

Students' Challenges in Joining Virtual Exchange Program

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Abstract

Financial concerns, social-economic problems, time constraints, and added by the Covid-19 pandemic are some of the reasons why students can not join a student exchange program. One of the alternatives to those obstacles is a Virtual Exchange (VE) Program, where students conduct the program online from their home country. This study aims to find out what are the challenges that students have to face during their VE, and how they are dealing with those dares. This study uses qualitative methods by semi-structured interviews to add the research references of this study. In addition, the interview was conducted with four correspondents from two different VE programs. The findings confirm that students do find some challenges during their VE program. The challenges that occur from the students themselves, the classes, or even from their home university. The results also found that students need to do, and find a certain way to deal with those challenges. Based on this phenomenon, it is better for students to prepare and consider themselves before joining a VE program.

Keywords: *student exchange; virtual exchange program; students' challenges, online class, education internationalization*

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad and learning outside our native country has become such a dream for many students. In order to achieve that dream, joining an exchange program could be one of the options to learn from other countries. However, joining an exchange program is not as easy as it sounds. Not all students are able to go abroad. A range of reasons has been suggested by students for not joining an exchange program, namely financial, socio-economic, and time constraints (Rienties et. al., 2020). Furthermore, the fact that the world is now facing the Covid-19 pandemic has also become another constraint for students to go abroad for an exchange program. Hence, Virtual Exchange (VE) program can be an alternative for students to cope with these unpleasant facts and reality.

Just like the offline exchange program, there has also been some research conducted about the VE program. For instance, a study was done by Schenker (2013) towards 50 students that joined a VE program found out, 18% of the students reveal VE had affected and increase student's learning interest and motivation especially about culture and foreign language. Similarly, Dooly and Sander (2013) in their research about VE stated, most VE students have a positive learning experience during the program. VE also potentially improves student's foreign language and technology pedagogical competence. However, these researches are mostly focused on the benefits and the positive sides of the VE program. And none of these researches discussed or even mentioned the fact that some students also found challenges and difficulties such as failed and missed communication in joining the VE program.

Since it can't be a denial that students will face challenges in joining a VE program. Therefore, this study was conducted to determine what are the challenges that students found in joining VE as well as any possible handlings regarding the challenges. to obtain those objectives, the research question of this study would be:

1. What are the challenges that students found in joining the VE program?
2. How do students deal with those challenges in joining the VE program?

LITERATURE REVIEW

An exchange is a program that allows students to study outside their main institutions, as well as allows students to go abroad to study outside their native country. The program is usually offered and accommodated by the cooperation between students' institutions, governments, or even a third party. Added by Yonezawa et al (2009), student exchange is a response program of government and universities around the globe towards students and education internationalization. Moreover, student exchange can also define as a program that offers students the opportunity to study outside their environment and experience the culture of their host countries. The program permit student to study overseas for one or two semesters (Daly, 2011).

Exchange Program during Covid-19 Pandemic: Virtual Exchange Program

As one of the universities with a great VE program, Asia University stated, based on what happened in status quo right now, the Covid-19 has shaped the face of student exchange program into another kind of alternative, called the Virtual Exchange (VE) Program. It is because the close of most national borders prevents students to go abroad for an offline exchange program (CIAE, 2021). The VE program is a form of technology-mediated learning whereby students who are geographically separated or from different cultural backgrounds work, communicate, and interact with each other in a remote class through digital platforms (online class) (Evolve, 2020).

According to O'Dowd and Lewis (2016), VE is defined as a program involving students in online intercultural collaboration projects with partner classes as part of their academic programs, with the help of teachers or qualified facilitators. Similarly, O'Dowd and O'Rourke (2019) define VE (or telecollaboration) as an online intercultural collaboration and interaction program that brings together groups of learners from various cultural contexts for extended periods of time. VE during the pandemic can also be defined as an alternative, innovation, and changes of the offline exchange program that utilizes the development of technology and the use of digital media.

Nature of Virtual Exchange Program

There are already some researches done about VE exchange program. Theresa Schenker from Yale University in 2013, in her study entitled "found out VE, can give opportunities for cultural learning for students. VE also offers students the opportunity for meaningful and authentic communication to connect with cross-cultural and cross-lingual environments. In addition, with 50 participants from a 12-week virtual exchange project, qualitatively, this research found out that 18% of the students reveal that VE has increased their interest, excitement, and motivation towards culture and foreign language (Schenker, 2013).

Using research data from a virtual exchange program between English learners from Peking University and Mandarin learners from Griffith University. Tian and Wang (2010), in their study entitled "Taking Language learning Outside the Classroom: Learners' Perspectives of eTandem Learning via Skype" found out that VE program can potentially increase participants foreign language competence. Added by Dooly and Sadler via (Rienties et. al., 2020) VE can also improve students technological pedagogical and content skills (TPACK).

Furthermore, another study on VE exchange program is entitled "The Impact of Virtual Exchange on TPACK and Foreign Language Competence: Reviewing a largescale implementation across 23 virtual exchanges". This study involved students from 23 VEs programs, 34 institutions, 16 countries. The authors of this study argue VE aware students about the use of technology and digital platform. It's eventually made students feel more self-assured about their TPACK skills and feel more comfortable using technology for their studies. Most of the students also indicate that their foreign language competence improved during the VE program (Rienties et. al., 2020).

The researches that have been done about VE have mostly highlighted the benefits of VE programs, especially on its impact on students' foreign language competence and their TPACK skills. However, the research related to challenges and difficulties that students found during their VE has never been conducted before. As the writer predicts students have found some challenges on their VE. This study will focus on the challenges as well as any possible handlings that students found in order to get such benefits from their VE program

METHOD

This research study used a qualitative method to find out what are the challenges that students faced during their VE program. To obtain the data, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews using voice recording devices and other supporting instruments (Hartono, 2018). Within the interviews, the researcher provided a list of questions to the participants. The questions consist of main questions about what are the challenges that students found during their VE program as well as how students cope with the challenges. Besides, several follow-up questions related to the main questions were also asked to the participants in order to support the data findings and to make the interviews to be more efficient.

The participants of this study are four students from the University of Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY). The participants that were chosen, are the students who have experienced and finished their VE program. The participants consist of two men and two women. Two of the participants joined the VE program at Asia University, Taiwan. Moreover, two other participants are the students who joined the VE program at the University of Northern Malaysia (UUM), in Malaysia.

To recruit the participants, the researcher personally approached and contacted several participants who are compatible with the criteria of the study. Further information's regarding the study and the interviews is then given to the participants that are willing to help. After that, semi- structured interviews were conducted through Zoom meetings. After collecting the data, the researcher began to analyze the answers as the available data. Finally, the researcher made a conclusion based on the important points from the data findings.

RESULTS

Basic Information

Based on the interview two participants (Participants I, and IV) joined a VE program at Asia University in Taiwan. Meanwhile, two other participants (participants II, and III) joined a VE program at the University of South Malaysia (UUM), in Malaysia.

Moreover, on answering question number 2, participant I decided to join Trademark Law, Multiculturalism and Global Perspective Class. Like the first participant, Participant IV also took Multiculturalism and Global Perspective Class. However, for the second class, he chose the Social Policy class instead. Different classes come from the two other participants that joined VE in UUM:

For the classes, there is a Cross-Cultural Management class for an exchange student. Then there are four other classes that I chose by myself, which are, Political Theories, World History, Human Rights, and Social Sciences Research (Participant II) (02.25). I took four classes, the first one is compulsory, class which is Cross-Cultural Management. Then I took, Diplomacy, International-Economy, and Theory of International Relations class (participant III) (01.16)

Students Challenges during VE

Based on the interview conducted, participants are indeed facing challenges and difficulties during their VE program. As participants II and III stated that they faced challenges during their VE. Not only participant II and III, the same answers coming from the two other participants:

"Honestly, yes there are a lot of challenges" (participant I) (01.54). "Yes, there are difficulties that I found" (participant IV) (02.15)

Moreover, the participants found at least there are two-four challenges that they have to face during the program. Participant, I stated that her challenges are the internet connection, monotone class, and class adaptation. On the other hand, participant II answered his challenges are the time zones, his obligation to also work on his final thesis during the VE, clashes class with the home university, and class adaptation. The different yet similar answer comes from the two other participants:

(participant III) "The challenges that I found are such as connection trouble due to different areas between Malaysia and Indonesia (02.18), time zone, and adaptations with the class and way the lecturers teach because some lecturers are not talkative and monotone, while some others are communicative" (03.07). (participant IV) "My first challenge is time zone. Although there is only one hour gap between Indonesia and Taiwan it's still affecting. (02.20), my second challenge is a less interactive class, and clashes class at VE university" (02.48)

Regarding the biggest challenges, the participant found that class adaptation and time zones/time difference are their biggest challenges. Participants I and III answered that their biggest challenge is class adaptation. Participant I, in her monotone classes, she needed to deal with a less communicative and less interactive class during her VE. Added from participant III, class adaptation is her biggest challenge because it will affect her scores later on. On the other hand, the two other participants stated that time zone is their biggest challenge:

"Time zone is the biggest challenge for me, want it or not I have to adapt myself with their time" (participant I) (07.04). "Time zone is the biggest challenge. Like I said before, although it's just one hour different. It is really affecting and still a difficulty" (participants IV) (04.55).

Students Handlings towards the Challenges

According to the interviews, students have done various handlings to face the challenges that they found. Participant I answered, in handling her monotone class, she tried to take a note, so that she has another activity to do. About the connection challenge, she tried to stay where she could find a good connection. In addition, participant IV has different handling regarding the class adaptation. He stated, on the adaptation of his monotone class he tried to learn and find the material from other open resources, such as Google. Moreover, to deal with the clashes class, he tried to use two devices. Meanwhile, others participant answered:

(participant II) "For the clash class with UUM I try two devices (05.36), I try to arrange my schedule. Making a list of my classes based on their schedule, assignments timeline, and every activity needs to be on schedule" (09.12). (participant III) "For time adaptation I usually set an alarm at least 5 minutes before the class. For example, I have a class at 4 pm, so I sent an alarm at 2.55 pm Indonesian time. (06.45), and for the monotone and class adaptation, I try to be more active by asking and answering the question, turning on my camera during Zoom meeting session" (07.08)

DISCUSSION

This study aims to find out students' challenges in joining the VE program, and how the students handle those challenges, by looking at the way they manage them. From the result of the interview, researcher found out that students are indeed facing challenges in joining their VE program. Students found various challenges such as connection problems, monotone class, clashes class, and even the obligation from home university while joining VE. Moreover, the

biggest challenges that students found during their exchange program are class adaption and the time difference between VE country and home country.

These results match the classification of VE challenges observed in an earlier study done by Robert O'Dowd (2013). O'Dowd in his study entitled "Telecollaborative Networks in University Higher Education: Overcoming Barriers to Integration", explained that VE challenges can be divided into four levels. First, the challenges that come from the individual. Second, the challenges that come from the classroom. Third, the challenges that come from the social- institutional. Last, the challenges that come from the VE interaction and communication. For instance, based on this study finding, we can tell that challenge like an obligation from a home university can be considered as an individual challenge. Meanwhile, other problems like clashes class can be considered as a social-institutional challenge.

Furthermore, in handling those challenges, researcher also found various handlings. Students need to arrange their schedules really well. Even they need to set a reminder, if necessary. Regarding the biggest challenges, students try to be more active during their class sessions using the digitalized platform. Besides that, students also need to use other open resources such as Google, as class alternatives. The use of two digital devices is also done by students when it comes to handling the clashes class. These findings are mostly related to the awareness of the students to the use of technology, in order to help them cope with those challenges.

Moreover, these findings are also supported by a research entitled "The Impact of Virtual Exchange on TPACK and Foreign Language Competence: Reviewing a largescale implementation across 23 virtual exchanges". The study argues, in joining VE students' needs to be alert about the use of technology and digital platform. Not only that, in dealing with their VE program students need to be more confident and comfortable in using technology, as well as digital platforms to help them with their studies during the VE program (Rienties et. al., 2020). The result of this study shows that there are difficulties in joining a VE exchange program. Hence, this study also shows that there are things that need to be prepared and considered by students before joining a VE program.

CONCLUSION

This study explained about the challenges that students face in joining the VE program, and how students cope with those challenges. This study concludes that the challenges that students found can be varied. The challenges could occur from the students themselves. The time such as the difference between home and VE university. Even from the classes such as monotone and clashes class. Not only that students also found varied handlings regarding those challenges. On one side of a challenge, students need to be more self-organized by managing their schedules well. While on the other side, students need to be more self-developed and aware of the use of technology, digital platform, and open resources to help them deal with the challenges.

This study proved that there will be many challenges in joining a VE that students will have to face and handle. Without careful consideration joining a VE exchange and dealing with its challenges will be another burden for students to deal with. Moreover, the finding of this study can be a consideration for students before they decided to join a VE program. The findings on how to handle those challenges can also be a reflection on what to do when students have to deal with similar difficulties in joining a VE program.

According to the result of this study, it is recommended that further studies would be on a bigger scale. Further studies can invite more participants, from more universities abroad that provide VE programs, so that the study will be able to present more data. The researcher also suggests that further studies could be conducted in a mixed research method, qualitative and quantitative. Thus, the data and results to be obtained will be more varied and diverse.

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