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# **Task Effectiveness and Intercultural Competence Development in Virtual Exchange – Based on Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language**

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## **Abstract**

In the recent decades, various forms of virtual exchange (VE) have been adopted by scholars and practitioners into their curriculum and classrooms of foreign languages. While VE has been widely recognised as conducive to intercultural learning, how types of task affect the development of intercultural competence requires studies in more depth, and the task effectiveness in VE in the context of teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) has also been rarely touched upon so far. The current study is based on weekly virtual exchanges completed for one term in the last two years between university students in China and the UK, drawing on the theoretical framework of intercultural competence (IC) and literature in VE mostly relating to learning of English and other European languages. Comparisons are made in the different types of tasks that students completed to explore how they have contributed to participants' development of IC. Questionnaires, Padlet notes, and reflective journals were used as the main data set and the qualitative data analysis was conducted using NVivo. It has been found that participants acquired new knowledge in the target language and developed their IC in dimensions including attitude, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness. Issues such as types of tasks, agentive and collaborative task in particular, and the relationship between task effectiveness and IC development are addressed and teaching implications are drawn for future VE projects in TCFL.

## **Keywords**

Task effectiveness, intercultural competence, virtual exchange, task design, telecollaboration in Chinese as a foreign language

## **1. Introduction**

Thanks to the advancement of network technology, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has thrived with various telecollaborative projects providing further opportunities for language and culture learning. Telecollaboration has been defined as “the use of online communication tools to bring together language learners in different countries for the development of collaborative project work and intercultural exchange” (O’Dowd & Ritter 2006, p. 623). In the past two decades, it has been referred

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to as e-pals or keypals (Belz, 2007), e-tandem (O'Rourke, 2007), internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (Belz & Thorne, 2006), Online Intercultural Exchange (O'Dowd, 2007), Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (Rubin, 2016) and Virtual Exchange (VE) (Helm, 2016; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022; Rienties & Rets, 2022). In the past two years, the Covid-19 pandemic spurred the VE projects to become a necessary replacement when the physical exchange became impossible for the time being.

According to Byram and Feng (2004), CMC technologies addressed the deficiencies in culture learning based in the traditional classroom as they enabled interaction in real time on a broad scale; in other words, what VE can offer but the classroom cannot "is the opportunity to develop the skills of interaction in real time" (Byram, 1997, p. 68). The meaningful communication between foreign language learners and native speakers can be facilitated and enhanced by the powerful video, audio and text-based online tools (e.g., email, chat, blogs, videoconferencing). They can be a positive motivator to students (Jauregi et al., 2012). Whether synchronously or not, online exchanges offer authentic opportunities for foreign language learners to negotiate meaning and explore different cultural perspectives while interacting with each other (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009). Just as O'Dowd (2011, p. 350) argues, in "eliciting meanings of cultural behaviour from 'real' informants of the target culture", learners are engaged in the process of gaining knowledge and understanding of a different culture. That could not just be found as factual and descriptive in the traditional textbooks, but also subjective and spontaneous from their partners.

Warnings were, however, given O'Dowd (2003) that mere contact between cultures or placing students simply into online interaction does not necessarily or automatically lead to intercultural learning. Rather, many factors need to be considered for a successful VE project. It can be characterised by students who are sensitive to their partners' needs and expressive of "their own cultural identity" (O'Dowd, 2003, p. 138) to build up rapport and friendly partnership quickly. Meanwhile, open-minded, receptive, and flexible teachers are required to plan and map out weekly activities with care. Teachers' planning certainly includes thoughtful task design. It is often the task design that links the teacher with the students and engages all participants in their telecollaborative activities. Therefore, it is essential that teachers focus on task design in such a way that students can be led to active, engaging and reflective VE sessions. While VE has been widely recognised as conducive to intercultural learning (O'Dowd & Lewis 2016), how task types affect the development of intercultural competence requires studies in more depth, and the task effectiveness in VE in the context teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) has also been rarely touched upon so far.

The current study is based on the two virtual exchange projects each with the duration of eight weeks in the academic years of 2020-21 and 2021-22 between university students in China and the UK, drawing on the theoretical framework of intercultural competence (IC) (Byram 1997, 2020) and literature in VE mostly relating to learning of English and other European languages. Comparisons are made in task types of both projects and how they impact on developing IC in terms of attitude, knowledge, skills and critical cultural awareness. More broadly, to what extent effectiveness of VE design facilitates IC development among students of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 IC and its development in telecollaboration

Among the most heatedly discussed themes in telecollaboration has been how virtual exchanges impact on the development of intercultural competence (IC). Byram's (1997, 2020) model of IC is postulated as four dimensions including attitude, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness.

Attitude, as a pre-condition for successful interaction, refers to openness and curiosity to other cultures and willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours. It is the process of

“relativising self and valuing other” (Byram, 1997, p.34). The openness and curiosity not just facilitate an increase in knowledge gained about other cultures, but also enable the skills of discovery and interaction to be gained in a less stressful manner (Byram 1997, 2020). It also helps individuals decenter from their familiar concepts and values and receive new ones.

Knowledge encompasses that of one’s own and others’ culture, as well as that of the process of interaction at the individual and societal levels. It can cover emblematic features such as dress or modes of greeting (Byram, 1997), but also include knowledge of history, belief, institutional and religious values of another country, as well as procedural knowledge of how to act in different situations and under certain circumstances. The knowledge described above can be expanded and refined through the skills of interpreting and relating, which are referred as the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own. In comparison, relationships between the two cultures, similarities and differences can be identified (Byram, 1997).

The skill of discovery refers to the “ability to recognise significant phenomena in a foreign environment and to elicit their meanings and connotations, and their relationship to other phenomena” (Byram, 1997, p.38). The skill of interaction refers to the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication (Schenker, 2012). While drawing on knowledge and skills in interacting with those from a different country or culture, one could develop critical cultural awareness, which is “an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Byram, 1997, p. 101).

Among an increasing number of telecollaboration projects established between English speaking and European language speaking countries, there are several studies on how online exchange impacts intercultural learning. O’Dowd (2003) found in a Spanish-English exchange that students who are receptive and sensitive to their partners’ needs lead more positively to a successful telecollaboration. Belz (2003) investigated linguistic ability in IC development among English-German partners. Belz (2007) argued that teachers should provide clear product guidelines on collaborative projects such as bilingual websites including criteria and specification in contents and linguistic features, images, videos and hyperlinks. Thus, these final collaborative products can be assessed. She also elaborated culturally rich points as markers of intercultural development in students’ interaction where they can relativise their own interpretation, suspend their own belief in certain practices and reflect their own thinking process. Schenker (2012) assessed the extent to which students’ IC developed through online communication between students learning German in an American university and German high school students in an advanced English course. The majority of Byram’s objectives in achieving the four dimensions of IC were demonstrated with the results of pre- and post-surveys. All these studies used asynchronous tools, for example, emails and not all of these studies involved university students.

## **2.2 VE in TCFL**

In the past two decades, studies on CMC in relation to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at Chinese universities and TCFL at British or American universities revealed the language achievements through exchanges. Wang, et al (2013) used wiki as the platform where Chinese students of EFL majoring in Business English in a China’s university helped improve linguistic accuracy of CFL learners’ assignment in Business Chinese in a British university. They reported students’ perspective and their motivation in using the platform to develop their IC. Some scholars explored the benefits and challenges. Adopting both quantitative and qualitative data, Luo and Yang (2022), in their study of Chinese-American telecollaboration, revealed four benefits of online exchange with cultural learning being rated most highly, learning motivation and community building as less highly, and Chinese language skills as least developed. Between the two levels of learners, intermediate students perceived themselves as having benefited more than beginners from their VE in general. Lewis and Kan (2021) evidenced

the significant improvement in L2 proficiency and intercultural learning in authentic communication with native speakers. The CFL beginners gained more understanding of Chinese culture and increased Chinese cultural knowledge. However, the primary concern was over the limited proficiency of the target language which affects learner engagement, alongside technological problems, and time zone differences. Similar issues were also reported in Guo, et al (2022) where CFL learners at various levels enhanced their employability skills and improved their IC in line with Byram's (1997, 2020) dimensions through virtual exchanges between university students from China and the UK. Xu, et al (2022) examined how L2 learners develop linguistic competence, social skills and digital literacy when they worked together during an online project between British and Chinese universities over the period of two years. Taking Conversation Analysis as one of the data analysis methods, they found that all participants increased cultural awareness at operational and textual levels, developed sufficient computer skills in presenting their final projects, and used various strategies to scaffold effective communications in the target language.

Other studies focused almost exclusively on linguistic gains from VE applying various learning theories. Tang, et al (2021) provided detailed analysis of types of linguistic errors made by CFL learners in terms of grammar, lexis and idiomatic expressions, and error correction strategies adopted by their VE partners. Similarly, Chen (2017) and Zhang (2016) further proved that CFL learners improved Chinese proficiency through online exchange with native speakers in China. Jin (2013) reported the language development outcomes and process in a 10-week VE project between 10 pairs of university students from China and USA. She found that CFL students produced larger numbers of Chinese characters with the project progressing steadily, expanded vocabulary, and improved reading ability, but the quality of writing did not improve rapidly. Adopting a sociocultural theoretical perspective, she suggested that a scaffolding mechanism needs to be built up between partners which could be trained and shared to improve productive skills in future projects. Following the similar theoretical underpinning, Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch (2014) in studying seven CFL students of intermediate Chinese and their partners who majored in TCFL, applied activity theory to analyse the online communication and identify tensions between participants, explaining reasons for them and pedagogical implications.

Luo and Yang (2018) provided a comprehensive review of telecollaborative practices in the past two decades in terms of models, tasks, challenges, technological tools and trends. The overview by Guo (2022) offered insights into how to implement VE in TCFL in terms of the overall design, types of tasks and future development in research. It also explained how data can be collected and what technological tools are available to support VE. According to these two studies, online exchanges in relation to TCFL have only been implemented in a very limited scale and remain largely underexplored. Avgousti (2018) also found the use of the Chinese language has been little researched in both telecollaborative partnership and in combination with intercultural communication. Possibly due to greater differences between students' native culture and the target culture than between European countries, much fewer studies have been conducted to explore students' intercultural learning in online settings among less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian (Belz, 2003; Belz & Thorne, 2006). In this sense, the current study will provide insights into how online networking technologies influence students' learning of Chinese, a culture that is more distant from American and European ones.

Among the previous telecollaborative studies which focused on IC development in online exchange, Jin and Erben (2007) used instant messenger to investigate CFL students at the university level. They explored how the interaction facilitated intercultural learning among eight CFL learners who were paired with native speaker of Chinese. By adapting intercultural sensitivity scales against which participants were measured at the beginning, middle and end stages of the two-month periods and follow-up interviews, they found that participants' intercultural interaction engagement and attentiveness steadily increased, and meanwhile critical thinking skills and respect for intercultural differences were also developed. Luo and Gao (2022) adopted Byram's (1997, 2020) IC framework to examine how intercultural learning has been promoted among Chinese and American university students while

sharing songs of similar themes in both English and Chinese in their telecollaborative project. They found more evidence in terms of interest in knowing about other people's culture and introducing their own, and knowledge about each other's culture for intercultural communication than in the ability to change perspectives and the knowledge about intercultural communication process. They pointed out that telecollaborative projects could focus more on task design to foster all four dimensions of IC. This current study actually aims to offer more insights into the relation between task types and VE design.

### **2.3 Telecollaborative task design and TCFL**

Tasks can be simply plans for learner activities which are meaning-oriented rather than form-focused (see Ellis, 2003). They should resemble real-world practices and potentially create authentic experience, engaging learners in producing a "defined communication-based learning outcome" (Thomas & Reinders, 2010, p. 2). O'Dowd (2021) iterated the importance of task design for a successful telecollaborative project and Dooly (2011) also confirmed the need to develop skills in design, implementation, and critical assessment of tasks for online exchanges. Tasks help to guide and structure students' online interactions, affect learning outcomes (Guth & Helm, 2011; Hauck & Youngs, 2008) and may increase the frequency and complexity of online interaction (Ortega, 2009). In telecollaboration, tasks can also be designed to serve as a springboard for learners' interactions (Jin & Erben, 2007). A carefully designed and effective task structure assumes an active role in providing students with an opportunity to analyse and reflect over exchanges with their partners (Müller-Hartmann, 2000,2007)

O'Dowd and Ware (2009) delineated the heterogenic nature of telecollaborative tasks by synthesising 12 types of tasks and illustrating them with actual cases from the existing studies along with intended outcomes and potential difficulties in engaging these tasks. They organised these tasks into three categories: information exchange tasks, comparison and analysis tasks and collaborative tasks. Information exchange tasks require students to exchange personal information and build relationship with each other, with mostly factual knowledge as focus. But mere exchange of information about one's daily life could lead to superficial understanding and may not lead to a deeper level of interaction (O'Dowd, 2021). According to O'Dowd (2012), many of the initial telecollaboration projects involve rather superficial exchanges, in which "information was exchanged without reflection and students were rarely challenged to reflect on their own culture or their stereotypical views of the target culture" (p. 342). While carrying out comparison and analysis tasks, learners both exchange information and compare and critically analyse practices and products from both cultures, for example, literacy texts and films (Müller-Hartmann, 2000), word association and responses to situations (Furstenberg et al., 2001; Jin & Erben, 2007; O'Dowd, 2003). They can tease out similarities and differences in comparison and analysis. Finally, collaborative tasks require students to work together with their partners to produce a joint product which could take the form of presentation, translation, an essay or a website (see Belz, 2002), on top of exchanging and comparing information. The co-production compels them to deploy all resources they have, negotiating meaning and reaching an agreement on their final product. Task-induced collaboration could also turn learners' emotive social presence into a higher-level thinking (Kurek, 2015). In the midst of more intense meaning negotiation, they could develop linguistic competence and understanding and knowledge of both cultures, but also skills of discovery, evaluation and critical intercultural awareness.

Sequencing the online exchange tasks properly could help engage learners in getting to know each other, establishing rapport, negotiating linguistic form and cultural meanings, reaching consensus for their collaborative projects. The three-stage task sequencing should be implemented throughout the VE projects (Guth & Helm, 2011; Luo & Yang, 2018; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009; Luo & Gui, 2021). Similarly, according to Belz (2002), task sequencing could follow the three phases. As an opening phase, the introductory session is very useful for learners to receive information about their partner, getting to know them better and raising awareness of their own and other cultures. Then, the comparative phase gives students opportunities to describe their own culture and ask questions about the partner's culture.

Based on the knowledge about their partners and their cultures, the final phase requires large amount of negotiation in order to reach an agreement on their final product, reflect on their collaboration and showcase outcome of their interaction. Kurek (2015) elaborated task instructions to voice teaching presence through examples of social affiliation, facilitation and support, including how to organise tasks and explain task contents to students. However, task sequencing in following O'Dowd and Ware's (2009) and Belz (2002) models has hardly been addressed in VE in TCFL.

In a few VE projects involving CFL, either no specific tasks nor topics were designated to any session (e.g., Tian & Wang, 2010), or just a single task was assigned to online exchanges where participants were encouraged to discuss anything in relation to each other's culture. Adopting the similar free style of communication between CFL beginners and native speakers in China, Chen (2017) and Zhang (2016) explored whether VE helped the students improve their linguistic competence. In the latter study, the researcher also shared with the participants the lessons learned from previous exchange projects. The CFL learners were encouraged to present on a specific topic after their discussion on it with their native speaking partners. In these two studies involving English and Chinese language and culture, their discussion of comparison and analysis were mainly conducted in English due to limited proficiency in Chinese among the CFL students. In studies by Jin and Erben (2007) and Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch (2014), information exchange tasks were clearly assigned, along with comparison tasks. An introductory session was organised separately for partners to get to know each other. The detailed tasks and schedule were displayed for participants at the beginning of each week. However, none of them encompassed collaborative tasks which are intended to address in this current study.

To sum up, among the existing research on VE in TCFL, more detailed studies are yet to be conducted to explore how task design impacts on the IC development, and how tasks should be sequenced to facilitate the IC development in TCFL. This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of tasks are effective to develop IC in the VE between British and Chinese universities?
2. To what extent does effectiveness of VE design impact on IC development among CFL learners?

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Context of the study

The current study is based on the two VE projects between students in one British university and its four partner universities in China in the years of 2020-21 and 2021-22 during the Covid-19 lockdown periods. Both projects ran for eight weeks, each with an hour per week. Around 200 students in total participated in the VE sessions. The earlier project involved 30 students taking Chinese as an optional or core degree module from the British university and 45 students taking English as their degree from one of the four Chinese universities. In the later project, around 60 students with similar profiles from the same British university were connected with their partners from each of the four Chinese universities. Students from two Chinese universities learned English or German as their undergraduate degree and those from the other two majored in postgraduate study of TCFL. The age difference between students from each country was between one and four years. The pairing or grouping was set mostly on one-to-one or one-to-two bases. However, only some of these students from the British university participated in the data collection of the study (see Table 2). MS Teams was a real-time communication tool that allowed the sharing of various media including files, images, audio and videos both synchronously and asynchronously. This tool was chosen mainly due to practical reasons and relative ease in accessing them by both universities. The design of the VE sessions in the two years was delineated in Table 1.

Table 1

*Design of VE Sessions*

	2020-21	2021-22
Total number of weeks	8	8
Teacher's presence	Each of the eight weekly sessions	Two of the eight weekly sessions (initial and showcase meetings)
Teacher's activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pair or group students at the first session</li> <li>• Give topics at the start of each session</li> <li>• Stay in the main meeting channel</li> <li>• Allocate students to separate channels</li> <li>• Solve problems if any at every session</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pair students in Week 1 and encourage them to email each other with their personal introduction</li> <li>• Organise the initial meeting for each group at Week 2</li> <li>• Read students' learning diaries (Weeks 3-7)</li> <li>• Organise a session to showcase collaborative projects in Week 8</li> </ul>
Student's activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk as much as possible in the target language with their partner(s) in a separate channel on a given topic by the teacher or self-initiative topic related to their target languages and cultures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email partner after choosing them or being allocated by the teacher.</li> <li>• Arrange a mutually convenient meeting time with partner for five of the eight weekly sessions</li> <li>• Talk to partner on a chosen topic between themselves (Weeks 3-7)</li> <li>• Write a paragraph on a chosen topic and ask partner to correct and discuss the correction together</li> <li>• Work collaboratively with partner on the chosen project/topic (Weeks 3-7)</li> <li>• Showcase the collaborative project in Week 8</li> </ul>
How to record the session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students note down what has been learned in the common Padlet board for each group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students write learning diaries of what they have learned and any difficulties/issues emerging in the week</li> <li>• Students video/audio record each weekly session upon agreement from both sides.</li> </ul>
Reflective report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not required.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Required and uploaded to Moodle after Week 8</li> </ul>
Connection with curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not credit-bearing,</li> <li>• purely voluntary participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not credit-bearing</li> <li>• Voluntary participation</li> <li>• Extra-curriculum award upon completion of required work.</li> </ul>

As shown in Table 1, the teachers who knew each other organised their students separately before VE sessions. They showed up in all the eight meetings in the 2020-2021 project in attempt to help at the site in front of screen, as opposed to only two meetings (initial and showcase) out of eight in 2021-2022 with the offsite assistance through reading students' learning diaries.

The participants did not know their partner until their first group meeting on MS Teams in 2020-2021, while those in 2021-2022 were asked to exchange emails before the first group meeting. They

would then meet at mutually convenient times with their partner for an hour each in the following five weeks, when they would talk and decide on the topic for their collaborative project in their preferred format which could range from videos, PowerPoint presentations to stories and songs. In the final week all participants showcased their collaborative project in the last group meeting to the audience consisting of all participants.

In terms of choice of topic for each session, the participants in 2020-2021 talked about the topics given by the teacher each week, but in 2021-2022 the participants chose any topic between themselves either in their target language for half the time, or opting to use English as main medium of communication as preferred to maintain conversation. The British students also needed to write a paragraph in Chinese on any chosen topic for their partner who would correct them with feedback for accuracy in the language. As a way of recording their VE sessions, they were encouraged to upload weekly learning diaries, audio/video recordings of their weekly online meeting (subject to agreement of all parties) and final reflective reports to Moodle – the virtual learning platform in the British university.

As far as post-VE activities are concerned, students changed from keeping notes on Padlet in 2020-2021 shared by the group to keeping learning diaries in 2021-2022 about what they have learned, and any difficulties/issues emerged from the session which could only be accessed by their own teacher. For the earlier project, reflection was encouraged but not required. Their participation was purely voluntary and did not relate to any recognition nor any recording except for the optional use of Padlet notes. However, the reflective report was a compulsory end part of the later project. Although neither project offered credits for participants, an extra-curriculum award was offered upon the completion of all required work in 2021-2022.

### 3.2 Participants

In this study, only participants from the British university were studied due to ethical consideration and ease in gaining informed consents. These students were encouraged to complete an end of project survey about their VE experience. When the survey questionnaire was administered, anonymity and voluntary participation were stated clearly on the cover page to guarantee that personal identities were protected in any case. There were only 10 students in the year of 2020-2021 who completed the questionnaire, among whom two had learned Chinese for five years or more, three for around two years, and five for less than a year or even a few weeks when they started the VE sessions. In the year 2021-2022, 34 students filled up the same questionnaire. Among them there were 13 students having learned Chinese for less than one year, and 6 for two years, 4 for three years, 2 for four years and 9 for five years (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Number of Participants and Length of Learning Chinese*

	<1 years	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	total
2020-2021	5	3			2	10
2021-2022	13	6	4	2	9	34

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

The survey results, Padlet Notes (PNs) and Reflective Journals (RJs) were used as the main data set. In the survey questionnaire, statements (most of which was listed as the titles of the tables) concerning all measures including attitude, knowledge, and skills of intercultural competence from the Byram's (1997, 2020) model were listed with five categories (strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree and strongly agree) as multiple-choice options. The participants chose the one that applied to them after experiencing the VE sessions at the end of the term.



Numerical analysis was carried out in Qualtrics. The percentages relating to answers were listed and compared between online exchanges in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Through comparison in terms of task types illustrated in O'Dowd and Ware (2009) and task sequencing in Belz (2002) between the two projects, the effectiveness of task design in VE were analysed and explained in alignment with the Byram's IC dimensions. In addition, extracts were taken from the 17 PNs by the cohort in 2020-2021. The 14 RJs by students in 2021-2022 were put into NVivo 12 for theme analysis, and exemplar extracts were selected to illustrate the IC development in the section below.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Attitude

In terms of attitudes, as indicated by Table 3, both cohorts stay nearly fully positive (90-100%) in presenting what attitudes they have towards VE. Almost all participants (with the only one exception showing uncertain as 10% in 2020-2021) believe that they are open minded to different cultures, interested to know more about way of people's life in other countries and interested in discovering how others perceive or interpret cultural phenomena they are familiar with. There is a slight difference in the attitude toward discovering perspectives and interpretations of cultural phenomena they are unfamiliar with. In the cohort 2021-2022, 91.18% of the participants agreed on this statement, being slightly higher than that of the previous cohort (90%). The high scoring in the dimension of attitude confirmed that VE experience enhanced the participants' openness and interests in attempting to understand and interpret their own familiar unfamiliar cultural practices from another country (Byram 1997, p.58). The rest of the participants (8.82%) were not very sure about their attitude towards unfamiliar cultural phenomena and pertinent perspectives and interpretations. In the previous year, 10% of the participants thought that they were not interested in learning about unfamiliar cultural phenomenon. It can be argued that VE has enabled the participants to at least begin to show willingness to take different perspectives from their own and start to interpret foreign cultures from different points of views, with clearly more upward tendency emerging in the 2021-2022 VE project.

Table 3

#### *Attitude to a Different Culture*

Options/ Attitude statement	open-minded to people from different cultures.		interested in discovering other perspectives or interpretation of familiar phenomenon in my own culture.		interested in discovering perspectives or interpretation of unfamiliar phenomenon in other cultures.	
	2020-2021	2021-2022	2020-2021	2021-2022	2020-2021	2021-2022
Answers	%	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	0	10.00	0
Uncertain	10.00	0	0	0	0	8.82
Agree	40.00	29.41	50.00	20.59	40.00	47.06
Strongly agree	50.00	70.59	50.00	79.41	50.00	44.12
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Positive	90	100	100	100	90	91.18

## 4.2 Knowledge and skills

In the area of knowledge learning and skill development, as demonstrated in Table 4, participants from both cohorts strongly believe that they have learned very much about another culture and country, with the percentage being 17.05% higher in the year 2021-2022 than in the previous year. Among 34 students, only one of them was unsure about their own cultural learning, taking up 2.94% whereas 20% of the respondents felt so in 2020-2021 when only the task of information exchanges was adopted in their weekly session.

Table 4

### *Learned Lots of Knowledge about Another Country and Culture*

Answer	2020-2021		2021-2022	
	%	Count	%	Count
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	0
Uncertain	20.00	2	2.94	1
Agree	60.00	6	61.76	21
Strongly agree	20.00	2	35.29	12
Total	100	10	100	34
Positive	80		97.05	

PNs in 2020-2021 and RJs in 2021-2022 also provided evidence in gaining knowledge in various topics. They ranged from everyday life including heating system in their accommodation to taxation system, from festivals, popular culture, to views about different other cultures, from history to regional and geographical differences within China. Meanwhile, they improved their target language proficiency. These can be shown in the extracts below:

Meeting people from different places in China, including from the south and east, not just north. (Extract 1 - PN)

I deepened my knowledge on both places where my partners come from, Qingdao, and Weifang. I learnt about local cuisine and traditional festivals, such as International Kite festival in Weifang, as well as deepened my vocabulary related to sports, movies, and literature. (Extract 2 - RJ)

I also learnt some very interesting things about Chinese culture and attitudes in society. I learnt a lot about eating habits, gender roles in families, attitudes towards marriage and young parents. (Extract 3 - RJ)

It was good practice to help me with my Chinese speaking skills, and it also helped me identify areas or words that I don't know how to talk about, which will help me if I go on a year abroad to China next year. For instance, say I wanted to have a conversation about famous actors and actresses, I now know that there are a few words that I don't know how to say because I was in a situation where I actually wanted to explain some of my opinions and didn't know these words, and now I have learnt them and would be able to talk about the topic in the future.

(Extract 4 - PN)

As shown in Table 5, in light of Byram's IC framework, participants in 2021-2022 believed that their IC developed more widely than those in the previous year. 85.29% of the respondents were able to explain a target culture event and relate it to that in their own culture, being 5.29% higher than those in 2020-2021, when two out of 10 respondents were uncertain about this skill, taking up 20% of the cohort. This

rate of uncertainty was 5.29% higher than that (14.71%) in 2021-2022. The lowered uncertainty seems to confirm the more effectiveness of the VE sessions among the 2021-2022 cohort again.

Table 5

*Explained a Cultural Event from the Culture I Am Learning about and Relate it to Similar One in My Own*

	2020-2021		2021-2022	
	%	Count	%	Count
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	0	0
Uncertain	20.00	2	14.71	5
Agree	70.00	7	50.00	17
Strongly agree	10.00	1	35.29	12
Total	100	10	100	34
Positive	80		85.29	

Both PNs and RJs have further examples to demonstrate their skills of interpretation and relating.

Double 11 refers to 11<sup>th</sup> November when there is a national remembrance with the whole population keep silent for one minute in memory of the lives lost during the wars. In recent years in China this day was referred to as the singleton's day initially among unmarried people due to its written form with four of Number 1 (the 11th of day of the 11th month) which looks like an image of upright sticks without anything surrounding it. Soon later this was linked with commercial activities online for consumers with supposedly huge discounts offered by business ..... Double 11 functions similarly to Black Friday originated in USA and Christmas Sale in the UK (Extract 5 – PN).

It is clear from the above extract that s/he found out the meaning of the day in Britain and offered his/her partners Chinese writing of 默哀 (silence for lamentation) and meanwhile, it can be seen that participates related it to similar cultural phenomenon in their own country. The similar relating and interpreting can be demonstrated in how Christmas and Chinese New Year have been discussed among the participants.

A similar image to Santa Claus in France Pere Noel, he is almost exactly the same as Santa Claus, whose red and white clothes inspired Coca-Cola and painted the world's main image of Santa Claus in the 1930s. And in some cultures, Santa Claus follows Caneth Ruprecht, or Black Peter. In some versions, there are Christmas grannies, dwarfs in toy workshops make holiday gifts, and sometimes Santa and Grandma are husband and wife. During the Christmas season, in many supermarkets in North America and Britain, there are Santa Claus who children can ask for gifts. The original Spring Festival is a reunion, is a year's summary, is a street to come and go into the relationship between relatives and friends an opportunity, is to see the Spring Festival Gala that kind of atmosphere and expectations, the sound of the old year's vision for the coming year. Now the Spring Festival is just for the holiday, without firecrackers, ..... (Extract 6 – RJ).

The above extracts demonstrate that the skill of relating was obtained and applied among the intercultural partners. It illustrated the ability for the learner to explain a cultural event and relate it to the one from

another culture (Byram et al, 2001). Through their conversation, they related the festival in their own culture to the one of similar importance in another culture and the cultural values imbued behind them. Thus, they can clearly explain the status of them in different cultures.

While the above two extracts illustrated students' skills of discovery, relating and interpreting, Table 6 provided more quantitative evidence that students also developed or enhanced their skills of discovery through VE. 76.47% of the respondents agreed that they discovered Chinese cultural practices which they can apply in their real-time interaction with native speakers. This was 16.47% higher than that of the cohort of 2020-2021 when 40% of the respondents were unsure about this discovery. This rate of uncertainty nearly doubled that in the cohort of 2021-2022 even though one out of 34 of them disagreed about this skill. Nevertheless, the much lower uncertainties and much higher positive responses in 2021-2022 demonstrated the more impactful experience in developing IC among CFL students.

Table 6

*Discovered Cultural Practices which I Can Apply to Real-time Interaction with Native Speaker*

Answer	2020-2021		2021-2022	
	%	Count	%	Count
Strongly disagree	0.	0	0	0
Disagree	0.	0	2.94	1
Uncertain	40.00	4	20.59	7
Agree	50.00	5	50.00	17
Strongly agree	10.00	1	26.47	9
Total	100	10	100	34
Positive	60		76.47	

Through this exchange and in particular through organising and completing our collaborative project together, I feel that I have become a lot more confident in talking and working with people I have never met before. I feel that I have also become more aware of how cultural differences can affect our understanding of each other and have become more sensitive to what elements of what I say might need clarification and what elements of what I and my partner say could be interpreted differently due to our cultural differences. (Extract 7-RJ)

The above extract shows that students applied what they had learned from their interaction with partner to their further communication, which provided more useful cues to induce more effective partnership.

### 4.3 Critical cultural awareness

As part of critical cultural awareness, students developed their evaluating skill from more varied VE experience in the past two years. In Table 7, while nobody denies completely the growth of this skill, 11.76% (4 students out of 34) of the respondents in 2021-2022 did not think that they could evaluate a different cultural practice or product. While nobody had the same disagreement in 20-21, over half (60%) of the respondents were not sure about whether they had developed this skill. Once again, the rate of uncertainty dropped nearly doubly (29.41%) in 2021-2022 when 59% of those believed that they can evaluate a practice or product from their partner's culture, striking 19% higher than the previous year (40%).

Table 7

*Evaluated a Product or a Practice from Other Cultures*

	2020-2021		2021-2022	
	%	Count	%	Count
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0
Disagree	0	0	11.76	4
Uncertain	60.00	6	29.41	10
Agree	40.00	4	29.41	10
Strongly agree	0	0	29.41	10
Total	100	10	100	34
Positive	40.00		59	

Reflective journals also illustrated the development of critical cultural awareness. This can be shown by the extract below.

“We exchanged cartoon characters from childhood cartoons in China and West, and the temperament and cultural identity behind cartoon characters. In function, western animation works are more focused on entertainment, language, action lively humor, rich expression. Eastern animation seems to value narrative more, beautiful picture, expression, action ..... This also represents the taste and character of the East and West, as well as the different appreciation of taste and needs.” (Extract 8-RJ)

The above extract demonstrated critical evaluation of cartoons as cultural products in both parts of the world and suggested productive intercultural learning through VE.

Table 8

*Already Changed My Perspectives to Other Cultures*

	2020-2021		2021-2022	
	%	Count	%	Count
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0
Disagree	10.00	1	2.94	1
Uncertain	50.00	5	23.53	8
Agree	40.00	4	52.94	18
Strongly agree	0	0	20.59	7
Total	100	10	100	34
Positive	40.00		73.53	

The participants in the past two years also had different experiences in whether VE has changed their perspectives to Chinese culture. As shown in Table 8, while nobody strongly disagreed on this, 10% the respondents expressed their disagreement in 2020-2021 but only 2.94% disagreed in 2021-2022. The rate of disagreement appeared much lower in the later cohort. Similarly, the rate of uncertainty in the former (50%) appeared over doubled that in the latter year (23.53%). Conversely, those who perceived highly positive about their VE experiences and changed their viewpoints towards Chinese culture maintained much higher in the 2021-2022 (73.53%) than that in the previous year (40%). It is also worth noting that

52. 94% of the respondents agreed on this change, 12.94% more than the previous year, and that nearly 21% of the respondents strongly agreed on this change in 2021-2022 where none expressed this strong feeling previously.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Research question 1: effective task types in VE among CFL learners

The above findings demonstrated that tasks that require a deeper level of engagement from the participants appeared to be effective in developing IC. Tasks in the 2020-2021 project were primarily of information exchange on different topics each week, mostly given by the teacher. The students, for their collaborative projects in 2021-2022, were found to have chosen topics such as university life, food and cuisine, film, books and TV programme, games and cartoons, festivals, sports and music. This type of task in 2021-2022 incorporated both information exchange and comparison and analysis in producing collaborative projects in the target language. This required a higher level of attention to both cultural meaning and linguistic forms in their discussion and negotiation of meaning with their partners during the eight weeks. It seems that information exchange was already embedded within comparison and analysis of practices in different cultures. Although the collaborative project was still relatively small scale, students experienced how to negotiate, compromise, and arrive at a common goal in their exchange. It can be argued that these tasks have achieved three purposes including exchanging information, comparing, and analysing similarities and differences between cultures as well as collaborating with each other. It seems possible to have three types of tasks in one VE project with the main task designed so as to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. The task could contain three elements being informative and engaging, analytical and output-oriented, with showcasing to a larger audience as a strong motivator. In 2021-2022, the students need to reach out more extensively through showcasing or reflection. As Garrison (2006) argues, these collaborative tasks help students create a common purpose, form a shared identity to build a social presence, for example, in showcasing to the audience other than their own group.

Apart from the collaborative project, the CFL students also wrote a paragraph on their chosen topic for their partners to correct to increase language accuracy. This concurs with one of the telecollaborative tasks in O'Dowd and Ware's (2009) where American students created a text in Spanish for their native speaking partners to feedback on language accuracy and appropriacy. In the 2021-2022 VE project, the 'proof-reader' and 'editor' task were suggested two weeks after the introductory stage when partners have already got to know each other where their partnering sense seems to have prepared them further for the next step. Again, for both the written task and the collaborative project, students need to take an agentive role in discussing with their partner and cooperating with each other in order to produce a tangible product in various forms.

What differed between the two cohorts was the task type required of the participants. The type of task in 2020-2021 were based mainly on information exchange and slightly on comparison. These tasks appeared limited and superficial, which are similar to one of the findings in O'Dowd's (2012). The participants followed the instruction passively, leaving little space for them to take any initiative and agency in their VE sessions. Also the outcome of this passive tasking tends to be very random and unanticipated. The tasks in 2021-2022 are of more effective types of tasks as they are more engaging, agentive and collaborative, compared to those in 2020-2021. They went beyond mere information exchange and comparison, engaging in analysis and reflection on the tasks they had chosen for themselves. To complete their project, they required collaboration, involving negotiations regarding the topic and format of their final showcase. This led to an increased sense of freedom and agency during their VE sessions. Consequently, an agentive and collaborative task should be incorporated into VE projects. However, the effectiveness of VE design is influenced by several factors, which will be discussed in the following section.

## 5.2 Research question 2: effectiveness of VE design in relation to IC

Effectiveness of VE design in relation to IC is determined by task type, task sequencing, teacher presence and the nature of tasks. The effectiveness of tasks in 2021-2022 has contributed to the success of the VE project as the tasks there fall into collaborative type and integrated well with information exchange and comparison tasks throughout the VE sessions. They developed the participants' IC to a much higher level than those in 2020-2021 in terms of attitude, knowledge and skill, and critical cultural awareness. This finding appears to contribute to literature in VE in TCFL as opposed to the previous studies which chiefly covered information exchange and comparison tasks (e.g., [Jin & Erben, 2007](#)).

In terms of sequencing, tasks in 2020-2021 appear to be parallel to each other week by week. With the exception of the first week and another one or two sessions at the time of festivals, the other weeks can be swapped randomly in topics. That is, they did not have a certain order which requires one topic to be a foundation for the next. These weekly topics chosen by the teachers to suit university students were not strictly sequential. Contrastingly in 2021-2022, tasks of the introduction, the written paragraph and the collaborative project followed the chronological order and the gradual approach to arranging students' activities with an increasing amount of negotiation and complexity. This finding is consistent with Belz's (2002) three phases of telecollaborative task design. At the introductory stage personal information was exchanged and social bonds could be built. Then at the comparative stage either in working together on the written paragraph or towards the final showcase product, partners were prompted to analyse and synthesise information, negotiate meaning and produce tangible products ([Belz, 2002](#); [Müller-Hartmann, 2007](#); [O'Dowd & Ware, 2009](#)). This sequence has given a relatively compact task structure to the VE sessions leading to an effective outcome. As Luo and Gui (2021) argued, various types of tasks in combination with sequencing can enhance an effective telecollaborative task design.

In terms of teacher's presence, it was the eight-to-two ratio between the two years. That is, during the eight-week period in 2020-2021, the teachers from both universities attended all the sessions providing a topic at the beginning, staying online for the whole hour and bringing students back to the main Teams space at the end of each session. But in 2021-2022, the teachers from all universities only attended two sessions respectively at the introductory meeting and the showcase meeting near the end of the project. The teachers' support was moved behind the screen in reading students' learning diaries and resolving emerging issues from the exchange sessions. This allowed sufficient time and variety in themes and topics for students, maintaining their interests and providing flexibility for them to pursue their own common interests in their end product. Students' activities changed from simply talking on a given topic in 2020-2021 to taking initiatives and making their own decision in 2021-2022. This included what to talk to their partners, what to write in the paragraph in Chinese for their partners to correct, and how to present their collaborative project at the final session. These seemingly loosely supervised tasks, which could be also partly attributed to online environments may "encourage learners to exercise agency and enact identities" ([Lamy, 2007](#), p.263). Although teacher presence in the weekly meeting space seems to be executed to the lowest level, the collaborative task kept intercultural partners constantly building up their own micro learning community ([Kurek, 2015](#)).

An effective design of VE appears to be open, agentive, and collaborative in nature. In 2021-2022, the tasks were open in nature involving learner independence and learner decision on the contents of their learning, and learners were active, participatory, and outcome-oriented in the VE sessions. The collaborative projects required them to analyse and compare the contents of cultural products and practices and identify similarities and differences, negotiating or evaluating different cultural perspectives, while learning about each other's culture. The tasks have provided a structure to a seemly loose-structured online environment, scaffolding autonomous learning, voicing the teaching with the least teacher's presence, and supporting group cohesion and social presence ([Kurek, 2015](#)).

The tasks in 2020-2021 was more informal in that they simply required participants to converse in their target language, with British students speaking in Chinese and Chinese students speaking in

English. In 2021-2022 the tasks are more structured and collaborative, having based upon negotiation of meaning and reaching a solution. Meanwhile, those in 2021-2022 were not very formal, but still flexible in essence. Similar to Jin and Erben (2007) study where the use of Chinese was not mandatory, the CFL students of higher levels in these two VE projects were encouraged to use Chinese as much as possible. The beginners' use of Chinese was not compulsory, though they were very excited to speak Chinese to native speakers in their first few weeks of learning the language. Many of them have used English most of the time, which also encouraged a focus on culture learning.

The findings of this study demonstrated that VE with the task design in 2021-2022 has facilitated IC development among the participants more effectively than that in 2020-2021. This result supports other studies on the use of telecollaboration in foreign language education (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2002; Gonglewski et al., 2001; Jin & Erben, 2007; Levy, 2007; O'Dowd, 2007; Schenker, 2012) in that they developed IC including attitude, knowledge, skill and critical awareness. Similar to Jin and Erben's (2007) study, the online intercultural interlocutors developed greater awareness of the differences between their own and the target culture, and some of them have critically reflected their own native culture or their own individual behaviours. It was their curious and open attitude combined with the readiness to learn about new cultures (Schenker, 2012) that enabled them to develop more positive attitudes toward the differences and became more self-reflective intercultural learners. The VE sessions were novel experience for most of the participants in the study, regardless of how long they have learned Chinese. This study has confirmed that the agentive, collaborative and reflective design of VE (e.g., in 2021-2022) can develop IC to a more advanced level than what a random and passive task design (e.g., in 2021-2022) can lead to.

### 5.3 Teaching implication

As regards to integration of a VE project into curriculum, the study offered a productive approach to authentic intercultural foreign learning through VE projects in both normal and challenging pandemic times. Given that the tasks of exchanging personal information, writing and feedback on linguistic accuracy, and the collaborative projects appeared to be an effective design, virtual exchange can be included as an alternative assessment method. Students' participation in the online exchanges of both years was not part of their assessment, but the project in 2021-2022, was linked with the extra-curriculum award being offered upon the completion of the required tasks. This could increase learners' motivation and boost their satisfaction. Collaborative tasks such as co-producing a website, writing in different genres including an essay/an advert (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009) could be added as the options for future cohorts.

From the tasks conducted between the intercultural partners, it can be seen that activities or projects on similar or different cultural practices have been options in real communication being realised in online environment. Both language and intercultural learning have been developed in the intercultural or multicultural communicative settings. These support Liaw (2007) in that online task design could consider factors ranging from linguistic and cultural foci to non-linguistic features including sociocultural knowledge, learning skills, and intercultural competence. Even when it is not possible for the VE project to take up certain percentage in module assessment, it will still be enriching intercultural experiences. In the longer run, VE session can be integrated as a pre-departure complement to prepare participants mentally for distant country/culture such as China, even when in-person exchanges restore.

### 5.4 Limitations and future research directions

It should be noted that an effective task design derives from a stronger sense of partnership between two institutions, a great deal of negotiation and attention both prior to and during the exchanges. In enacting telecollaborative tasks, teachers need to consider factors such as extent of learners' autonomy, type



of end-product students work together for, teacher's presence and intervention, how to assess student participation and evaluate their end product. This study only explored how telecollaborative task design contributes to CFL learners' IC development, while other factors such as teachers and students' openness to a different culture or different pedagogical belief will also be worth investigating further. Issues such as how task design impacts on student motivation and whether task types affect different levels of learners in their IC development could also be probed in future inquiries. Future research can look into the actual process of task design and task planning stages (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009), and how to train teachers with different pedagogical beliefs and cultural backgrounds to set up VE projects and organise sessions. Future focus could also be on interaction patterns which play important roles in the process, in addition to social and cognitive factors and complexity involved in the interaction.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has explored the relation between task design and IC development through virtual exchanges between foreign language students from China and the UK. It has been found that participants acquired new knowledge in the target language, gained more insights into different cultures, and challenged their own preconceptions they may have learned from books and media. The study evidenced the IC development through agentive and collaborative VE task design. Despite benefits, virtual exchange will be unlikely to replace physical exchange, nor will it be in competition with it; rather, they could complement each other. Unlike a contingency plan during the pandemic, virtual exchange could constitute part of blended mobility (O'Dowd, 2021) and innovative pedagogy now and in the near future.

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# 网络交换中任务有效性与跨文化能力的发展——以中文作为外语为例

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## 摘要

近年来, 各种形式的网络虚拟交换涌入教师学者们的课程设置和外语课堂中。虽然广泛认为此种交换有利于跨文化的学习, 但是何种交换任务有利于跨文化能力的发展, 仍有待深入研究。在国际中文教育领域, 网络交换任务有效性的研究就更为少见。本研究以中英两所大学的学生每周一次共八周的网络虚拟交换为例, 利用问卷、Padlet 平台记录和反思报告为数据, 并结合 NVivo 进行质性分析, 从跨文化能力发展框架的角度, 比较分析两年的网络交换中不同任务的有效性, 并从态度、知识、技能和批判性文化意识方面考察何种任务有利于跨文化能力的发展; 探讨任务类型, 尤其是合作型和能动性的任务特点及任务有效性与跨文化能力的发展之间的关系, 同时为未来教学中使用类似项目提出建议。

## 关键词

任务有效性; 跨文化能力; 网络虚拟交换; 任务设计; 国际中文教育中的远程合作

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