

Virtual Exchanges Between Research and Teaching Practice: A University Course With Pre-Service Teachers of German as a Foreign and Second Language

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Abstract

The integration of teaching practice and research on teaching practice has been proven to be an effective and, indeed, necessary component of the professional development of teachers (Borg, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). In line with this understanding, this paper presents a university seminar held at the University of Vienna in the winter semester 2023/2024, designed for pre-service teachers of German as a Foreign and Second Language (GFL/GSL). The seminar aimed to foster reflective teaching practices and introduce students to research methods in interaction and conversation analysis. The course format combined seminar sessions with a series of one-hour videoconferences – Virtual Exchanges (VE) – with GFL learners at Waseda University in Tokyo. While not the primary object of investigation, the VEs served as a meaningful pedagogical setting in which students could take on the role of language experts and engage in intercultural, peer-based communication. These interactions, recorded for research purposes, became the basis for seminar activities such as transcription, analysis, and critical reflection. The paper outlines the pedagogical framework and structure of the course, focusing on how it supported the development of both didactic and analytical competencies. Drawing on excerpts from student learning journals and the instructor's own observations, the discussion highlights opportunities and challenges associated with this blended format. Ultimately, the paper argues that carefully integrated Virtual Exchanges can serve as an effective medium to support the dual goal of preparing pre-service teachers as reflective practitioners and emerging researchers.

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51

1. Introduction

While the benefits of integrating teaching practice with research on teaching practice are well recognized in language education (cf. Borg, 2013; Ellis, 2012), there remains a need for more teacher-researchers and researcher-teachers, and for closer alignment between these two domains.

This paper examines a seminar held at the University of Vienna for pre-service teachers of German as a Foreign and Second Language (GFL/GSL), aimed at fostering both reflective teaching and research-oriented thinking. The course combined theoretical and methodological input with practice-based reflection on classroom interaction. *Virtual Exchanges* (VEs) with GFL learners at Waseda University in Tokyo served as the main teaching format but are presented here primarily as one example of a setting through which broader developmental goals were pursued.

After outlining key theoretical considerations regarding the relationship between teaching and research (Section 2) and the role of Virtual Exchanges in education (Section 3), the paper offers a detailed description of the course conducted by the author in winter semester 2023/2024, including its assessment, structure, and digital tools used (Section 4).

Finally, two perspectives on the course are presented: insights from the Vienna students based on their learning journals (Section 5), and my own reflections as the course instructor (Section 6).

2. Bridging the Gap: Teaching Practice and Research on Teaching Practice

Ellis (2012) differentiates research from teaching by highlighting their distinct objectives and approaches while also exploring their potential interrelations.

Research aims to systematically examine specific phenomena with a view to describing and/or explaining them and then publishing the findings. It contributes to technical knowledge about language teaching and learning. Teaching involves curriculum planning, designing lessons and then implementing and evaluating them. (Ellis, 2012, pp. 341–342)

Thus, research generates a body of knowledge that can be applied to teaching, enriching teachers' practical knowledge. As Connelly et al. (1997) point out, many aspects of teaching – if not all – such as curriculum planning, interaction with students, and assessment, are closely interconnected with “what teachers know and how they express their knowledge” (p. 666).

Knowledge, understood here as teacher learning, is not a monolithic concept. In this regard, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) identify three types of knowledge that emerge at different stages of a teacher's professional development, each of which is, to some extent, interrelated: knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, and knowledge-of-practice.

Knowledge-for-practice refers to formal, theoretical knowledge – or what Ellis (2012) describes as technical knowledge – produced by researchers in academic contexts to enhance teaching practice. By contrast, knowledge-in-practice encompasses practical knowledge which is an integral part of teaching practice and reflective teaching.

Moving beyond the division between formal and practical knowledge, knowledge-of-practice refers to the knowledge teachers themselves generate through inquiry within their own classrooms and professional communities. This process leads to local knowledge based on reflective practice, critical engagement with existing theories, and the contextualization of teaching experiences within broader social, cultural, and political frameworks (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 250).

From the perspective of teacher education, when teachers actively participate in research, they bridge the gap between theory and practice by applying research-based knowledge to enhance their teaching while also generating new insights that contribute to the wider field of educational research (cf. Borg, 2013, p. 230).

3. Virtual Exchanges

One setting in which pedagogical and research-oriented aims were implemented was through Virtual Exchanges, which provided an interactive environment for exploring intercultural communication, facilitating reflection, and generating video data for analysis.

VEs is an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of computer-mediated online interactions among learners in different geographical contexts. In the fields of education and pedagogy, several terms – though not without distinctions – are used to describe similar concepts, including “online intercultural exchange” (OIE) (O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016), “telecollaboration” (Warschauer, 1996), “teletandem” (Elstermann, 2014), and “Collaborative Online International Learning” (COIL) (Rubin, 2016).

Although reaching a unanimous definition of VEs remains challenging, certain common elements can be identified across these approaches – such as the “engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations ... under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” (O’Dowd, 2018, p. 5).

In the field of language teaching and learning, particularly in the GFL/GSL context, Würffel and Schumacher (2022) classify such virtual cooperative teaching and learning environments as “interaction spaces for language learning processes and intercultural learning” (p. 144). One concrete example of this is a series of videoconferences in which a group of German learners at a university in Japan – gathered in a classroom or language lab equipped with a camera and microphone – interacts in German in a group-to-group exchange with pre-service teachers from a German-speaking university, who likewise share a physical space with access to the videoconferencing platform (cf. Hoshii & Schumacher, 2010, 2017, 2021).

This is just one of many possible VE scenarios, but it closely aligns with the setting adopted in the university course described in detail in the following section, as well as with the framework of past collaborative projects between the University of Vienna and partner universities worldwide (Prkoszovits, 2020, 2022).

4. The University Course: “Interaction and Communication in Virtual GFL Classrooms”

Building on the premise that “it is not always straightforward for language teachers to transform knowledge-for practice into actual practice in their professional development” (Nakata et al., 2021, p. 344), the university course presented here aims to support pre-service teachers both in their teaching practice and in conducting research on their own teaching practice. The following sections examine in detail how this was achieved.

4.1 Course Description

The course, titled “Interaction and Communication in Virtual GFL Classrooms – A Cooperation Project with Partner Universities Abroad”¹, was held during the winter semester 2023/2024. It consisted of 14 weekly sessions of 90 minutes, structured into seven group-to-group videoconferences with GFL learners from the Waseda University in Tokyo and seven seminar sessions, which were held exclusively in Vienna as standard in-person lectures for the Vienna students.

The course was attended by four master’s students from the German as a Foreign and Second Language program at the University of Vienna (pre-service GFL/GSL teachers). Four students from Waseda University, not enrolled in German studies but learning or having learned German as a foreign language, participated in the videoconferences. Their proficiency levels and learning experiences varied, but all had at least a B1 level in German, as confirmed by their instructor, Makiko Hoshii, in Tokyo.

The interactions were not structured as teaching simulations or virtual team-teaching sessions. Instead, they were designed as hierarchy-free, group-to-group interactions about self-selected, interculturally oriented topics, which were alternately presented by the Vienna students one week and the Waseda students the next. This peer format provided German learners with the opportunity to speak German in an authentic environment² with

1 Original title in German: “Interaktion und Kommunikation in virtuellen DaF-Klassenzimmern – ein Kooperationsprojekt mit ausländischen Partneruniversitäten”.

2 It is certainly debatable how authentic and natural interactions in virtual settings can be (see Section 5.3). However, it is undeniable that for German learners outside Ger-

competent speakers of the target language (cf. Prikoszovits, 2022, pp. 107–108), while the pre-service teachers in Vienna could practice didactic aspects of virtual classroom discourse.

Before the first videoconference, all students signed a consent form allowing instructors to record the videoconferences for research purposes. On the Vienna side, video clips from the sessions were later used in seminar discussions for reflective activities on key aspects of interaction, including teacher talk, error correction, feedback strategies, negotiation of meaning, and utterance construction.

To summarize, the VE format used in this course followed the model drafted in Section 3: Two groups interacted from geographically distant locations (Vienna and Tokyo); the exchanges were interculturally oriented, with topics and moderation alternating between the groups; the interactions were facilitated by digital tools (see Section 4.4) and occurred in a peer format; students in Vienna acted as competent speakers and cultural mediators, but not as instructors; the instructors, Makiko Hoshii in Tokyo and the present author in Vienna, did not provide predefined discussion topics, giving students full autonomy in selecting their discussion themes.

4.2 Course Assessment

On the Vienna side, students enrolled in the course had the option to complete it for either three or six ECTS, which determined differences in the course assessment. In both cases, students were required to moderate a videoconference and write a learning journal, which had to be submitted by the final seminar session. Those who opted for or were required to earn six ECTS also had to submit a seminar paper within two months after the last seminar session.³

man-speaking territories – particularly those living on another continent – these VEs provide a rare opportunity to communicate with proficient German speakers in a way that is almost always uncommon in their traditional German classes (Würffel & Schumacher, 2022, p. 146; see also Hagen et al., 2016, p. 4).

³ Additionally, the distribution of points for evaluation was adjusted: For the three ECTS option, 50 points were allocated to the moderation of a videoconference and 50 points to the learning journal, whereas for the six ECTS option, 20 points were assigned to the moderation of a videoconference, 30 points to the learning journal, and 50 points to the seminar paper.

As part of their videoconference moderation, students were responsible for presenting cultural or language-related topics, which they selected in collaboration with their international partners during the initial meeting (see Section 4.3). To support their moderation, they were required to develop a presentation (e.g., using PowerPoint). Students were instructed to plan for a 60-minute videoconference and to design an interactive format that encouraged active participation and discussion. Regarding the technical setup, students were asked not to share their screen in the virtual meeting room or use other digital tools during the videoconferences, as this could disrupt the recording or prevent students from being properly captured on video⁴ – an essential requirement for the video-based (self)reflection activities during the seminar sessions.⁵ The moderating or presenting group received a collective grade.

The second form of assessment was based on a learning journal. Learning journals have proven to be highly effective in educational contexts for fostering reflective practice (cf. Farrell, 2020, 2012; Genc, 2010). Students in Vienna were required to write approximately one page after each videoconference, resulting in about six pages, plus an additional three to four pages providing an overall evaluation of their experiences in the course and potential future implications for their role as GFL/GSL teachers. The reflection on each videoconference was expected to include both a descriptive account and a critical evaluation of the events that took place. Before each videoconference, students and the instructor collaboratively determined a specific observation focus, such as: “How do I facilitate communication?” or “How do I articulate clearly?”.

The final (and additional) assessment for students aiming to earn six ECTS instead of three was a *traditional* seminar paper.⁶ The 25-page essay

4 Consequently, they were encouraged to structure their presentations relying exclusively on oral interactions. This aspect will be further explored in Section 5.2, which discusses the perceived limitation in structuring the moderation due to the request to refrain from using screen sharing or other digital tools for didactic activities.

5 As explained in Section 4.4, the PowerPoint presentations were uploaded to Slack either by the Vienna group or the Tokyo group, and downloaded by the counterpart, who then viewed them directly on their laptops during the videoconferences, thus eliminating the need for screen sharing.

6 For guidelines on preparing an academic essay in the field of German as a Foreign and Second Language at the University of Vienna, see: <https://spl10.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/>

had to focus on one of the seminar topics and ideally include an analysis of one or more self-transcribed sequences from the videoconferences. The topic was to be determined in consultation with the course instructor during the semester, and the submission deadline was set for two months after the final seminar session.

4.3 Course Schedule

The course planning began well in advance of the first seminar session. In coordination with the instructor in Tokyo, the seven videoconferences were scheduled to accommodate both time zones and academic calendars. Once confirmed, the semester plan was developed, outlining the corresponding seminar topics.

The course opened with three preparatory seminar sessions: an introduction to VEs in GFL/GSL (Unit 1), classroom research and video analysis (Unit 2), and observation methods and learning journal preparation (Unit 3; see Section 4.2).

The first three videoconferences then followed. In the initial meeting (Unit 4), students introduced themselves and collaboratively selected three discussion topics for the remaining sessions:

- Topic 1: Education, student life, and work-life balance.
- Topic 2: Food and health
- Topic 3: Dialects, multilingualism, and diversity

In Videoconferences 2 and 3 (Units 5 and 6), the Vienna and Tokyo students alternately presented Topic 1.⁷ A seminar on interaction analysis and transcription (Unit 7) followed, where students practiced transcribing short video excerpts.

Videoconferences 4 and 5 (Units 8 and 9) addressed Topic 2, again with alternating moderation. These were followed by a seminar session on interactional competence (Unit 10), using selected clips for analysis and group discussion.

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⁷ The presentations had to be prepared outside the scheduled teaching units due to time constraints.

Finally, Videoconferences 6 and 7 (Units 11 and 12) covered Topic 3, and the course concluded with two final seminar sessions (Units 13 and 14), dedicated to further reflection on interactional competence.⁸

4.4 Resources: Zoom, Slack and Moodle

To support the various activities of the course, both the Vienna and Tokyo groups utilized a range of digital resources, which had also been employed in prior telecollaborative projects at Waseda University (cf. Hoshii & Schumacher, 2021, 2010) and the University of Vienna (Prikoszovits, 2022, 2020).

For the videoconferencing Zoom⁹ was employed, enabling the recording of the VEs. These recordings were subsequently used in the seminar sessions for video-based reflective activities and were made available to both students and instructors for research purposes.

To facilitate more immediate communication among students and serve as a platform for uploading PowerPoint presentations, Slack¹⁰ was utilized as a chat tool. Slack is a cloud-based team communication platform, with access regulated and granted based on prior registration. Students on both sides could use it for computer-based, online, asynchronous communication, such as chatting outside of the videoconferences or briefly notifying about delays or technical issues. However, this type of communication was limited to essential interactions and did not provide valuable data for observing other forms of interaction or written Virtual Exchanges.

In addition, Moodle¹¹ was used in Vienna as the online platform for uploading seminar-related resources, including video recordings, preparatory readings, and interactive activities. Moreover, a forum was also set up in Moodle, where seminar participants could exchange ideas or ask questions to the seminar instructor.

8 Additionally, students discussed course assessment components, including the learning journal and seminar paper. In one case, a student who intended to use the video data for her master's thesis requested an opportunity to discuss her research ideas with the instructor and her peers. She sought feedback on her thesis structure, formulation of research questions, methodological considerations – an initiative warmly supported by the instructor.

9 <https://www.zoom.com/>, 28.03.2025.

10 <https://slack.com/>, 02.04.2025.

11 For the Moodle homepage of the University of Vienna see <https://moodle.univie.ac.at/>, 28.03.2025.

5. Conclusions From the Learning Journals

Although this paper does not present an empirical study but rather offers a description of the pedagogical concept underlying the university course, a brief examination of the learning journals – without delving too deeply into details – provides valuable insights into the perspectives of the four pre-service GFL/GSL teachers in Vienna regarding their experiences with the VEs.

5.1 What Worked

In general, all four participants highly appreciated the format of the course, as it enabled them to acquire practical knowledge – or knowledge-in-practice with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, p. 250; see also Section 2) – that was then analysed and discussed parallelly in the seminar sessions (V1¹², p. 10). Three aspects were particularly highlighted as positive in the learning journals: (a) the autonomy granted to project participants, (b) the intercultural enrichment, and (c) the advantages of video-based reflections. V4 emphasized that the discussion topics had been self-selected, allowing the Vienna students to organize the videoconferences with a high degree of flexibility (V4, p. 7). According to V3, this flexibility and creativity were also required to manage technical difficulties and to adapt the interaction to the needs of the GFL learners at Waseda University (V3, p. 10).

Furthermore, V2 corroborated that VEs provide both a space for intercultural interaction and a framework for reflecting on language learning and teaching processes (V2, p. 144). The video-based reflection activities in the seminar sessions were thus perceived as particularly valuable:

By focusing on the observations and in particular by rewatching the videos, I was able to reflect on my behaviour when dealing with learners of German. For instance, by focussing on comprehension checks during the 3rd videoconference, I also paid more attention to this in later videos. This has made me realise how I deal with it myself: I often repeat what has been said or also add “if I understood that correctly” or similar. (V2, p. 10)¹³

12 The pre-service teachers in Vienna, whose learning journals are discussed here, are referred to as V1, V2, V3, and V4. Further biographical information is not necessary for the purposes of this paper.

13 The learning journals were written in German. The excerpts presented here have been translated into English by the author, who assumes full responsibility for their accuracy.

The significance of the video clips is underscored by several comments in which the Vienna students demonstrate an increased awareness of their own communicative practices and pedagogical approaches—elements that they had previously overlooked or had not explicitly addressed in other teacher education contexts.

5.2 Challenges

Most of the challenges, as perceived by the students in Vienna, were related to technical aspects – some arising from the planned course format, others resulting from external factors. The latter refer to technical disruptions that, as is common in videoconferencing, occasionally occurred. While everything ran relatively smoothly on the Vienna side, there were sporadic issues with video and audio in Tokyo. These problems occasionally forced the Austrian students to adjust or shorten their planned schedules, as it was difficult to predict how long it would take to resolve the technical difficulties, making the actual amount of available interaction time uncertain (V3, p. 8).

Another technical constraint identified as a challenge was related to the presentation format. As outlined in Section 4.2, students on both sides prepared PowerPoint presentations to serve as a foundation for discussions during the group-to-group interactions. However, they were instructed not to share their screens or use additional digital tools outside the Zoom environment, including breakout rooms, as it was essential to ensure that all participants remained visible at all times and that the recordings were not interrupted. To accommodate this requirement, presentations were uploaded to Slack, downloaded by the counterparts, and viewed on their own laptops during the videoconferences (see Section 4.4). Therefore, participants on both sides were required to implement exclusively oral activities within the shared virtual space.

Furthermore, as already mentioned in the first entry of this learning journal, it was not possible to use apps or similar. This meant that you were somewhat limited in terms of fostering interaction and didn't have many other options apart from asking questions; [...] In my opinion, gamifying tools could have contributed to a more varied organisation of the interactive exchange. (V3, p. 9)

These measures were perceived by some students as limiting, and it might be interesting to reflect on whether this method of presenting is truly the most optimal solution, or if there are more varied and interaction-fostering options for activities during the videoconferences.

5.3 Ambivalences

This section examines aspects of the Virtual Exchanges that elicited ambivalent responses. Specifically, three aspects will be focused: a) the students' understanding of their role during the Virtual Exchanges, b) the aspired authenticity of the interactions, and c) the varying effects of the observation during the videoconferences.

On one hand, V3 appreciates the opportunity to engage with the multiperspective dimension of the format, which allowed for experimentation with multiple roles – at times aligning with that of a teacher, at others adopting the perspective of a learner, and additionally approaching the experience from a more analytical, research-oriented standpoint through observation and documentation of their own learning process (V3, p. 8).

On the other hand, V2 questions the presumed role of the Vienna students as teachers in a peer format, while V4 challenges the position of all participants as cultural experts. The notion of assuming the role of teachers in interactions with peers was particularly problematic when it came to providing corrective feedback. Since it had been established from the outset that this was not a formal German course but rather an exchange among peers, the Vienna students often struggled with whether to explicitly address mistakes or how to apply implicit correction strategies (V2, p. 9). Additionally, V4 questions the cultural expert role assigned to participants and, by extension, the underlying concept of interculturality, pointing out that individuals are not necessarily equipped to answer questions about their own country's customs and traditions (V4, p. 7).

Another aspect that V4 found debatable was the degree of authenticity in these Virtual Exchanges. While V3 considers the spontaneity and unpredictability of the interactions to be highly realistic, mirroring future teaching and learning situations (V3, p. 8), V4 criticized the authenticity of the videoconference conversations, as they took place in a university setting rather than

in an informal or private environment. Furthermore, the instructors on both sides were always present, even though they only intervened in the event of technical difficulties (V4, p. 7).

The final ambivalent aspect concerns the predetermined observation foci set before each videoconference for reflection purposes. While this approach was generally well received, V4 questions whether focusing on a specific area of observation during the conversations sometimes hindered their own engagement in the exchange (V4, p. 7).

6. Reflections and Insights From the Course Instructor

In conclusion, I would like to share some reflections based on my observations during the course. The core aim was not to promote VEs as a method per se, but to create a setting in which pre-service teachers could critically reflect on their own teaching discourse, engage with empirical classroom research, and begin to integrate theory with practice. While the VE format offered unique opportunities for intercultural interaction and video-based analysis, it functioned primarily as a pedagogical vehicle to support these broader goals. The structure of the course – combining interactive tasks, transcription-based reflection, and peer discussion – contributed meaningfully to students' evolving understanding of their roles as future teacher-researchers. Furthermore, my experience confirmed many of the positive aspects highlighted in the scientific literature, such as the enhancement of communicative and intercultural competencies, the in-depth engagement with linguistic and cultural dimensions encountered in interaction, and the potential for students to transfer the skills and experiences gained through VEs to other teaching contexts and courses (cf. Würffel & Schumacher, 2022, pp. 145–147).

However, organizing a university course in this format presents significant logistical challenges. In general, issues related to coordination with universities in other countries must be addressed, including differences in academic calendars and, in some cases, time zones. Moreover, the unpredictability of student enrolment and the dependency on developments at partner institutions pose further challenges. None of the involved parties can determine with certainty whether the course will take place until the registration periods at all participating universities have concluded.

In winter semester 2023/2024, the enrolment numbers were ideal, with four students in Vienna and four in Tokyo. However, the situation could have become problematic if one of the two institutions had not enrolled a sufficient number of students for the videoconferences, potentially resulting in the cancellation of the course for both sides. Another possible scenario is an unexpectedly high number of student registrations. In such a case, it might be advisable to involve additional partner universities and divide larger groups into smaller groups collaborating with different institutions. Naturally, this would entail further organizational adjustments and challenges.

One structural change implemented for the current iteration of the course in the summer semester of 2025, as this paper is being written, is the reorganization of the seminar sessions into fewer, but longer blocks instead of weekly 90-minute sessions. This structure provides greater flexibility for students and allows for more dedicated time in seminar sessions to engage with the video recordings, as activities involving video analysis proved to be particularly time-intensive.

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