

Using a Global Virtual Learning Community to Enhance L2 Language Teaching: Connecting ESL and EFL Teachers in a Synchronous/Asynchronous Environment

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Abstract

This article presents a descriptive study of a virtual learning community (VLT) established to connect pre-service ESL teachers (N=6) at a Southeastern U.S. university with a group of EFL teachers (N=6) at a university in Turkey. The VLT used both asynchronous (e-journaling, blogs) and synchronous (i.e., SKYPE, Google Hangout, FaceTime) communication to support an environment in which both groups could share common challenges of and instructional methods for teaching English to non-native English speakers in addition to providing an open forum for discussing educational and cultural issues common to both cohort groups of teachers. Results of the study were mostly favorable, following qualitative analysis of the asynchronous ejournal entries (posted on the PB works wiki-website which supported the VLC), and the post-project survey completed by all participants.

Keywords: virtual learning communities, second language teaching, collaboration, knowledge sharing

1. Introduction

Long before the ubiquitous use of synchronous communication in real-time, virtual settings (i.e., SKYPE, FaceTime, Google Hangout) to enhance academic environments, asynchronous communication modes (i.e., blogs, wikis, online discussion groups, WeChat) were the norm. In today's tech-rich world, however, the presence of internet-based instruction, embracing both synchronous and asynchronous communication, has grown exponentially, particularly over the past decade, with at least 32% of U.S. students now taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This online instructional delivery system trend in some instances, has been supported by full state initiatives in the U.S., such as those implemented at Minnesota state colleges and universities, when they mandated that 25% of all college credits be delivered online by 2015 "to save tax dollars and reach more students" (n.d., para. 1). Presently, web-based post-secondary academic programs are readily available, affordable (particularly with MOOCS, massive online open courses, McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Cormier, 2008), and indeed thriving in most content fields including Teacher Preparation. The purpose of the study described in this article was not to examine the quality of internet-based instruction in general, or even Teacher Education programs, specifically. It does, however, chronicle the development, growth and efficacy of a particular global virtual learning community (VLC), established by the authors, to serve as a dual platform (synchronous and asynchronous) communication vehicle connecting members of a pre-service ESL teacher education methods class, at a large university in Knoxville, TN, with practicing (in-service) teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a university in Ankara, Turkey.

2.0 What are Virtual Learning Communities?

Virtual learning communities (VLCs), as defined by Yang et al. (2007), are “information technology-based cyberspaces in which individuals and groups of geographically dispersed learners accomplish their goals of elearning” (p. 84). VLCs, formerly referred to as *online communities of practice* (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008; Johnson, 2001), are in reality, 21st century versions of *learning communities*, defined by Bielaczyc and Collins in 1999 as cohesive communities which embody a “culture of learning in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding” (as cited in Rogers, 2000, p. 384). And, this describes exactly the virtual learning communal environment that the authors wanted to create for their respective cohorts; pre-service ESL teachers formed one group, practicing EFL teachers, the other.

3.0 Background of the Study

The first author of this article was a professor of a Grammar for ESL Teachers summer class, taught at The University of Tennessee, in which the second author was a student. At the end of the class, the professor challenged her students to work with her in a replication of a research project that she had previously conducted a few years prior when she established a VLC connecting her University of Tennessee ESL Methods students with EFL teachers she taught while a visiting professor in South Korea (Davis-Wiley, 2014). When the second researcher took a position teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey, he accepted the challenge and thus, the special research project journey began.

4.0 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to establish a Virtual Learning Community, using both synchronous (SKYPE, Google Hangout, FaceTime) and asynchronous (ejournaling on a closed PBworks wiki environment), to provide an open forum for pre-teachers of ESL students and in-service, practicing EFL teachers, to freely and candidly exchange ideas, materials, resources and engage in meaningful discussion on issues concerned with their respective educational and cultural arenas.

5.0 Importance of the Study

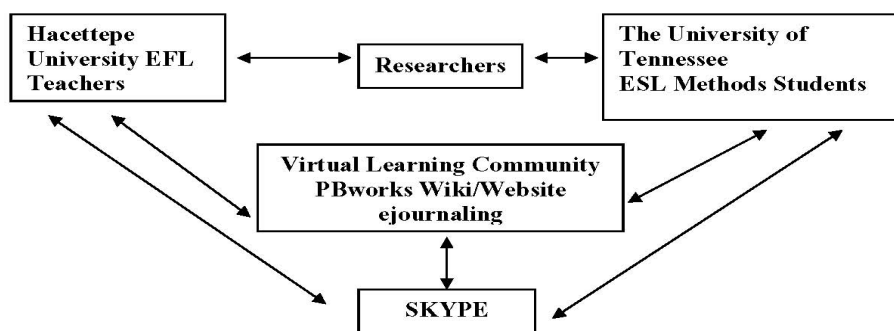
Whereby there exists published research documenting the use of Virtual Learning Communities to enhance the second language skills of its members (a few studies include those published by Kasper, 2000; Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000; Shih & Yang 2008; Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012), there appears to be a dearth of publications documenting the use of VLCs to enhance the understanding of ESL/EFL pedagogical issues in a virtual learning environment where language and culturally-diverse second language (L2) teachers can openly share and discuss their ideas, opinions and experiences.

6.0 Methodology

6.1 Design

Figure 1 presents the Virtual Learning Community model followed in this study. Both researchers and community members used the VLC site for dynamic virtual communication using both synchronous and asynchronous modes.

Figure 1. VLC for pre-service ESL and in-service EFL teachers.



6.1.1 Organization of the Virtual Learning Community Site

After researching a variety of free and easily-accessible cyberspace environments, the primary researcher established a PBworks (pbworks.com) wiki that she made available through personal invitation to the members of the Virtual Learning Community, consisting of the pre-service ESL Teachers from Tennessee, the in-service, practicing EFL teachers from Turkey, and her research partner. This particular cyber venue was selected for its user-friendliness for both facilitator and users. It is organized by navigator tabs from the front page and hyperlinks on the front-page Navigator panel. Files and images can be seamlessly uploaded to the site by all members of the wiki-website using a WORD-like format. The established PBworks website would be used by all members of the VLC for 8 weeks during the first half of a 15-week spring semester, although some members still occasionally post to the site. On the homepage of the VLC website was: a time schedule grid, graphically illustrating the 7-hour difference between Knoxville, TN and Ankara, Turkey (see Table 1); a table of SKYPE partners with contact information (selected by the researchers to match members' backgrounds and interests); ejournal and SKYPE topics (jointly selected by both cohort groups at the beginning of the project); directions for navigating the PBworks site; dedicated ejournal pages for each cohort team; a separate folder for general information on both cohort groups' respective cities and universities; and directions for navigating the wiki-website.

Table 1 Time Zone Table for Tennessee and Turkey

TIME ZONE TABLE					
Knoxville	Ankara	Knoxville	Ankara	Knoxville	Ankara
2400	0700	0800	1500	1600	2300
0100	0800	0900	1600	1700	2300
0200	0900	1000	1700	1800	0100
0300	1000	1100	1800	1900	0200
0400	1100	1200	1900	2000	0300
0500	1200	1300	2000	2100	0400
0600	1300	1400	2100	2200	0500
0700	1400	1500	2200	2300	0600
2400 = midnight		1200 = noon			

6.1.2 Asynchronous and Synchronous Communication

All VLC cohorts were asked by their respective leaders (the two researchers) to identify potential topics of interest to be discussed by each team, first via ejournaling during one week, followed by a SKYPE (or other virtual medium such as Google Hangout or Face Time) conversation on the same topic during the second week. This procedure was followed for all selected topics throughout the duration of the project. This allowed the VLC partners to establish a positive rapport (Arbough, 2001), first asynchronously, second, synchronously, which would allow them to become more comfortable and less self-conscious with each other. There were several topics discussed over the course of the semester, beginning with self-profiles, personal interests and philosophies of teaching and ultimately leading up to issues dealing with ESL/EFL instruction (see Table 2). Throughout the duration of the research project, the two researchers consistently urged their two cohorts to assiduously participate in regular ejournaling and SKYPE meetings in order to not get behind with the Virtual Learning Community's posted schedule. The only weeks that the VLCs were not active were during the cohorts' spring breaks.

Table 2 Self-Selected Topics for Ejournaling and SKYPE Sessions

COHORT-SELECTED TOPICS FOR EJOURNALING AND SKYPE SESSIONS
Introductions; Family; Personal Interests; Philosophy of Teaching
Education in Tennessee (U.S.) and Ankara (Turkey)
Career Goals: Present and Future
Content Language/Integrated Learning Issues, Techniques, Resources, Materials

6.2 Participants

There were a total of 12 participants in the study, all female: 6 were pre-service ESL teachers, taking an ESL Methods class at The University of Tennessee (Team Knoxville) and 6 were practicing, in-service EFL teachers from Hacettepe University (Team Ankara).

Whereby participants from the ESL Methods class (Team Knoxville) were required to become an active part of the VLC community (and received up to 35 out of 100 points for a grade in the class), the EFL teachers in Ankara, Turkey (Team Ankara) were all volunteers recruited for the study project by the second author, and received no extrinsic rewards for their efforts.

7.0 Results

7.1 Ejournal Entries and SKYPE sessions

Eleven of the 12 members of the VLC reported using their home computers for both ejournaling and SKY Ping activities. One Ankara member, however wrote main thoughts first at her school and then later completed her journal entry at home. The first ejournal entries the two cohorts posted during the first week of the new semester during which the VLC was established were essentially autobiographical and consisted of the participants' academic backgrounds and other personal information. All participants enthusiastically shared family and significant other photos, descriptions of their hobbies, families, friends, pets and even favorite places to visit and things to do. It was interesting for the researchers to see how the virtual rapport established through regular ejournaling and SKYPing evolved into not only real friendships between the cohort partners but also respect for each other's cultures, educational milestones and achievements. This phenomenon exemplifies Wengner's (1998) research on Communities of Practice (i.e., the present research study project's Virtual Learning Community) where practice brings coherence into a community in which "its members form relationships with each other and with their tasks" and where the characteristics of "mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint expertise must be present" (as cited in Rogers, 2000, p. 385).

In illustration of the above, one young Turkish EFL teacher entered in her first journal entry with her new partner, "Hi! This is me. Nice to meet you. I'm so glad you'll be my partner, I hope we'll have fun while sharing our experience about teaching, students, difficult and sometimes really funny situations in learning/teaching process...I hope we will learn a lot from each other. I can't believe that one week already passed...I can't wait for [our] next skypeing session! I will be able to tell you lots of funny stories from my classes:" [And she did, over the next 3 journal entries.] Later on, after several ejournal and SKYPE sessions with her Turkish EFL partner, another ESL pre-teacher had obviously established an excellent rapport with her EFL in-service teacher partner after just two ejournal and SKYPE sessions and felt very comfortable complimenting the seasoned teacher regarding how the EFL teacher worked with her students. "I really enjoyed skypeing you again... I adore how you manage your classroom. You seem like such a kindhearted teacher." One other pre-service ESL teacher, who had not yet had any experience teaching students in her own classroom, had asked her EFL cohort partner some excellent questions concerning classroom management (one of the later topics for discussion in the VLC). The EFL teacher had not only shared several long paragraphs of tips and strategies with the pre-service ESL teacher but also posted multiple pictures of how she organized her students for a reading activity. The pre-service ESL student was most appreciative.

"Thanks so much for your input on classroom management! I loved your pictures. The one of the students reading is really cool! I really liked your popcorn' method for students to pay attention in class!" [The teacher would say, *Pop* and the students would answer, *Corn*.] "I think I will use that when I have a classroom someday. I also like 'Okra'! That is a really good idea to ensure students are speaking English in the classroom!" Careful reading of all ejournal entries over the 8-week project, convinced the researchers how well all participants in the study became enthusiastic, active, productive stakeholders in all of the assigned activities housed in the Virtual Learning Community. Ejournaling did not present a logistical problem for the two VLC cohorts due to its asynchronous nature. However, setting up real-time virtual synchronous times, compatible for regular SKYPE dates, was a challenge due to the time zone difference of 7 hours; when it was 10 p.m. in Knoxville, TN (Eastern Standard Time) it was 7 a.m. in Ankara, Turkey. Sometimes, finding a common time to SKYPE was difficult, however, members of the VLC worked out these challenges and rarely missed a SKYPE date. "I loved reading your entry... I can't wait to speak with you face to face, but I am in class tomorrow at 7 p.m. (Turkey). What about skypeing Friday at 7 p.m. (Turkey) [ESL pre-teacher]?" "Unfortunately, I'll be on the way to İstanbul to see my niece Friday at 7 p.m. :(My sister has just moved to a new flat so she doesn't have wifi connection at home. Can we skype today at late hour? I'll be OK till 11 p.m. (Turkey). If it's OK or you, I'll be quite happy [EFL teacher]."

7.2 Reflections from the VLC Cohorts at the End of the Semester

At the end of the research study project during which the VLC was active, all participants were asked to carefully reflect on several questions (see Appendix) and to post their answers anonymously to a special forum set-up for this purpose. Qualitative analysis of the cohorts' reflections, conducted by both authors, is summarized below.

7.2.1 Reflections from Team Ankara

All comments made from the EFL practicing teachers were for the most part very positive and expressed a sense of gratitude for having had this unique experience made possible from participating in the Virtual Learning Community established for the present research project. "Ejournaling is like talking to her [her partner]...especially after we've talked with each other face to face while skyping." Although not an explicit objective of the research project, a positive by-product of the synchronous communication mode, practicing English with a native speaker, was reported. "I think, having an American E-conversation partner is an opportunity for me to improve my spoken English." Several members of Team Ankara spoke about how much they enjoyed getting to know another teacher from another culture and appeared to be genuinely surprised that both had so much in common, echoing the results of Wengner's (1998) research. "I liked the information exchange and seeing my partner's family photos about the Ejournaling. I think photos brought in some kind of an intimacy into our project." "Skyping my partner was the best. I loved talking to her. We spoke for more than an hour." "Seeing that we had so much in common was great. I think we will do wonders in this project... I loved speaking to an American partner...It was nice to have someone who spoke the language fluently so in turn I could speak the same."

"Finally, I just want to say I loveeeee my partner. Thank you for matching me up with her." One of the outcomes of a viable Virtual Learning Community is the mutual sharing of knowledge (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008; Shen, 2015) and respectful acceptance of other members in the VLC (Johnson, 2001; Rogers, 2000). "I think it's a great opportunity to share the experience, thoughts and learn something useful. Also we are from different cultures, so we're lucky that we can learn something cross cultural (intercultural?) that maybe we can need in a future. I believe that in any case it's something helpful and beneficial to both teachers. We're getting valuable experience." Another outcome of the Virtual Learning Community established for this research project, was that several members of Team Ankara expressed a desire for their American VLC partners to come visit them in Turkey. One exchange between cohorts demonstrates this. "Definitely I will show you around if you have a chance to come here! I have lots of things you to show in this beautiful country :) [member from Team Ankara]." "After talking to you I told all of my friends that I have a new Turkish friend who is going to show me around Turkey someday :) [Member from Team Knoxville]."

7.2.2 Reflections from Team Knoxville

Comments shared by the members of Team Knoxville were just as positive as those shared by Team Ankara. "Overall, I found this synchronous/asynchronous project to be very rewarding in several aspects. Not only was I able to connect and form a bond with my partner, but I feel that it allowed me to witness ESL/EFL instruction in a new light." "It was great hearing both about her [partner from Team Ankara] challenges and strengths in the classroom." "I think having the chance to skype helped to create a more intimate connection across the project. I loved that we could discuss various topics on teaching and the classroom." "I liked reading X's [name removed] perspective about teaching....It was nice to see her expressions and hear how well she actually speaks English." "I loved sharing stories about culture and about our 'typical days.'" Several pre-service ESL teachers shared interesting insights, comparing ESL with EFL teaching, including the following. "...my courses...and this project have helped to showcase the difference in perspectives relating to ESL/EFL instruction...[showing] similar challenges faced by ESL/EFL teachers regarding the limited classroom time." "With such little time available for instruction, it makes it ever more important to engage students in meaningful and authentic activities that will make connections on multiple levels." Invaluable advice from seasoned EFL Team Ankara members, concerning working with language learners (as supported by Krashen, 1982), was also given to Team Knoxville members. "Throughout the project, it became clear how important the affective filter is in the classroom. My partner gave concrete backing to this by explaining that if a child is not comfortable or fails to give the correct response they [he/she] may not be willing to try again in the future. Because of this, I think it is essential that students are made to feel comfortable and are not pressured to feel that they must be correct every time." Admiration for and appreciation of the dedication of the EFL teacher cohort were shared in Team Knoxville's reflections.

“As a [aspiring] teacher, it [the ejournaling and SKYPing] has made me more determined to become a teacher. I really admire Y’s [name removed] dedication and respect for her students...even though they can be very challenging.” “I learned a lot from my partner in Turkey. She [my partner] has given me great advice about teaching. I will use the techniques that she [my partner] told me about to manage my classroom... [she] has inspired me as a teacher!” The pre-service ESL teachers were essentially happy about having the experience of using both synchronous and asynchronous modes to communicate in the VLC with their EFL partners, although, there were some challenges at times. “My overall favorite aspects of establishing and maintaining communication through [e]journaling were that it provided a starting block for skyping the following week. It allowed us to get to know our partners before we actually spoke with them the following week, which I felt made skyping a more natural experience.” Finding a good time to Skype was probably the hardest part of this project. “With everyone being so busy and the time difference, sometimes it was hard to find a good common time.” “The only challenges I encountered was at times it was difficult to find adequate service or signal...However, in most cases we were able to quickly resolve them.” Plans for continued communication with members of Team Ankara were also expressed in Team Knoxville’s reflections. “I now want to visit Turkey. We are now Facebook friends and I have her whatsapp [WhatsApp] number and skype. We would [will] probably continue to communicate through What App or Skype.”

8.0 Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Of primary interest to the two authors who initiated the present research project was establishing a viable Virtual Learning Community in which the first author’s pre-service ESL teachers in Knoxville, TN could meet and communicate with practicing, in-service EFL teachers in Ankara, Turkey. After mutual topics of discussion had been negotiated between both cohorts, the VLC members would be free to first ejournal and then SKYPE with their assigned partners on a regular basis throughout the duration of the project. It was hoped that the aspiring ESL teachers would greatly benefit from interacting their EFL teacher partners in the VLC, learning about methods and techniques of teaching English, suggestions for organizing and managing a classroom and discussing any other issues that occur in the English language classroom. There was no particular agenda on either researcher’s part other than wanting to virtually connect two sets of teachers interested in teaching English to non-native English speakers. It was hoped that once a Virtual Learning Community had been set-up, and both cohorts had been guided and gently urged by their respective cohort leaders on how to participate in the VLC with linguistic partners from the other side of the world, that the members of the community would be able to thrive and freely *share joint expertise* through *mutual engagement* and a *shared repertoire* (Wengner, 1998).

And, indeed, this is exactly what the researchers found to be true. Serendipitous results of the present project included not just the pedagogical suggestions that the EFL teachers freely gave to their junior L2 pre-service ESL teachers, but also the cultural sharing opportunities documented in the VLC along with a tangible mutual respect of one cohort of the other and a desire to continue a friendship started and nurtured through the virtual community of practice. Additionally, it was clearly evident to the researchers that all members of this global VLC truly shared more commonalities than differences in both their professional and personal lives, as documented in the members’ ejournal posts and their final reflections at the end of the project. The minor technical challenges, presented by using a synchronous communication mode (SKYPE), were met and overcome by the VLC’s members and did not appear to negatively impact the success of the project.

The asynchronous medium (ejournaling) fully engaged all members of the project and yielded a rich amount of data that will certainly be examined in a later research study. One interesting linguistic phenomenon (for future research) that was noticed was the language recasting between both groups of teachers, in addition to the inclusion of similar language patterns and expressions, adopted by the EFL teachers following their communication with the pre-ESL teachers. Limitations of this particular study are common with most research projects and included having a small number of participants and a short period of time during which the project took place. In addition, the current research project was only examined qualitatively, and only from written sources. Further similar research studies should include a more robust platform of data collection including personal interviews with the participants.

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Appendix

Post-Prospect Reflections

1. At the end of this 8-week project, what are your overall feelings about it?
2. What were some of the initial challenges that you encountered?
3. How were you able to address these challenges as the project progressed?
4. How has your perspective regarding ESL/EFL evolved throughout the project?
5. What were your overall favorite aspects of establishing and maintaining synchronous (Ejournaling) communication with your partner?
6. What were your overall favorite aspects of establishing and maintaining synchronous (SKYPE) communication with your partner?
7. How do you think the project could have been improved?
8. How has this project impacted you as teacher? As a person?
9. How has this project impacted you as a person?
10. Describe how you *may* want to continue communication with your partner.
11. Any other additional thoughts/comments regarding this project: