

FROM THE CLASSROOM

Creating a virtual cross-cultural exchange program

Andrea Rakushin Lee

Summary: This paper provides an overview of a virtual cross-cultural exchange program that was piloted during Spring, 2022. Participants included students attending a university in South Korea and the United States.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, intercultural communication, virtual exchange, Google Classroom

It is important for students to be equipped with 21st-century learning skills, which include cross-cultural communication skills. The purpose of this virtual cross-cultural exchange program was to improve language skills, foster global citizenship skills, and increase intercultural communication skills. It developed largely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This virtual cross-cultural exchange program was carried out during the Spring semester of 2022 through Google Classroom activities. There were two faculty leaders, including a professor who was teaching an English as a Global Language class in South Korea and a professor who oversaw the Korean Culture Club at the US university. Initiation of the program began with the faculty leader in the US reaching out to professors and administrators that she previously worked with in South Korea from 2007 to 2012. The faculty leader at the US university oversaw the virtual cross-cultural exchange program, set up meetings between professors and administrators at the South Korean university, and facilitated online activities in Google Classroom. Participants comprised students attending a university in the United States and South Korea. The students attending the university in South Korea were taking an English language class for credit; about half of the students were Korean citizens and half were exchange students from a wide range of countries. The students at-

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tending the university in the United States were mostly participating in a Korean culture club or attending classes at the university's English language institute. The students studying at the

university in the United States were primarily US citizens, but there were a few international students as well. The paper will begin with a discussion of the benefits of virtual exchange, followed by the procedures for creating the virtual cross-cultural exchange program. The paper concludes with reflections of program successes and needed changes.

Benefits of Virtual Exchange

Virtual exchanges have been used in various educational contexts (e.g., Bassani & Buchem, 2018; Toner, 2018; Weaver et al., 2022). Virtual cross-cultural exchanges afford myriad benefits to students, who can immerse themselves in another culture while improving cross-cultural awareness, becoming more open-minded, and increasing global citizenship skills (Verzella, 2018). Virtual exchanges also promote 21st-century learning skills (Háhn, 2019). According to O'Dowd (2018), virtual exchange centers on the "engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes" (p. 1). Virtual exchanges can take various forms, with participants engaging in a variety of learning activities (Weaver et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual exchanges increased in popularity as educational institutions worked to devise creative and meaningful ways to promote cultural exchange due to travel restrictions (Weaver et al., 2022). In addition, virtual exchanges also allow for greater socioeconomic equity as travel can be cost prohibitive; thus, virtual exchanges provide more flexibility for students who lack the time and financial resources to participate in traditional exchange programs (Háhn, 2019).

O'Dowd (2019) provides recommendations for ensuring that virtual exchanges are meaningful and beneficial to both institutions. These include having a balance of synchronous and asynchronous activities, giving students recognition for their



Life in the US and South Korea



A Lee • Mar 7 (Edited Apr 14)

Use this space to ask questions about life in South Korea and the US. You can ask questions about topics such as daily life, food, school, transportation, dating culture, nightlife, famous sites, traveling in the country, etc. If you are not from South Korea or the US, you can talk about your home country.

There are some videos below that might help you think of some ideas. Just note that the videos are based on the experiences of different people. Opinions and experiences may vary.



BIGGEST DIFFERENCES: US...
YouTube video 14 minutes



KOREA VS. AMERICA: COLL...
YouTube video 8 minutes



A Week Of Food: South Kore...
YouTube video 12 minutes



Korea vs. America, 6 Culture...
YouTube video 12 minutes



Korean vs. American Culture...
YouTube video 4 minutes

Figure 1: Life in the United States and South Korea Discussion Board Prompt

virtual exchange work, and ensuring that both institutions feel their contributions are valued. O’Dowd goes on to say that an emphasis should be placed on relationship building and improving communication. When developing virtual exchanges, it is important to consider the needs of the students and to create a program that values their contributions. Although guidelines and best practices for implementing and facilitating virtual exchanges exist, ultimately, partnering institutions need to create a plan that is mutually beneficial, aligns with course curriculum or institutional missions, and meets the needs of the students.

Procedures for Creating a Virtual Cross-Cultural Exchange Program

This virtual cross-cultural exchange program began with the faculty leader at the US university reaching out to the partner institution where she used to work in South Korea. Her research interests largely center on intercultural communication and she wanted to provide more opportunities for meaningful exchange across cultures. The planning process began in January 2022. Initial discussions took place through email, and several Zoom sessions were held to discuss ideas. A few students were invited to the sessions to share ideas since the program was intended to be student centered. The spring semester at US universities typically begins in January and ends in May while the South Korean spring semester begins in March and ends in June. The virtual cross-cultural exchange program was implemented in late March and ended in mid-June 2022. It consisted of asynchronous activities carried out through Google Classroom. Both institutions wanted to include synchronous activities; however, due to the time difference between South

Korea and the United States, participants decided that it would be best to avoid live activities. Moreover, to avoid larger complications within a new system, participants and administrators focused on a reduced number of activities. There was also some concern about a lack of participation at the US institution since students were not receiving a grade for participation.

Google Classroom was used as the platform for the virtual cross-cultural exchange program. The faculty leaders at both institutions oversaw all activities and provided instructions to students. Students participated in five discussion boards, which consisted of the following topics: open chat, university life, language differences, learning another language, and lifestyles.

Figure 1 shows sample directions for the University Life topic, which also included some videos. These are the prompts that were included.

- **Open Chat:** Please feel free to use this forum to get to know each other. Where are you from? What do you like to do for fun? You can ask your own questions on random topics. You can also use this space to share ideas related to language and cultural learning resources.
- **University Life:** How would you describe university life in your home country? What do you like and dislike about university life in your home country? If you are studying at “A Institution” (pseudonym) in South Korea, what would you like to know about university life at “B Institution” (pseudonym) in the United States? If you are studying at “B Institution,” what would you like to know about university life at “A Institution?” These videos and websites may help you to think of questions or ideas.
- **Language Differences:** We can use this space to share our experience in using English language with other first

language speakers. I am sure, in this globalized world, you all have had an experience of interacting with English speakers from different places (in and out of the US). Have you noticed any differences? Let me give you some examples from so-called 'Konglish' (English used among Koreans). If you are a native English speaker or an English speaker from outside of Korea, can you guess what they mean?

- **Learning another Language:** Share your experiences learning another language (e. g., Korean, English). Why are you studying another language? What are some challenges you have had in learning another language? What tips do you have for learning another language?
- **Lifestyles:** Use this space to ask questions about life in South Korea and the US. You can ask questions about topics such as daily life, food, school, transportation, dating culture, nightlife, famous sites, and traveling in the country. If you are not from South Korea or the US, you can talk about your home country. There are some videos below that might help you think of some ideas. Just note that the videos are based on the experiences of different people. Opinions and experiences may vary.

Students were encouraged to include questions in their posts and write substantive feedback to their peers. The length of posts varied. Some students provided a lot of details while others only wrote a few sentences. Sample discussion board posts are included in Figures 2 and 3.

The students attending the university in South Korea received a grade for participation while the students studying at the US university were just completing activities for personal interest or wanted to learn more about Korean culture. Participation was slightly higher among the South

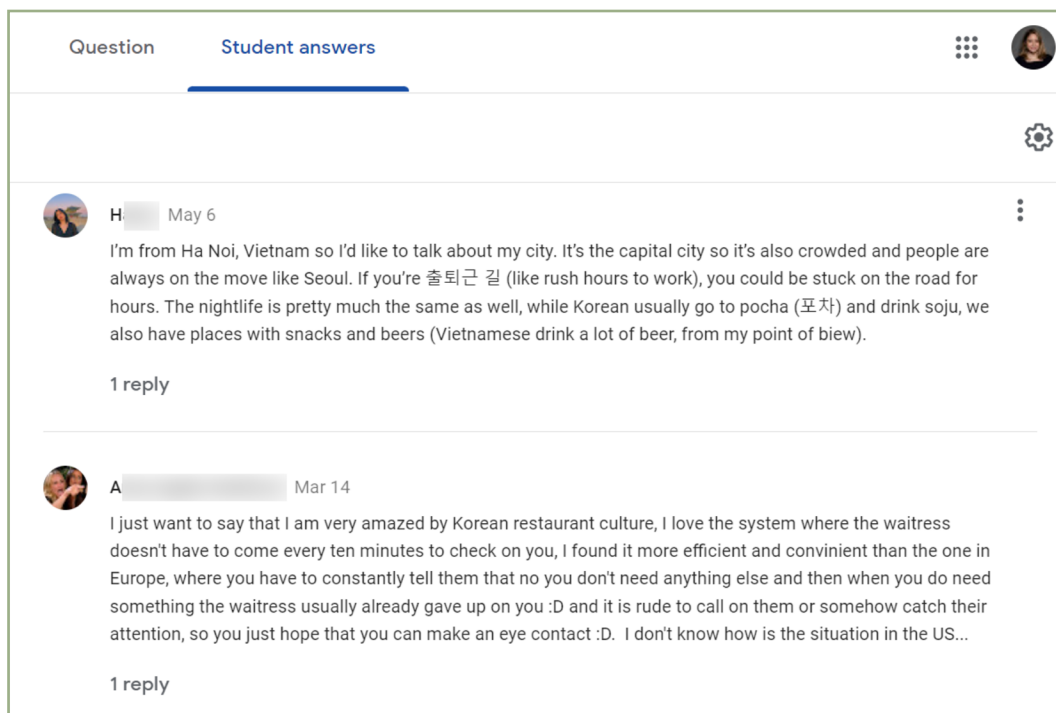


Figure 2: Sample Discussion Board Post: Lifestyles

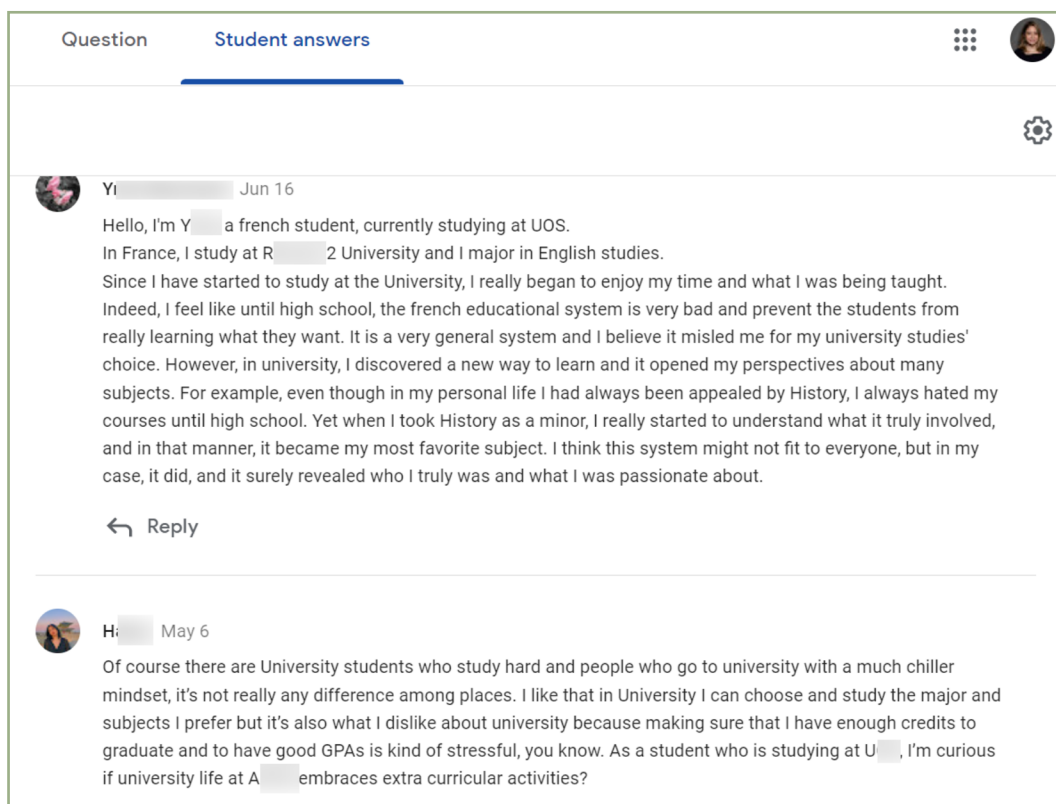


Figure 3: Sample Discussion Board Post: Learning another Language

Korean participants, with 65% of posts being made by students studying in South Korea. This could be due to them having more students overall as well as the requirement to complete discussion boards for a grade. Students were given specific prompts on each of the topics and shared their experiences and thoughts. Since participants came from a wide range of countries (e.g., Vietnam, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, China) and not just the United States and South Korea, there were sometimes vast differences in

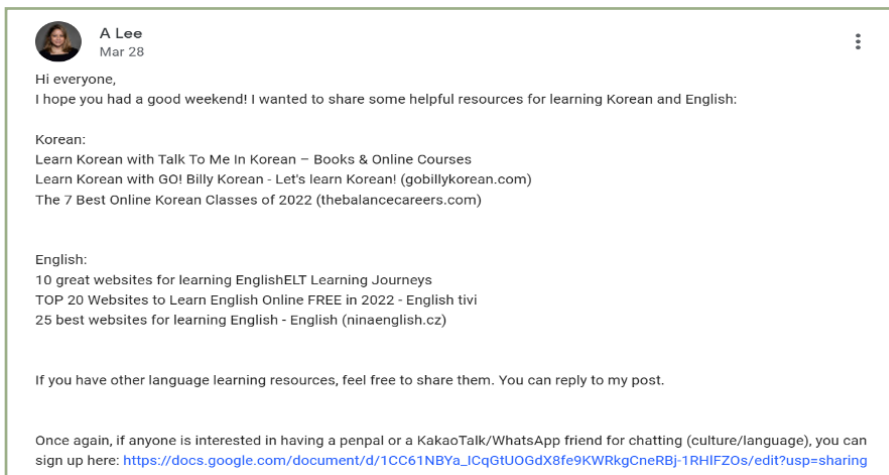


Figure 4: Class Announcement: Language Resources

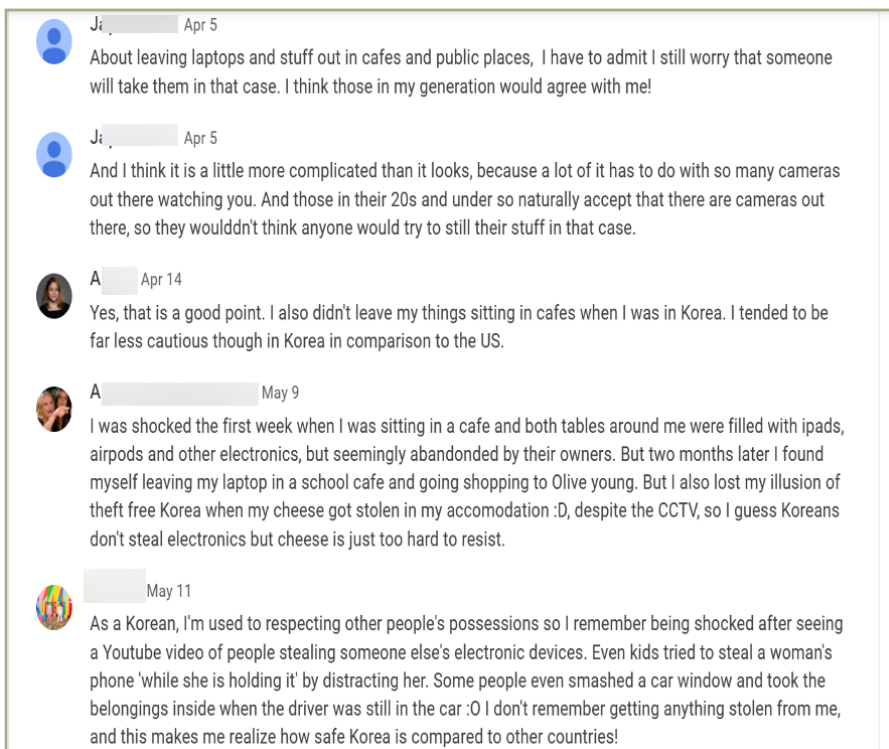


Figure 5: Class Announcement: Video on Korea from a Foreigner's Perspective

responses, which led to further discussions and questions. These differences often sparked curiosity, with students asking questions about other cultures and language differences.

In addition to the discussion boards, the faculty leaders posted weekly announcements to share tips for learning the Korean and English languages. Sample announcements are included in Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 includes an announcement that provides various resources for studying English and Korean while Figure 5 was an announcement sharing foreigners' experiences in Korea. Several of the participants responded to the video and shared their opinions and experiences.

Cultural resources and other tips were provided to the students. For example, videos on Korean and English language learning tips were provided. Sometimes students responded to these announcements and included additional tips or

asked questions. The faculty leaders at both universities also wanted to provide engaging activities to encourage students to explore new resources to help learn either Korean or English.

Reflection

Overall, I believe this was a valuable program to promote intercultural communication skills among the student participants while fostering global citizenship competency and language development. Nevertheless, there were some challenges. The students studying at the university in South Korea received a grade for participation while the students in the United States did not. This may have led to more participation among the students at the South Korean university. In hindsight, it might have been more beneficial to connect two classes and require participation among students at both institutions. This could have included students taking an English language class at both institutions or students taking a Korean class at the US university and students taking an English class at the Korean university. For the students in the United States, requiring participation for a grade might have increased overall engagement in the discussion activities. Although the time zone difference presented problems in scheduling live activities, it would have been beneficial to include at least a few synchronous activities in the morning or night in which students could interact and get to know each other more.

Furthermore, including speaking activities that are conducted on Zoom or another platform could have helped improve communication skills. An alternative would be to include video activities that are posted to the discussion board.

This program will likely continue in the future with some modifications being made to better suit the learning needs of students in both countries. Although the time zone difference was problematic, future virtual cross-cultural exchange programs will likely involve some synchronous activities to give students opportunities to interact live. Future activities may also center on thematic elements such as tourism and travel, popular culture, or topics of interest that are voted on by the students. In addition, a survey may be sent to students in advance to get their input on activities of interest to them. This virtual exchange program provided a foundation for future online activities and programs that promote intercultural dialog and awareness. The author welcomes suggestions for other virtual intercultural collaborations.

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ANDREA RAKUSHIN LEE, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Specialties at Austin Peay State University. Her research interests include international education, English language learners, and intercultural communication. You may contact her at lea@apsu.edu.

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