition.

Figure3. Virtual Exchange Model

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Elstermann, A. K. (2022). Peer group mediation sessions as an assessment tool in teletandem. *Assessing virtual exchange in foreign language courses at tertiary level*, 79.

In summary, the Kolb-based Preparation–Reflection model addresses the identified challenges by providing structured preparation, group mediation sessions, and post-exchange reflection, thereby promoting learner autonomy, equitable participation, and intercultural competence.

8 Conclusion

This study explored the challenges SLA students faced when participating in a Virtual Exchange (RQ1) and provided practical recommendations for teachers to improve future VE implementation (RQ2). The analysis revealed that students valued opportunities for authentic intercultural communication but experienced difficulties such as unequal participation, limited preparation time, and nervousness when speaking with unfamiliar partners.

To address these challenges, this study proposed a Kolb-based Preparation–Reflection model, adapted from Terada et al. (2019). The model emphasizes structured pre-exchange preparation, group mediation sessions, and post-exchange reflection through watching recorded videos. These stages promote students' metacognitive awareness, equitable participation, and learner autonomy, leading to deeper intercultural understanding.

The findings suggest that Virtual Exchange can be a powerful pedagogical tool in SLA classrooms when supported by clear guidance, reflective practice, and teacher mentoring. However, since this study involved a small sample of intermediate-level learners from one institution, future research should apply the model in different educational contexts and levels to examine its broader effectiveness.

Overall, integrating Virtual Exchange through experiential and reflective learning models offers an effective way to connect language learning with real-world intercultural communication.

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