

# Virtual exchanges: Ontological engagement in student-led learning spaces

Tim Cleminson

## Background

English as a foreign language (EFL) education is facing serious macro-environmental challenges. The shift to e-learning since COVID-19 and artificial intelligence implementation has accelerated digitalization in university language learning, resulting in a reduction in meaningful, face-to-face classroom interactions and autonomous linguistic production (Zai and Zhou, 2026). Economic factors compound this issue in Japan, where unfavorable currency exchange rates are making study-abroad programs financially prohibitive, leading to decreased opportunities for learners to develop intercultural competency. However, virtual exchange (VE) connects geographically distant learners through collaborative online learning and offers an inexpensive and inclusive way to experience intercultural encounters and deep learning outside of class (O'Dowd, 2022; Rubin, 2017).

## Pedagogic Design

The study details a VE peacebuilding course between universities in Japan and Ukraine implemented as an elective component within existing university modules. In Japan, the project was embedded in an Intercultural Communication course, while in Ukraine, it was integrated into an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum. The three supervising teachers guided a cohort of 13 Japanese and 10 Ukrainian university students (TOEIC proficiency approximately 550). The curriculum paired critical media literacy with conflict-sensitive communication and aimed to teach students how to analyze bias in conflict reporting and rewrite reports using conflict-sensitive language (Kellner and Share, 2019; Koleth, 2021).

Utilizing a trauma-informed pedagogy structured around the principles of mindfulness and limiting harm, the course was designed with three sequential phases. In the first phase, which was teacher-led, students received mini-lectures on peacebuilding, media bias, and conflict-sensitive language. Students had opportunities to apply the techniques in activities and receive guidance from teachers. In the second phase, which was learner-led, international teams of students had two weeks to collaboratively analyze and edit a conflict article. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was chosen as it was considered neutral, since no students had personal involvement. Student teams organized these sessions, making suggested edits asynchronously on shared documents, and meeting synchronously on Zoom to discuss the edits. Through this learner-led process, students actively identified ideological framing and co-edited the texts into more balanced narratives. In the third phase, all teams reconvened on Zoom to present their analysis and edited articles. Groups delivered reflective presentations evaluating their complex editorial choices and received feedback from teachers and peers. At the end of the final session, students wrote a report on the learning experiences, discussing the challenges and benefits of the VE peacebuilding course.

## Research Approach

The pedagogical investigation utilized a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the interaction between instrumental and ontological learning. Instrumental learning is defined as the mastery of technical and critical skills used in the analysis and production of texts, such as identifying biased language and framing devices. Ontological learning is defined as process-oriented learning that involves socio-imaginative capacities, such as empathy, personal investment in learning, and shifts in learners' self-perceptions (Yeh and Friesem, 2024). Data collection relied on descriptive statistics from post-course surveys, a six-month follow-up survey, and direct observations of student peer-review comments within shared documents. The core qualitative analysis focused on the end-of-course student reports. These texts were systematically analyzed to isolate learning modes and triggers for 'ontological engagement' (Matusov et al., 2019), which occurs when the curriculum intersects with students' lived realities.

## Findings

The findings revealed that learner-led VE spaces provided opportunities for students to practice instrumental techniques and develop a degree of technical competency in media analysis. Students successfully demonstrated the critical ability to identify and reframe biased information within conflict narratives. A Ukrainian participant reflected on this practical skill development, stating:

This project definitely made me think differently about how language is used in the media... Words like 'massacre' or 'genocide' don't just describe—they shape opinions and emotions. Now I try to read more critically.

A Japanese student similarly noted:

We changed many parts of the article to make the tone more neutral and respectful. I believe that these small changes can make a big difference for readers.

During these technical exercises, authentic human encounters between the geographically separated and socio-historically distinct student cohorts led to deeper ontological engagement with the subject matter (Lavrysh et al., forthcoming). This was acutely felt during live Zoom sessions where Japanese students heard air-raid alarms in the background and experienced the reality of conflict. Conversely, Ukrainian students realized they had to make their own speech conflict-sensitive to create space for polyphonic, mutually respectful dialogue with their Japanese counterparts (Bakhtin, 2013; Sidorkin, 2025). This reflective shift was clearly articulated by a Ukrainian student who wrote:

I also feel like my perspective changed. At first, I thought neutral reporting meant not caring or being too 'soft' on serious issues. But I've learned that neutrality doesn't mean ignoring the pain—it means showing respect for different sides and trying to make space for dialogue. I now understand that peaceful communication is not just about what you say, but how you say it.

## Conclusion

Learner-led VE can be seen as an event-space in which human encounters between learners generate ontological engagement with the curriculum through meaningful communication between socio-historically distinct student cohorts. Encounters motivated students to develop instrumental and critical skills to challenge authoritative texts and prompted a re-evaluation of their worldviews, sparking reflexive insights about how their own communicative choices shaped opportunities for peacebuilding and meaningful dialogue. Ontologically, this VE project triggered deeper identity transformations through the acknowledgment of experiential asymmetry and the desire for polyphonic dialogue. Hence, this study shows VE can be a stimulating form of out-of-class learning that supports ontological engagement with language learning and promotes authentic and autonomous linguistic production.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Vol. 8, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Kellner, D., and J. Share. *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education*. Brill Sense, 2019. <https://doi:10.1163/9789004404533>.
- Koeth, M. "Language Matters: Exploring the Relationship Between Linguistic Choices and Conflict Transformation." *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2021, pp. 189–203.
- Lavrysh, Y., et al. "Peacebuilding through Critical Media Literacy and Conflict-Sensitive Communication." *Handbook of Using Virtual Exchange Across Disciplines: Building Global Citizens from Home*, edited by K. A. Tzoumis, Springer Nature, forthcoming.
- Matusov, E., A. Marjanovic-Shane, and M. Gradovski. "Ontological Engagement." *Dialogic Pedagogy and Polyphonic Research Art: Bakhtin by and for Educators*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 143–73.
- O'Dowd, R. *Internationalising Higher Education and the Role of Virtual Exchange*. Routledge, 2022.
- Rubin, J. "Embedding Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) at Higher Education Institutions." *International Higher Education*, no. 2, 2017, pp. 27–44.
- Sidorkin, A. M. "The Polyphonic Relational Epistemology." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2025, pp. 248–61.
- Yeh, E., and Y. Friesem. "Social Justice Education as an Intercultural Experience for Foreign Students in the United States." *EuroCALL Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2024, pp. 24–36. <https://doi:10.4995/eurocall.2023.15010>.
- Zai, F., and X. Zhou, "The Impact of AI-Assisted Learning on the Agency of Foreign Language Learners: A Meta-Analysis." *Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 16, no. 3, 6 Mar. 2026, p. 379. PubMed Central, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs16030379>.