

Students as teachers: The key to learning a language in virtual conversation exchanges

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Current levels of interest in learning a foreign language are unprecedented, and there have never been so many ways to learn. The internet has given rise to a wide variety of tools for listening, reading and

writing in another language. It has also led to the emergence of platforms where students can improve their speaking skills through virtual conversation exchanges.

Busuu, which has more than seventy million users, and Tandem, with more than ten million, increase their number of users every year, especially among learners of English, Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. Estimates suggest that the online education market will increase in value to \$325 billion by 2028, and [language learning](#) is predicted to be one of the most important sectors in that growth.

A [study](#) by a researcher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), published as [open access](#) in the journal *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, highlights the benefits of these online conversation exchanges between students, as well as the potential they offer for learning about other cultures.

The study, a qualitative analysis of real conversations between learners of English and Spanish, shows that learners adopting the role of teachers has beneficial effects, as it enables the participants to correct each other. The study found that in linguistic digressions in which the conversation drifted towards the more technical aspects of language, such as explaining a new term, the climate of camaraderie that was created offered a safe environment, and fostered corrective feedback and learning.

"Virtual exchanges are hugely beneficial, as they can be adapted to each [student's](#) time and pace, and they are very flexible," explained Laia Canals, the author of the study and a researcher in the UOC Faculty of Arts and Humanities' TechSLA Lab, "but in order to make good use of this method for authentic oral practice, teachers need to have more material and didactic units prepared in advance that they can use for different levels, contexts and languages."

Platforms for learning a language and understanding another culture

Canals, who organizes an exchange program at the UOC for different levels of English proficiency aimed at improving students' conversational skills, pointed out that the provision of resources would encourage language teachers to use this method. "It currently creates a significant workload for them, which can put them off," she explained.

There are interesting platforms in Europe that bring together teaching staff and students from different universities and educational programs. Two of the most well-known are eTwinning, which connects teaching staff and students through a virtual platform and different web tools, and UNICollaboration, which is aimed primarily at young people.

Another application, Soliya, has a more ambitious objective, as it brings together university students from different countries so that in addition to practicing their language skills in conversations, they can also find out more about different cultures. The application suggests various issues, such as religion or local customs, for the students to discuss with each other and understand each other's points of view.

Exchanges in developing countries

Virtual language exchanges are a growing trend in developed countries, but developing countries have yet to experience this upsurge. Canals believes that further research should examine the reasons behind this slow progress in developing countries—problems related to access to technology, cultural issues, etc. "It would be useful to see how these countries could be included," she said, "and to try to find solutions to foster this type of exchanges in other contexts, in other countries, and in other languages, including minority languages maybe."

As this UOC research shows, language learning could benefit greatly from virtual exchanges and language exchange applications. Finding out how the participants relate to each other and how they learn is therefore essential for creating better learning situations and making the most of their potential.

More information: Laia Canals, Modified output and metalanguage during conversational interaction: A qualitative look at interactional feedback, *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* (2023).

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