

TELEPRESENCE IN ECUADOR

by

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Abstract

The Telepresence in Ecuador project served to analyze and gain an understanding of virtual education with an emphasis in building relationships with students and English language acquisition. The project was completed through a partnership with Kansas State University and ULEAM in Manta, Ecuador. An honors section of Educational Technology (EDCI 318) took on the project, using Double 2 robots to access the Ecuadorian classrooms. The K-State students in the class were split into pairs and assigned a school. The K-State students focused on improving the English pronunciation and vocabulary of the Ecuadorian students through the use of literature circles, games, and conversation. The project found that conversation with the students not only helped to improve their pronunciation as they listened to native English speakers, but it also rapidly built relationships and trust with the students. This project focuses on the qualitative experiences of the authors rather than the quantitative data, as the project was still in its early stages when the authors were involved.

Telepresence in Ecuador

As with many College of Education courses, course descriptions get passed down from upper to lower classmen. So, when enrolling in an honors section of Educational Technology with Dr. Mark Ellner, we expected to learn about websites, programs, and other technology we could use to enhance our instruction. However, our unexpected experience with the Telepresence in Ecuador project proved to be one of the most valuable educational opportunities of our undergraduate careers. Through participating in the Telepresence in Ecuador project, we became proficient in the technology associated with Double 2 robots, built relationships with students virtually and cross-culturally, and gained valuable experience that will translate into our future classroom.

The Telepresence in Ecuador project began in the Fall 2021 semester, taking place through an honors section of Educational Technology (EDCI 318) with instructor Dr. Mark Ellner. After committing to the project and all it would entail, we began training to successfully navigate the robots and learning about the strategies we would be using within our Cooperating Teacher's classroom. At the time, we were the first group of students to engage with the Double 2 technology for cross-cultural, virtual education. We were randomly assigned a partner and a school we would be working with for the remainder of the Fall 2021 semester into the Spring 2022 semester. In partnership with ULEAM, a university in Manta, Ecuador, we focused on students' language acquisition and English pronunciation through a variety of instructional strategies, such as literature circles, conversations, and games.

For training, we practiced driving the Double 2 robots around Bluemont Hall to prepare for technical issues that may arise as we began meeting with our students in Ecuador. We also hosted introductory Zoom meetings to meet with our Cooperating Teachers and learn more about

our role in their classroom and what their expectations were. In addition to working with the robots, we researched the schools we would work with, Ecuadorian culture, and how to successfully implement instructional strategies virtually.

Partner groups met with their respective schools once or twice a week with time slots ranging from 1-2 hours each session. We used strategies such as literature circles, movement, discussion, songs, and presentations to aid in students' English language acquisition. As with any new project, we experienced unforeseen issues such as technical difficulties with Wi-Fi connection, robot malfunction, and sound issues. The connection issues lessened once the Ecuadorian schools set up higher quality internet connection. Sound issues were solved later on as a result of purchasing microphones and speakers. As we were working with schools, we would record our sessions via Zoom and take time to reflect afterwards either on the same Zoom call or through journal entries.

While the focus of the project was English language acquisition, we were interested to see how we would be able to build trusting relationships with the students virtually. At the beginning of the project, the students were wary of the robot. Many were hesitant to talk to us, and some would not approach the robot at all. It was difficult for us at first as well, as we struggled with the language barrier and the lagging connection. However, as the project progressed, the students became more comfortable with approaching the robot and having conversations with us. The class sizes we worked with ranged from 20-60 students at one time; however, even in the larger classes we were able to recognize and remember the students from session to session.

As the sessions progressed, our focus shifted from literature circles to conversation and pronunciation. At this point, we were discussing their favorite foods, hobbies, pop culture, their

favorite places to visit, and more. Once we transitioned to a conversational format, we noticed the students becoming more excited and willing to share with us. They were also intrigued to hear about our lives as college students in the United States, and we were surprised to hear that they enjoyed much of the same entertainment and pop culture as we did. This served as a springboard for further connection and trust building. At the end of the project, one of Hannah's students commented, "I just want to thank you for listening to me and my stories. I know I talk a lot, but no one has ever listened to me like you have." Up until that point, we were unsure how much of an impact we had made on the students, so that comment solidified the importance of our work.

Finally, the Telepresence in Ecuador had innumerable implications for our future teaching careers. As stated above, we learned that strong relationships with students can be fostered both virtually and cross-culturally. Through learning about Ecuadorian culture from our students, we realized the impact culture and background has on education, which will inform our interactions with our future students. We were also able to implement English as a Second Language instructional strategies that we had learned in previous classes, such as revoicing and using a guarded vocabulary, but had yet to use in a classroom setting.

The project required us to adapt lessons to aid in our students' successes and to increase our contact time with the students, especially through technical difficulties. The Telepresence in Ecuador project also gave us the opportunity to become more technologically literate and enhance our problem solving skills. Working with the Double 2 robots allowed us to become comfortable working with new devices and communication platforms, which has already proved valuable in our student teaching experiences.

In conclusion, the Telepresence in Ecuador project was an invaluable experience that has and will continue to inform our teaching experiences. Throughout the project, we refined our skills and learned new ones, created lasting relationships with our peers and our Ecuadorian students, and allowed us to shape the project for the next groups of Educational Technology students as the project continues. The project allowed us to experience the English language acquisition process first-hand, while impacting the students we were working with in a way we did not know would be possible in a virtual setting. While this paper outlines our experience, our main project is a video documentary which details our interactions with the Ecuadorian students and an interview with the Kansas State University faculty and students who were involved.

Link to Video Project: <https://youtu.be/QRrAnActlsl>