Collaborative Online International Learning in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an approach that connects teachers and students to collaborate and learn as part of their course. COIL is one type of virtual exchange that promotes more inclusive international collaboration that has been gaining popularity in recent years (O'Dowd, 2019; Rubin, 2017). In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, foreign language educators have seen COIL as a vehicle to promote international collaboration and language learning. Furthermore, as participation in study abroad programs for university students in Japan and worldwide has been lessened and is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic participation levels in the near future, COIL offers opportunities for higher education institutions to work towards their internationalization goals. For students in foreign language university courses in Japan, COIL can provide unique opportunities to interact and collaborate with L1 or L2 speakers in another country. In addition to language development, COIL offers opportunities for development, including intercultural competence. For stakeholders interested in incorporating virtual exchange in their language classrooms, this paper aims to provide an overview of COIL, and some examples of language-learning-focused COIL. Finally, some suggestions about how to get involved in COIL will be provided.

Introduction

The Japanese government's push for fostering global *jinzai* (global human resources) and internationalization in Japan's institutions of higher education has caused universities to look for methods to work towards these objectives. Many private universities have seen study abroad as a vehicle to foster global jinzai and internationalize the curriculum (Yonezawa, et al., 2009). Unfortunately, not all students have the means or time to participate in international exchanges. This realization is evident with the growing popularity of the concept of internationalization at home (IaH) among educational institutions. Beelen and Jones (2015) describe IaH as the "purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal curriculum

for all students within domestic learning environments" (p. 69). Beelen and Jones (2015) argue that the term IaH suggests international mobility efforts have reached relatively few. Teekens' (2013) description of IaH puts emphasis on expanding opportunities to more students. For Teekens (2013), IaH is concerned with what do with the vast majority of students who are not involved or exposed to international or intercultural experiences.

The combination of the push for more equity in international or intercultural exchanges in the midst of lockdowns and cancellations of mobility programs due to a global pandemic has made virtual exchanges appear to be an attractive solution to a lack of access to mobility programs like study abroad. Reiffenrath, et al. (2020) laud the possibilities of virtual exchanges to help bridge more access and opportunities of cross-cultural collaboration, even across disciplines. Virtual exchanges (*or telecollaboration*) are not entirely new. Over the past 20 years, virtual exchange has seen dramatic growth in popularity in foreign language education (Hauck & MacKinnon 2016; O'Dowd, 2013; O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019). Virtual exchange is simply a method that brings people together for learning and exchange through the use of technology (see Stevens Initiative [2021] for an overview of the various types of virtual exchange). Among the different types of virtual exchange, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a teaching methodology that enables both students and instructors in different countries to collaborate on projects and discussions as a component of their coursework (SUNY COIL Center, n.d.) COIL is not simply students in different countries sharing an online classroom, rather COIL creates equitable team-taught learning environments where faculty in two different countries or cultures work together to create a shared syllabus that emphasizes experiential and collaborative learning (COIL Consulting, n.d.) COIL is a type of virtual exchange that is closely tied to a pre-existing course in a university where students collaborate with classmates from a different university outside of their country.

COIL exchanges can take many different forms. Students in different cultures may work on a research project, media product, business plan, or action plan. COIL exchanges can be completely online or in a blended format See (Ikeda, 2021a) for examples of a variety COIL projects that Kansai University students have worked on with students around the world. A COIL exchange typically follows three steps: an icebreaker, comparison and analysis, and collaboration. In the beginning of a COIL exchange, the icebreaker provides a crucial function of building rapport, engaging the students, and team building. In the next step of comparison and

analysis, learners become accustomed to the tools that they will use to communicate. Often, the software might be something they are normally accustomed to using. Malinowski and Kramsch (2014) and Kern (2014) draw attention to the way the technological or online medium can impact intercultural learning and influence how communication takes place. These impacts can be positive as well as negative. If the platform for communication presents too many challenges to use, students' motivation to interact may be negatively affected. Students also get accustomed to the style of communication among their group members. Group members might have preferred times and ways to communicate with their classmates. When dealing with time differences, this might mean that some students have to engage earlier in the morning or later in the evening. In this step, students discover new ways to interact with each other. For example, their classmates might prefer communicating in real time over video. In contrast, some classmates might upload a video and await a response. While others might prefer to communicate through chatting or phone calls rather than video chat. Kern (2014) stresses the importance of drawing attention to how the online medium impacts their interactions. In the third step, students engage project-based learning. The COIL projects can be incorporated into fully online, face-to-face, or hybrid (partly online, partly face-to-face). The COIL projects can be incorporated into complementary content or similar content.

Ikeda (2021) describes how some COIL projects can be interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, crossdisciplinary, or interdisciplinary. For example, in an intradisciplinary course, Student A in an English literature course at University X works with Student B in an English literature course at University Y, researching Shakespeare's use of conflict. While in a multidisciplinary COIL project, Student A in mass media communication works with Student B in computer science, producing a short digital promotional video clip. In an interdisciplinary course, Student A in marketing works with Student B in English education, researching how educational product companies promote their products to educational organizations worldwide and suggesting a better approach.

While many programs may fit under a general COIL design umbrella, a language-learning focus may be more appropriate for foreign language instructors. Ikeda (2021b) points out how language-learning COIL design differs from a general COIL design. First in terms of student learning outcome, language-learning COIL aims to give students plenty of opportunities to practice using the target language, while general COIL design is developed based on the goals

for the matched courses. Next, in terms of task design, language learning COIL will likely have tasks that enhance fluency in the target language for both groups of students. While a general COIL design will have a task that engages the students in collaborative learning. A project or team-based task design is likely the goal. Then, in terms of the language used, the instruction language might differ from the practiced language in language-learning COIL. For example, students in a Japanese language class in America might be taught in English, but the practiced language will be Japanese with the group of students they are working within a different country, like China. In a general COIL design, the most common option is English for the lingua franca. Finally, regarding the collaboration mode, it is strongly recommended that language learning COIL designs have a good amount of synchronous communication. Direct synchronous communication, in the form of live text or video chats can create stronger connections and bonds between groups (Institute for Innovative Global Education, 2022). While general COIL designs have synchronous or asynchronous collaboration for their mode of communication.

Examples of Language Learning COIL Designs

This section will provide two examples of designs the researcher at two different universities in Japan has used with a partner at a university in northeastern China. To begin, the researcher (Instructor A) was introduced to his partner (Instructor B) in China through a COIL program coordinator at a university he was working at in 2020-2021. Table 1 provides a background of these two universities.

Table 1

Language Learning COIL Project 1 Background information

	University A (Japan)	University B (China)
Location	Central Japan	Northeastern China
Institution	Private	Public
Size	9,000	32,000
Major	Humanities/ British & American Studies	Education
Class(es)	Communication Skills/ Oral Communication	English Communication Skills
Students	39	44

English proficiency level	Humanities majors-Intermediate British & American Studies majors-Upper intermediate and advanced	Upper intermediate and advanced

Language Learning COIL Project 1

Initially, both instructors exchanged a series of emails explaining the nature of the courses they taught, their teaching philosophies, and their initial goals and objectives for conducting a COIL project. Gradually, the teachers developed a list of specific objectives for students at both universities. Both instructors hoped that the university students in China and Japan would be able to talk about various everyday topics (summer, food, holidays, careers, interpersonal relationships) in English. The overall objectives for this COIL project were as follows:

- Give students opportunities to learn from each other
- Improve English language skills
- Improve intercultural skills
- Improve virtual learning skills

After developing shared objectives, both instructors decided on the activities and the final project for their students to collaborate on. Table 2 provides an overview of the Basic COIL Project 1. The topics for the weekly discussions (e.g., summer vacation, interpersonal relationships, careers) were chosen as they were topics the students were assigned to read and discuss in the classes in their courses. Both Instructor A and Instructor B wanted to give the students a chance to discuss these topics with students from a different culture. Additionally, the final project was created as an opportunity for the students in China and Japan to develop a deeper understanding of the topic through research, analysis, discussions, and a presentation. The 83 students were divided up into groups of four or five. Each group had at least two students from Japan and two students from China. During Weeks 1-6, the students would chat synchronously and asynchronously through WeChat about the assigned topics. Finally, in Week 7, each group gave their presentation to a live zoom meeting. Each week, the students filled out

a reflection on Google Forms. They answered the following questions in order: (1) What was interesting about your interactions this week? (2) What did you learn from your interactions? (3) What would you like to know more about?

Table 2

Basic COIL Project 1 Overview

Phase	Week	Activities
Prep	0	Preparation-Install and check required software/ assign students into groups on WeChat (WeChat)
1	1	**Icebreaker**-students get to know each other, learn about each other's local environment, students learn about Japan/ China (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)
2	2	**Discuss**-Summer vacation (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)
	3	**Discuss**-Food (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)
	4	**Discuss**-Holidays and Traditions (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)
2	5	**Discuss**-Interpersonal relationships/Careers (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)
3	6-7	**Project report-** Conduct a survey on one of the four topics/ Create Power Point presentation Students give joint presentations on their research during a Zoom meeting during class for the university students in China. (PowerPoint, WeChat & Zoom)
4	8	**Reflection** (Google Forms)

Finally, a reflection and survey were administered to better understand the students' learning and experiences with the COIL project. The posttest survey, adapted from Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016) was translated into Japanese and was administered in Week 8 through Google Forms. Table 3 (on the following page) shows a list of the 12 five-time Likert-type scale statements in the posttest survey. Additionally, the students answered three open-ended questions (1) What did you learn from this project? (2) Why is that important? (3) How will that help you in the future? The questionnaire was used to help both teachers gain a better understanding of the students' experiences and to assess the degree to which the objectives were met.

Table 3

Basic COIL Project 1 Posttest Survey

Statements
1. I have been more motivated to learn the language through participating in this course.
2. Due to this COIL experience, I am more motivated to further my English competency for use in my future work or career.
3. I feel that my language skills have improved.
4. I feel that I can speak with more fluency now than prior to my participation in this program.
5. My comprehension of spoken English has improved due to this program.
6. I feel confident speaking English after participating in this program.
7. I feel more comfortable speaking in class now that I did before I participated in this program.
8. I feel more comfortable speaking with a native speaker now that I did before I participated in this program.
9. I feel confident that I can conduct virtual meetings in English in a work environment.
10. This program has made me more aware of the needs, interests, and abilities of others
11. This program has changed the way that I interact with others of cultural background different from my own.
12. Due to this experience, I would like to study abroad.

Language Learning COIL Project 2

The following year both instructors collaborated on another language learning COIL project. Table 4 provides an overview of another COIL project that both instructors collaborated on in 2021. This time, Instructor A used a class of students at a different university (University C) in Central Japan. The students in University C were early childhood education majors in their third year at university. While the students at University B in northeastern China were Japanese majors in their first year. For students at University C, many were studying to become teachers in nursery schools, kindergartens, or elementary schools. The students at University B in northeastern China were studying Japanese, even though they were participating in an EFL class. The 70 students were divided into 12 groups, with around three students from Japan and three students from China in each group.

Table 4

Language Learning COIL Project 2 Background information

	University C (Japan)	University B (China)
Location	Central Japan	Northeastern China
Institution	Private	Public
Size	1,900	32,000
Major	Early Childhood Education	Japanese
Class(es)	Foreign Language (English) Exercise	English Communication Skills
Students	36	44
English level	Lower intermediate	Upper intermediate and advanced

The objectives for this COIL project were the same as the previous year. However, the plan and tasks were different. Table 5 provides an overview of the Language Learning COIL Project 2. In this project, students collaborated on weekly tasks to learn and discuss the culture of cities in China and Japan. The students were assigned a city in China and Japan to research, discuss, compare and contrast. Each week the students were asked to find a time to discuss their findings and create a short PowerPoint presentation. The students uploaded their group PowerPoint presentations to Lark, a collaboration software that allows to students to chat by text, video, and share files. Finally, the students created a final presentation that compared the life and culture of both cities. The students recorded the presentation through Lark and uploaded it for their classmates to watch.

Table 5

Language Learning COIL Project 2

Phase	Week	Activity
Prep	0	Download Lark and create an account, join their Lark group
1	1	**Icebreaker**/ self-introduction-Upload a self-introduction video for 90 seconds; 2 truths, 1 lie
2	2	**Research and discuss** general information about their assigned cities; create PowerPoint slides

	3	**Research and discuss** the history and relics of the cities; create PowerPoint slides
	4	**Research and discuss** the culture around food of the cities; create PowerPoint slides
	5	**Research and discuss** Customs and lifestyles in the cities; create PowerPoint slides
3	6	**Group study report**; Put slides together; Record group presentation
4	7	**Reflection**; fill out survey and questionnaire.

To assess the students' learning and gain a better understanding of the students' experience, a pretest and posttest survey was administered to the students in Japan through Google Forms. The pretest and posttest survey, adapted from Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016) was administered in Week 0 and Week 8 through Google Forms. See Appendix for the sample of the adapted survey. Additionally, in Week 8, the students answered three open-ended questions 1) What did you learn from this project? 2) Why is that important? 3) How will that help you in the future. As previously mentioned, the surveys and questionnaires were used to help both teachers to better understand the students' experiences and to assess the degree to which the objectives for this project were met.

Results

Analysis and discussion of the data collected from Language Learning COIL Project 1 are available in Ottoson (2022). Themes developed through the posttest questionnaires highlight the change in attitudes toward other cultures and English communication. Reflections from the participants focused primarily on the increased openness, curiosity, and respect for other cultures, followed by the importance and enjoyment of using English to communicate across cultures. Furthermore, participants described development in virtual learning, research, and leadership skills. Results from Language Learning COIL Project 2 will be detailed in a forthcoming paper. Similar themes were noticed. However, students from University C focused a great deal of attention on their initial fears and worries about collaborating with students in China. These initial fears lessened as students participated in icebreaking activities and informal video chats. While the more proficient English users from University A focused more on seeing the usefulness of English as a tool for communication, the lower-proficient English users from

University C largely mentioned a reduction in anxiety and fear in using English to communicate with people who are not from Japan.

Discussion

Regardless of the students involved in collaboration, considerable attention and time are necessary for setting up a COIL project. Establishing shared goals and objectives will help guide the direction of a COIL project. Communicating the goals and objectives to the students can buy into the project. Particularly, students with lower proficiency in the target language may need more time and consideration in beginning a COIL project. Icebreaking activities should allow the students to use and get comfortable with the software and each other. Creating a friendly and positive atmosphere at the beginning can help to ensure all students will collaborate more actively and positively toward the final objective.

Finally, students need time to reflect on their development and learning. Prior to setting up a COIL project, it is important to ask, "What are our goals? and "How we will know when we have reached them?" Setting up these goals at the classroom level is important, but ultimately, it is necessary to consider how these goals work toward an institution's overall mission and objectives. Relying on one method of assessment is not enough. Vande Berg (et al. (2012) encourage a healthy skepticism of self-reports from intercultural experiences. These glowing self-reports can fall victim to social desirability bias because students may exaggerate their learning as they feel that is what the teachers or coordinators will want to hear. It is important to consider how to confirm these self-reports of learning and development. The two projects described in this paper rely on students' self-reports of developments. While these positive self-reports are promising, more careful confirmation of these reports is necessary. Triangulation through multiple data sources can confirm students' self-reports and develop a more comprehensive understanding of what's happening in these COIL projects. Ultimately, these results need to be shared not only with the administration and our colleagues but the students themselves. Data collected from internationalization efforts need to be analyzed, shared, and communicated to a variety of stakeholders, including the students. Providing feedback to the students provides a way for them to improve their learning (Deardorff, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, COIL is a type of virtual exchange that enables teachers and all their students to connect, collaborate, and learn as a part of their course. Within COIL, language-learning COIL projects aim to offer opportunities for students to develop their fluency in a foreign language through numerous opportunities to interact and collaborate synchronously with students from different cultures and countries. While there are many challenges when setting up and carrying out a language-learning COIL project (e.g., finding a partner, learning a new collaboration software, collaborating across cultures, navigating time zone differences), the opportunities for intercultural competence development in a time when study abroad programs and overseas exchanges have been cancelled or postponed far outweigh the difficulties teachers and students may incur. Finally, all COIL programs and their participants differ. Thus, more understanding of the experiences and development is needed. Further investigations of a diverse array of COIL programs can bolster this understanding. For those interested in participating in a COIL or different type of virtual exchange, a growing number of universities have joined COIL networks (e.g., SUNY COIL Global Network, IIGE Global Network, JPN-COIL Association) that help connect their instructors to possible collaborators abroad. If an educational institution is not affiliated with a COIL network, a quick online search can provide more information about joining a network or finding a collaborator for a COIL project.

BIO DATA

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APPENDIX
Language Learning COIL Project 2 Questionnaire

	Please rate your current understanding of each of the following aspect of Chinese culture. (1 = lowest rating, 10 = highest rating)									
Cultural knowledge	Religion									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Pop culture									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Family									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	History									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Civilization									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Politics									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Poverty									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Education									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Language Proficiency	Please rate your current level of English proficiency in the following areas: (1 = lowest rating, 10 = highest rating)									
	Listening									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Speaking									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Grammar									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Vocabulary									

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Collaborative Online International Learning									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Socio-economic/ educational responsibility	Please rate your current level of engagement in the following areas: (1 = lowest rating, 10 = highest rating)									
	Evaluate your interest in social progress abroad (e.g., malnutrition, water sanitation, literacy)									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Global competence. Evaluate your interesting in interest in international perspectives and issues.									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Global Community Involvement. Please rate your current desire to volunteer or engage in international service.									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Evaluate your current understanding of the impact of the school philosophy toward education (kindness).									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Intercultural Communi-cation	Please read the following statements and fill in the numbers that apply. (1 = lowest rating, 5 = highest rating)									
	It is fun to interact with people from different cultures									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	I tend to think a little before I form an opinion about people who are culturally different, rather than making up my mind right away.									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	I am not prejudiced against people from other cultures.									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	I am comfortable dealing with people who are culturally different.									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures									

	1	2	3	4	5	
	I am very careful when interacting with people from other cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	When I interact with people from other cultures, I try to get as much information as possible.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I am sensitive to the subtle implications of interacting with people who are culturally different.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I am fairly confident in my ability to interact with people from other cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I always know what to say when I interact with people from other cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I am interested in participating in a study abroad program.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I don't like to be around people from other cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I cannot tolerate the values of people from different cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I cannot tolerate the behavior of people from different cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I do not accept the opinions of people from other cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	I think that my culture is better than other cultures.					
	1	2	3	4	5	