

Enhancing Intercultural Understanding Through Collaborative Online International Learning: An Analysis of Benefits, Challenges and Insights

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in developing intercultural understanding among university students. A 2-year COIL project, ‘Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Across Contexts’, was implemented between universities in Catalonia (Spain) and Poland, involving 49 students from Special Education and Inclusive Education programmes. Using a humanising methodology, this qualitative study collected data through initial interviews, narrative reflections and focus groups. Findings highlight the benefits of COIL, including enhanced intercultural awareness, positive impact on learners’ self-perceived communication competence and empathy. However, challenges such as language anxiety, task design limitations and resistance to new methodologies among students were also identified. The study contributes to the research on COIL with a focus on students’ perspectives, underscoring the potential of COIL to foster intercultural understanding and inclusivity in higher education.

Keywords

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), intercultural understanding, higher education, humanising methodology, linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, inclusive education, intercultural competence

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Introduction

Virtual online exchange activities have been used in classrooms since the 1990s to create opportunities for students to work collaboratively with partners from other cultural backgrounds. In their overview of Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) programmes in university education, O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) contend that such programmes represent a key tool for internationalisation, contributing to developing students' intercultural awareness and intercultural skills. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a global shift to online learning in 2020, raising questions about the future of higher education (HE). Pardo Kuklinksi and Cobo (2020) speculated that this transition might normalise the integration of digital learning, optimising educational experiences. This article builds on their post-pandemic vision, exploring the experiences of four university teachers who, upon returning to traditional classroom methods, sought to leverage hybrid approaches to facilitate collaborative learning across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

The motivation to include an online collaborative component in HE study programmes was also influenced by the idea that Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) can contribute to developing intercultural competence in university students. Although COIL has gained popularity, its effectiveness in developing intercultural competence remains understudied, as shown by Hackett et al. (2023). This article aims to address this knowledge gap, contributing to the growing body of research on COIL in the European higher education context.

We begin the article by defining COIL and discussing its relevance in relation to the development of intercultural learning and understanding. We then share details of the COIL project designed and implemented across our two universities, before presenting the results of a study conducted within this context which aimed to explore the benefits and challenges of using COIL as a teaching methodology in HE, and analyse the extent to which COIL contributes to developing intercultural understanding among university students.

COIL: Widening Access to International Experiences

Conceived within a paradigmatic shift toward more active learning in HE, COIL is a term used to describe virtual mobility experiences that are integrated into existing study programmes, providing students and educators with opportunities to interact and collaborate with peers from international universities. Coined by the State University of New York in 2006, the term COIL designates an approach that brings educators and students together across cultures to learn from each other, with educators partnering up to design learning experiences and students partnering up to complete the activities designed (SUNY, 2020). Rubin (2017) and Rubin and Guth (2022) provide detailed guidelines and examples of how to embed COIL within HE programmes. One of the most notable benefits of the method is the potential for widening access to intercultural experiences, by providing all students with authentic international learning experiences at their home institutions. This emphasis on 'internationalisation at home' can be a particularly effective way of promoting more inclusive and participatory oriented education in contexts where international mobility programmes may be limited, as discussed by Guimarães et al. (2019).

Intercultural Learning and Understanding

COIL has been linked with the development of intercultural competence (Hackett et al., 2023), defined as the 'ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes' (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). In the specific context of teacher education, a cross-national collaboration involving teacher education programmes in

New Zealand and the United States focused particularly on developing intercultural understandings (Arndt et al., 2021). The authors of this study emphasise the unique potential of collaborative learning across borders for enhancing preservice teachers' insights and sensitivities to others. Within the framework of COIL, intercultural understanding encompasses the knowledge, awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity, as well as the capacity to interact effectively across various cultures through virtual collaborative experiences (Johnston & López, 2022). COIL represents an educational methodology that facilitates connections between students and educators from various cultural backgrounds and nations through online collaboration, typically organised around course projects or activities that demand cooperative engagement (Garizurieta-Bernabe & Prakaschandra, 2024).

The primary components of intercultural understanding in COIL include cultural awareness, communication skills, empathy, respect, collaboration, critical reflection and global citizenship (Guamguami & R'boul, 2022). In this context, intercultural understanding aims to foster meaningful connections among participants from diverse cultural backgrounds (Anderson & Or, 2024), thereby enriching their educational experiences and preparing them for participation in an increasingly globalised society. During intercultural learning processes, participants enhance their cultural awareness by gaining insights into their own and their peers' cultural backgrounds, encompassing norms, values and communication styles. This deeper understanding facilitates effective cross-cultural communication and aids students in navigating misunderstandings. The COIL framework also promotes critical reflection, prompting students to engage in analytical thinking regarding their experiences, challenge biases and confront stereotypes (Hackett et al., 2023), while enhancing their collaborative skills through cross-university teamwork focused on the accomplishment of shared objectives. Ultimately, participation in COIL nurtures a sense of global citizenship, reinforcing students' awareness of their responsibilities within an interconnected world (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021). By integrating these dimensions, COIL can contribute towards advancing intercultural understanding in higher education.

Potential Challenges and Obstacles

Despite the numerous benefits of COIL, the methodology does not come without certain challenges and obstacles that may impede its effective implementation. Furstenberg (2010) emphasises the crucial importance of effective task design when teaching with technology, arguing that 'only well-designed tasks can ensure the quality of the learning process' (p. 24). This argument is elaborated further by O'Dowd and Waire (2009), who identify a typology of different types of tasks and task sequences and make recommendations about key factors that instructors and teachers should consider when designing virtual exchanges. Recent work (Müller-Hartman, 2016) suggests that further research is needed in this area, particularly from a qualitative perspective. Reporting on a virtual exchange project between universities in Japan and Romania, Caluianu (2019) reflects critically on the unexpected challenges of telecollaboration. Taking a critical view of the over-emphasis on task design, she argues that this in itself may become an obstacle by hindering opportunities for unscripted and authentic exchanges: 'it became clear that, for the project to achieve its goal, [improving cross-cultural understanding and increasing student self-awareness] the focus of the collaboration should shift from task completion to reflection and discussion of the exchange process' (Caluianu, 2019, p. 12).

One of the key benefits associated with COIL is the opportunity to foster authentic international experiences and improve communicative skills, usually in another language which serves as the lingua franca to facilitate communication between the partner universities. Nevertheless, students who have been studying a language for many years can still feel anxious when faced with the challenge of having to communicate directly with students from another country (Anzai

& Shimizu, 2023). This can represent a barrier to genuine communication and limit students' participation in group tasks.

The study presented in this article aims to contribute to the critical line of enquiry advanced previously, by analysing a virtual exchange programme conducted over 2 years between a university from Catalonia (Spain) and a university from Poland. Building on the insights provided in the previous literature, our main research objectives (RO) are to:

1. explore the benefits and challenges of using COIL as a teaching methodology in higher education
2. analyse the extent to which COIL contributes to developing intercultural understanding.

Description of the COIL Project: Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Across Contexts

The experience was developed by four teachers, two from the University of Girona (U1), Catalonia, and two from the University of Warsaw (U2), Poland, to provide MA students in Special Education (U2) and MA students in Addressing Diversity in Inclusive Education (U1) with an opportunity to enhance their intercultural competence and understanding. All four teachers (and authors of this study) have extensive experience as university educators and two of them are specialists in intercultural education. At both universities, the project was embedded within subjects addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in inclusive education, aligning with programme objectives.

Collaboration began in January 2022 using the SUNY Model (Contract and International Learning) to design a COIL project titled *Linguistic and cultural diversity across contexts* (COIL-LCDAC from now on). The main learning objectives were:

1. Identify actions taken to address linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms in relation to the treatment of home languages/cultures, as well as methodological support strategies and organisational aspects to support newly arrived students or those who are still learning the language of instruction.
2. Reflect on the intercultural experience itself (strengths, difficulties, strategies used) and then relate it to the experience of a student starting school in a new culture/language.

Implemented in the Spring term of the academic years 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024, the 7-week project included three synchronous and two asynchronous sessions with the whole group, plus autonomous work in small inter-university groups composed of students from both universities. Activities included icebreakers, context exploration, collaborative research, interviews and a final presentation. Table 1 summarises the weekly structure and content.

Teachers used an Open Moodle platform to share resources. Before starting, they briefed students on objectives, logistics and communication aspects: English was designated as the main language of communication and instruction, with space for multilingual exchanges during group work. The first synchronous session focused on building rapport through photo sharing and group introductions in breakout rooms, followed by the creation of WhatsApp groups to facilitate connections outside regular class time for the inter-university working groups. Subsequent asynchronous sessions guided students through exploring and comparing educational contexts, culminating in interviews with education professionals. Students collaborated across institutions, using shared documents and online meetings to analyse and present their findings. The project concluded with a final synchronous presentation comparing both contexts and a reflection session at each university. Students also submitted individual written reflections responding to structured questions.

Table 1. COIL-LCDAC Project Overview.

Week	Format	Description of activities
Week 1	(Sync)	Introduction, photo icebreaker, group formation
Week 2	(Async)	Explore diversity in a new educational context
Week 3	(Autonomous work)	Group task preparation
Week 4	(Async)	Investigate diversity issues in partner's context
Week 5	(Autonomous work)	Interview professionals and summarise findings
Week 6	(Sync)	Reflect on progress, prepare final task
Week 7	(Sync)	Group presentations and evaluation

Method

The 2-year COIL-LCDAC project was guided by a humanising methodology (Reyes et al., 2021), which emphasises inclusivity and values diverse student voices and perspectives. This approach involves ‘dialogic consciousness-raising and the cultivation of relationships characterised by dignity and care’ (Paris, 2011, p. 137), and was fundamental to creating a learning environment that fosters intercultural understanding. Humanising methodology represents an approach to research and educational practices that highlights the importance of recognising and respecting the human experiences, identities and contexts of participants, while also acknowledging the complexities inherent in individuals’ lived experiences (Paris, 2011; Paris & Winn, 2014). This methodology aims to foster more equitable, inclusive, reflective and empathetic research and to deconstruct learning environments. Ultimately, it seeks to transform research into more human-centric processes that appreciate and uphold individuals’ complexity within the context of intercultural communication, facilitating deeper understanding and yielding more meaningful outcomes. Humanising methodology has its roots in qualitative phenomenology, which emphasises lived experience and subjectivity, although the former seeks to incorporate insights from critical, decolonial and narrative traditions (Paris & Winn, 2014). This qualitative approach was adopted to explore the benefits and challenges of using COIL as a teaching methodology in HE, and to analyse the extent to which COIL contributes to developing intercultural understanding based on the perceptions of students who participated in the COIL-LCDAC experience.

Participants

Twenty-nine students (22–26 years old) from the U2 and 20 students (22–35 years old) from the U1 participated in the study during the 2 academic years (2022–2023 and 2023–2024) in which the COIL project was carried out. An overview of student participation by year, gender and subject is provided in Table 2. Students from U1 had previously completed undergraduate degrees in fields related to education, such as *Teacher Education* or *Social Pedagogy*. At the time of the study, they were enrolled in a 1-year master’s programme focused on Inclusive Education. Students from U2 were enrolled on the master’s programme, which culminated their 5-year programme of studies specialising in Special Education. All students enrolled in the module *Family, interculturality and multilingual classroom* at U1 participated in the study. The participants from U2 were those registered in the module *Methodology of teaching students with adaptation challenges*. In this case, two of the enrolled students declined to participate in the study. Most participants ($n=45$, 92%) identified as female, which reflects the female-dominated gender distribution

Table 2. Participants.

University	2022–2023	2023–2024
U1	9 Participants, all of them women Enrolled on Addressing Diversity in Inclusive Education MA; Subject: Family, interculturality and multilingual school	11 Participants, 8 women and 3 men
U2	13 Participants, all of them women Enrolled on a Special Education MA; Subject: Methodology of teaching students with adaptation challenges	16 Participants, 15 women, 1 man

typical for education-related degree and master's programmes in both countries. Culturally speaking, the 20 participants from U1 shared similar cultural backgrounds, with 17 originating from Catalonia, two from the Basque Country and one from Latin America. All of them understood Catalan, the main language of instruction of classes, although communication between students was often conducted in Spanish to facilitate dialogue with their newly arrived Spanish-speaking peers from the Basque country and Latin America. All students from U2 were of the same nationality and shared a common native language. English functioned as their foreign language and medium for international academic communication. This group was homogeneous in linguistic and cultural terms, with no participants representing other national or language backgrounds.

Research Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data about students' perspectives: initial individual interviews, a final narrative reflection and focus groups. The initial individual interviews explored students' previous intercultural experiences and were carried out before starting the COIL-LCDAC project: students interviewed each other in pairs and uploaded their recordings to the platform. The interviews included the following questions:

- (a) Have you had intercultural interactions with people from other cultural/linguistic backgrounds? If yes, how was your experience?
- (b) What do you think intercultural competence is?
- (c) Do you think it is important for future teachers?

In the final reflection, students were asked to write a text reflecting individually on the COIL experience, following a series of question prompts. The questions were collaboratively designed by the four teachers involved in the experience, drawing on their professional expertise and aiming to gather information relevant to the aims of the study:

1. What have you learned about yourself during this experience?
2. Has this experience helped you develop your intercultural competence? How/in what ways?
3. Has the experience encouraged you to reflect on any particular aspects of intercultural relations or on how you deal with these situations?
4. What are the strong/weak points of this experience from your perspective?
5. How would you rate the activities carried out? Which ones were useful/not useful and why?
6. Have you had enough support from your teachers, or would you have liked more support?
7. Do you have any suggestions for developing/improving the experience?

This generated a narrative text from each student relating how they experienced the project and what they had learned about intercultural communication and intercultural understanding. The primary goal of narrations-based inquiry is to analyse, interpret and present the perspectives that individuals share, providing insight into their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

The final focus group took place once the COIL-LCDAC experience had finished and aimed to collect information related to the strengths and weaknesses of the experience. Questions 4 to 7 of the individual reflection (see above) guided the focus group. Focus groups are useful for exploring complex issues, such as educational experiences, academic challenges and social interactions, as they allow researchers to gather rich, qualitative data (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Procedure

Before starting the COIL-LCDAC project, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Girona and the University of Warsaw. An open-Moodle platform was created at U1 to provide an accessible online learning environment for all participants at both universities. Informed consent was obtained from the participating students, both from the 2022 to 2023 group and the 2023 to 2024 group, before starting of the project.

The initial interviews were conducted by the students themselves. At each university, students were organised into pairs and conducted reciprocal interviews prior to the first synchronous session. Students recorded the interviews and uploaded the audio files to the Open Moodle platform via a task which was visible to teachers but not to participants. The interviews were carried out in February 2023 and February 2024. Interviews were transcribed by the university teachers.

Students' final reflections were written following the last synchronous session. Students were given a 2-week period to complete the assignment and were required to upload their written reflections to the Open Moodle platform. As with the interviews, submissions were visible to the teachers but not to participants.

Focus groups were conducted in April 2023 and April 2024, with one session held at each university. All participants involved in the COIL experience were invited to take part. The focus groups were conducted face-to-face by one of the teachers involved in the COIL experience, but not directly involved in the teaching of the module or the assessment of students. Each focus group lasted between 60 and 70 min. Sessions were audio-recorded, and one teacher from each university transcribed the recordings.

Initial interviews, final individual reflections and focus groups were carried out using the language of instruction of each university (Catalan or Spanish at U1 and Polish at U2). This arrangement enabled students to express their ideas, reflections and emotions more freely in their respective languages.

Although all students consented to participate, not all of them took part in every activity. Table 3 provides a summary of the materials collected and the number of participants involved.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the instruments were analysed using directed content analysis (Baralt, 2011). With this approach, we identified key concepts, initial codes, that were used as a coding grid for all the data, based on theory (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During the first phase, the research teams at the respective universities conducted a collective iterative reading of students' narratives and

Table 3. Materials Collected and Number of Participants.

Instrument	U1		U2	
	2022–2023	2023–2024	2022–2023	2023–2024
Initial interviews	6 Interviews	11 Interviews	6 Interviews	9 Interviews
Student's final reflection	6 Individual reflections	5 Individual reflections	4 Individual reflections	4 Individual reflections
Final focus group	5 Students	8 Students	13 Students	15 Students

focus group transcriptions and discussed the adequacy of the key concepts to code the materials. Subsequently, one researcher independently coded the transcripts according to the theoretically defined categories and identified additional themes. Following this, the suitability of the codes was discussed again by all four researchers. The codes and themes used for the data analysis are presented in Figure 1.

In the 'Findings' section, extracts from the data collected are included using the following anonymisation process: student reflection (SR) or focus group (FG), university (U1 or U2), year (2023 or 2024).

Findings

This section presents the study's findings, which are organised into three parts: benefits, challenges, and the extent to which COIL contributes to developing intercultural understanding.

Benefits of Using COIL

Overcoming Language Barriers

The use of English as a lingua franca enabled Polish-speaking students and teachers to engage in an online collaboration with their Catalan or Spanish-speaking partners. Despite initial concerns about language barriers, students reported a positive experience, demonstrating that they could effectively communicate in a foreign language, even with intermediate to low proficiency levels:

I always put up a barrier when it comes to English, and feel insecure using the language, thinking that I don't know enough or won't be able to understand anything or that people won't understand me. This experience has made me feel that I can interact with other people in this language, and write things or do presentations. (SR-U1-2024)

This constructive attitude towards making oneself understood in a foreign language was shared across both universities and appears to have been enhanced by the COIL experience. The challenge of having to communicate with people from another country to carry out tasks shifted the focus away from their own perceived limitations and onto the purpose of the task in hand: *'If two people want to communicate, they will manage to do so, even if they both do not speak the language perfectly'* (SR-U2-2024). Despite initial inhibitions and low levels of linguistic competence in some cases, students learned that they could achieve sufficient levels of communication through effort and application, without needing to aspire to speak the language 'perfectly'. As reported by a student from Poland: 'What I learned about myself during this experience is that I am not afraid to talk to others in English and it can be an interesting experience' (SR-U2-2023).

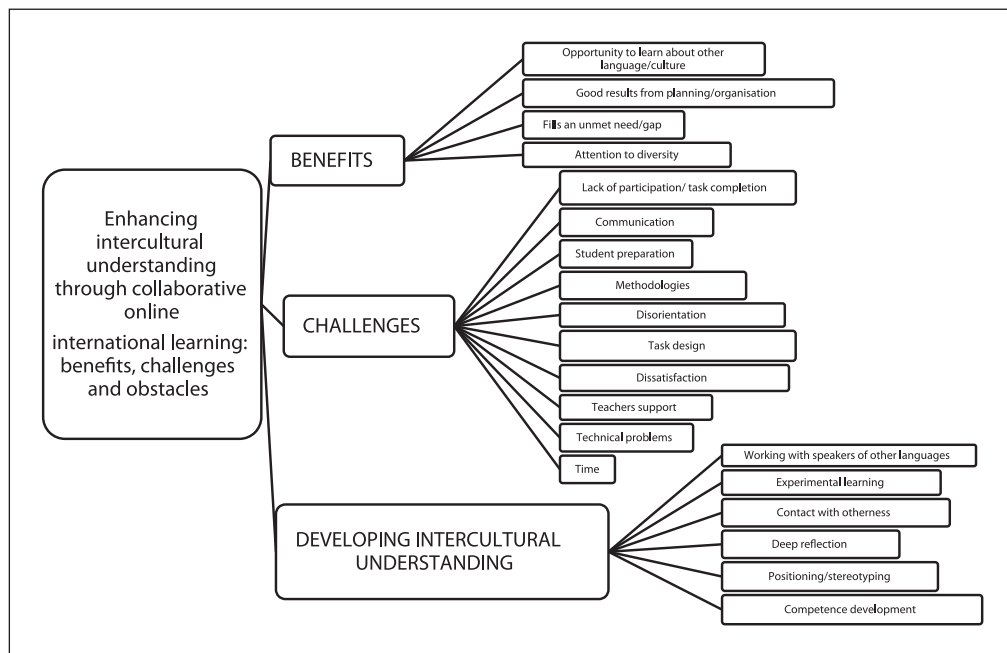


Figure 1. Tree of codes and themes.

Widening Access to Intercultural Experiences

Advocates of COIL stress its potential for widening access to intercultural experiences. In this sense, it is considered to be an effective way of filling an unmet need by providing students with authentic international learning experiences at their home institutions, without the costs and other restrictions associated with international mobility. Our analysis of the data prompted us to treat this question with some caution. In the first instance, results from initial interviews indicated that students were already accustomed to interacting with people from other cultures, which could suggest that the experience did not provide them with anything new. On further analysis, we found that the question lies not so much in whether they have contact with people from other cultures, but in relation to the quality of these experiences and their impact on learning. Although the level of engagement with their partners' culture was somewhat superficial, remaining at a *'very general level'* (SR2-U2-2024), students appreciated that they had been given an opportunity to learn directly from people in another country:

I think this activity has helped me find out about other cultural realities and ways of doing things (in relation to education), but in a more direct way [. . .]. We almost certainly won't have another opportunity to be in contact with people from other countries who we can talk to about intercultural education and how it's treated in their context. (SR3-U1-2024)

According to this account, the experience did indeed fill an unmet need by providing students with an opportunity to expand their knowledge about international contexts and engage in authentic dialogue with international peers. The qualitative difference between informal intercultural contacts and connections established within the COIL framework appears to be strongly related to the organised nature of the experience and the design and planning of each task:

I think the activities presented have been really good and that the questions we were asked were perfect for opening debates and considering the differences between countries, even though they were quite simple and open questions. Although they might seem simple at first, they become more complex as you start to reflect and discuss the information with the other participants. (SR4-U1-2023)

The importance of task design will be considered further in the next section considering the challenges of using COIL.

Challenges of Using COIL

Student Autonomy and Self-Responsibility

The asynchronous component of COIL projects, when students meet up outside regular class-time without their teachers, requires a certain degree of autonomy and self-responsibility from all participants. Some students in our study found it difficult to collaborate with their partners and build knowledge together, expressing frustration over a lack of engagement from their international peers, and pointing to insufficient collaboration:

[We noted] lack of control over the work and motivation to complete tasks. Our [. . .] partners did the tasks when we told them they had to do them and by when. When there were groups during classes, the work somehow progressed, but the lack of control outside of class led to insufficient work. (FG-U2-2024)

Communication was a major challenge beyond language skills. While some saw it as a learning opportunity, others struggled with discomfort. Some students stated that they did not know how to collaborate to achieve a sufficient level of depth in the tasks and that *'the online meetings didn't have the expected outcomes'* (FG-U1-2024). One student emphasised the need for more structured interaction:

It would have been great if we'd been able to connect more during the module itself. It's difficult to arrange meetings outside class time with people from another country that you don't know, or that you see are not very interested in the activity, when you start off from a position of little trust or without creating a bond. (SR4-U2-2023)

Some students felt that all the interactions should have been scheduled by teachers instead of managing the asynchronous sessions by themselves. Students had to take more responsibility, which some found valuable, but others felt unprepared. One noted: *'They [teachers] should have been more proactive'* (FD-G- U1- 2023).

The lack of scheduled interactions led to unequal levels of engagement between the different inter-university groups, suggesting a need for more facilitated activities and teacher intervention. Others directly blamed the lack of collaboration on students from the partner university: *'At our meeting, our [. . .] partners weren't there at all. . . At one meeting, they only spoke [their partners first language] and did the tasks on their own'* (FG-U2-2024).

Although the first synchronous session was dedicated entirely to ice-breaking activities, some students considered that more time was needed to develop bonds before starting the academic activity.

In addition to trying to extend the timeframe and focus more on this project, it would also be interesting to do more activities to build more of a bond with the students from the other university. (SR5-U1-2024)

Technical Problems

One of the most frequently reported challenges related to technical aspects. Students from both universities reported having connection problems, especially during the first year of the experience, partly due to their lack of knowledge of the online platform used:

The website where we met with the [other] group was problematic, many people's audio was not working. (FG-U2-2023)

In my case, the connection problems they said they had didn't help at all to do the tasks set. (SR6-U1-2023)

Although these problems were addressed in the following year, there were still some difficulties affecting both synchronous and asynchronous sessions.

Adaptation and Integration Into Wider Study Programme

Many students struggled to adapt to the remote format, contrasting it with traditional in-class learning. On this note, some students were satisfied with the level of support received – *'We've received adequate support from our teachers; they were always there if we had doubts'* (SR5-U2-2022-2023) – while others needed more guidance: *'I solved the tasks intuitively and don't know if it was done correctly'* (SR3-U1-2023).

Another challenge was related to how students understood the sense and significance of the COIL project. Students had mixed views on the structure of the activities and some students felt lost: *'A clearer explanation at the start would have helped. We didn't understand what it was about or why we were doing it'* (FG-U1-2023). In this regard, some students suggested that it could have been integrated more effectively into the subject they were enrolled on:

Including the COIL experiences in the planning of the subject in a more organic way and so that it doesn't feel like an isolated situation. Allocate more time during classes to carry out the tasks, simplify some of the activities, or use these activities to assess the subject. (SR2-U2-2024)

The point raised here regarding assessment is developed further in the next section on 'Time and workload'.

Considering the challenges of integrating COIL into study programmes, some students suggested that COIL should be offered as a general university course, rather than embedded within specific subjects. This would provide the opportunity for students from different specialties and faculties to participate and for such courses to be delivered in a larger number of hours.

Workload Versus Impact on Grades

The fact that the asynchronous sessions were held outside regular class hours was criticised by some students, who felt it was extra work. Some students felt that the experience was too short to develop intercultural competence. Other students pointed out that spending more time on the COIL activity would have facilitated the establishment of a link with students from the other university in a way that would have favoured the development of the activities.

With the activities we were given and the time we had to dedicate to them outside class, the exchanges have been too superficial and didn't allow us to explore issues we might have been more interested in. (SR7-U1-2023)

Despite interest in the experience, some students felt the workload was excessive, especially since the COIL project had little impact on their final grades.

Developing Intercultural Understanding Through COIL

Intercultural Awareness

Student reflections suggest a significant impact of the COIL experience on their intercultural awareness. In the most notable cases, this was manifested in terms of a realisation of their lack of awareness: *'I learned that I know very little about interculturalism. It is a rarely discussed topic in a country as closed to differences as [own country]'* (SR-U2-2024). Participants from both universities valued the opportunity to engage in intercultural contact, which enabled them to gain insight into unfamiliar contexts and educational systems. Through dialogue with students from diverse backgrounds, they discovered new realities and approaches to diversity in education, sparking an interest in exploring other educational systems:

This experience has helped me discover my own interest in finding out more about other educational contexts, since up to now I've only known about the Catalan system, and I'd like to find out how other systems work. (FG-U1-2024)

Prior to this experience, few students had expressed interest in exploring other educational systems, demonstrating the potential for COIL to spark further learning and develop intercultural understanding and empathy. Acknowledging the importance of knowing other contexts and backgrounds, one student reflected: *'I think this experience has made me more open-minded. Each of us is different and yet there are significant similarities between us'* (SR-U2-2024). Having reflected on the effect of the intercultural experience on themselves, one of the main goals of the COIL project was to relate their own experiences with those of children starting school in a new culture and language. In this respect, and speaking as future teachers, participants became more aware of the need to get to know their students, and to understand their cultural differences, in order to generate positive learning environments:

I think the experience has made me see the importance of knowing about other situations, and about really understanding the need to get closer to our students, wherever they're from, as that will enrich the learning that takes place both inside and outside the classroom. (FG-U1-2023)

Besides their growing awareness of the need to develop their own intercultural knowledge, participants also emphasised the need to become more sensitive and open to difference: *'It's made me reflect on how important it is to be understanding, to empathise, and to be willing to learn about different things'* (SR-U1-2024).

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is defined as the 'ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes' (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). The extent to which the project helped students develop their intercultural competence was directly explored through question 2 of the Individual Reflection (Has this experience helped you develop your intercultural competence? How/in what ways?) and discussed further in focus groups. Our analysis revealed mixed results, with some students considering the experience insufficient to have any impact, while others believed that it did contribute to developing

their intercultural competence. Students with favourable views of the experience considered that exposure to another country's reality was crucial, enabling them to share experiences with students from different backgrounds. In this regard, they particularly welcomed the experiential part of the experience: *'doing activities with less theoretical content and more experiential learning'* (SR-U2-2023). Despite the difficulties experienced by some inter-university groups, others valued the asynchronous component and considered the discussion element to be instrumental in developing intercultural competence: *'The time together in the groups was the most productive part in terms of developing cultural competence, because it was discussion and not just listening'* (FG-U2-23).

As mentioned previously, one of the main goals of the project was to relate their own experiences with those of children starting school in a new culture and language and to consider how they would address diversity as future teachers. Responding positively to the question about whether the experience helped develop intercultural competence, one student links this directly with her capacity to maximise student inclusion in her future professional actions:

I've been able to find out about the reality of another country from people who live there, I've been able to compare it with my country, I've been able to agree on possible ways and resources to maximise student inclusion (particularly newcomers) in the educational system, etc. (SR-U1-2023)

Stereotyping

Despite the favourable attitudes towards the benefits of intercultural awareness, some students displayed stereotypical thinking and positioning, undermining the potential for genuine intercultural exchange. This was detected particularly during the first year of implementation, when participants tended to adopt a judgemental position regarding other contexts, as suggested by the following excerpt:

Thinking about my own intercultural competence, this has been the first activity I've done during my formal education related to sharing experiences with people from another country. In that sense it's been a learning experience. For example, I've seen that there are still countries, people, or cultures that find it difficult to open up to others, even though they're part of the EU. There are countries where there are still closed and more restrictive mentalities. (SR-U1-2023)

Generalised comments about 'countries' or 'people' were particularly notable during the final presentations of the inter-university group tasks (2022–2023), with students making direct comparisons between contexts – with some contexts being deemed inferior to others – rather than seeking to understand the complexities and specificities of different contextual circumstances. This underscores the need for more sustained intercultural engagement to counter stereotyping and foster deeper understandings of diversity, empathy and cultural sensitivity among students. In the second year, instructions were revised to promote more nuanced thinking and reduce students' tendency to form judgement-laden comparisons.

Discussion

Benefits

This study set out to explore the benefits and challenges of using COIL as a teaching methodology in higher education (RO 1), and to analyse the extent to which COIL contributes to developing intercultural understanding (RO 2). Regarding the first objective, our findings support previous

research highlighting the benefits of COIL, while also providing insights into some of the challenges that may hinder its effective implementation.

Focusing first on the benefits, our findings are in line with previous studies suggesting that COIL widens access to international experiences, by providing learning experiences for all students without the costs and other restrictions associated with mobility programmes (Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Guth, 2022; SUNY COIL Center, 2020). Nevertheless, our findings highlight an important nuance regarding the difference between informal and formal learning opportunities. Regarding the former, our study found that most students were already accustomed to interacting with people from other cultures, often for personal reasons related to travel or leisure. While recognising the value of such experiences, which account for the great bulk of a person's learning, we also acknowledge that such learning tends to be unorganised and unsystematic (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). Building on students' previous experiences, COIL can enhance their intercultural skills and knowledge by providing structured activities which focus directly on their area of study. Our findings thus support those of previous research highlighting the need for careful task design (Furstenberg, 2010; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). From our perspective, and considering the rise in global mobility since the 1990s when virtual online exchange activities were first introduced, careful task design responds to the need to ensure quality formal learning experiences that provide added value to what many students already have access to in their personal lives.

Previous studies have highlighted the potential benefits of COIL projects in relation to improving students' language competences, especially in the context of foreign language education (Anzai & Shimizu, 2023). Results of our study do not indicate any direct impact on English language proficiency, which is to be expected in view of the duration of the project. However, findings do show a positive impact on learners' self-perceived communication competence (SPCC), which has long been recognised as an important predictive factor in willingness to communicate and effective language learning (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In this sense, our findings are in line with a recent study investigating the effect of a COIL project on English as a foreign language learners in Japan, Turkey and Spain (Remmerswaal et al., 2025), particularly with regard to the positive effect on students with low SPCC. Our qualitative findings highlight a shift away from feelings of insecurity and doubt to a more enabling focus on communication within each person's ability. The shift away from the idea of having to speak the language 'perfectly', or like 'a native', is closely attuned with research questioning the native speaker construct in education and advocating for more egalitarian approaches to language learning (Lockley, 2013; Waddington, 2025). Our findings show the potential for COIL projects to foster enabling and constructive approaches to foreign language learning by contextualising such learning in authentic and purposeful tasks.

Challenges

Turning to the challenges involved in implementing COIL projects, many students had difficulty understanding the new approach to learning. The traditional education model, based on teacher instruction and direct classroom interactions, served as a point of reference for them, particularly in the Polish context where they reported less experience with remote learning and active classroom methodologies. The new teaching format of COIL therefore required a shift in mindset about education and learning, which presented challenges for some students. This was most notable in relation to the asynchronous component of the experience, which was valued by some participants, but considered to be inappropriate by others and lacking in sufficient teacher intervention. Some students' view that teachers should be more 'proactive' suggests resistance to a methodology that required greater autonomy and independent engagement without direct teacher presence. Our findings are in line with previous studies reporting student resistance to teaching innovation and

highlight the need to introduce change gradually, paying close attention to potential sources of student resistance (Keeney-Kennicutt et al., 2008). While close attention was paid to the elaboration of clear task instructions, student reflections indicate that more time could have been dedicated to explaining tasks and ensuring full comprehension prior to autonomous work.

One of the most frequently reported challenges in our study related to technical aspects, particularly concerning connection problems or issues related to the Open Moodle platform used to share resources. Anzai and Shimizu (2023) highlight the need for teachers to be flexible and adaptable to be able to respond to the unexpected issues that arise in COIL projects, which do not tend to happen in the conventional classroom. Coming to terms with these unexpected issues and adapting to them together – both students and teachers – can prove to be a crucial learning experience considering the ever-changing nature of HE today. According to Anzai and Shimizu (2023), '[p]roblems may arise at any time, but COIL (2023) brings students real international communication that they cannot experience in the regular classroom' (p. 53). This point relates closely to the tensions reported in relation to the need for better integration of the experience within the study programme, so that it would not be seen as an isolated event, but as an integral part of their studies. Careful task design (Furstenberg, 2010) and explicit discussions about the relevance of the project to the students' area of study emerge as crucial factors in the effective implementation of COIL. The suggestion made by some students that COIL could be organised as an open course for all university students, rather than limiting it to a specific subject, is indicative, again, of a resistance to new methodologies and a failure to see the purpose of COIL, which is to embed intercultural experiences and intercultural learning within existing study programmes – bringing together students on similar programmes – rather than creating a stand-alone course on interculturality.

Another significant challenge identified in our study relates to the additional workload that arises during periods of increased academic responsibilities. Students suggested that the COIL experience should take place earlier in the academic year, such as in October or November, rather than in March when their workload is heavier. They also emphasised the need for better scheduling of activities throughout the week. Although teachers made every effort to organise the project in a way that was effective, their decisions were restricted by logistical factors related to existing timetables and other courses, that were beyond their control. Johnston and López (2022) provide specific guidelines on logistical planning which could help relieve tensions and improve participation and outcomes. The results of our study also suggest that the project may have been more effective if the focus shifted 'from task completion to reflection and discussion of the exchange process' (Caluianu, 2019, p. 12), reducing time-pressures and fostering more unscripted and spontaneous responses.

Developing Intercultural Understanding

With regards to our second research objective (RO2), analysing the extent to which COIL contributes to developing intercultural understanding, our findings show mixed results. On the one hand, students report significant increases in their intercultural awareness and understanding, which will have a positive impact on the way they respond to linguistic and cultural diversity in their future profession. This would suggest that COIL can be instrumental in developing intercultural competence, as highlighted by previous studies (Hackett et al., 2023). Despite these positive results, students often displayed stereotypical thinking and a tendency to position themselves as already knowledgeable, revealing limited reflexivity and openness to new perspectives. This self-perception – marked by superficial understanding and assumptions of omniscience – hindered meaningful relationship-building and deeper intercultural engagement. The data suggests a reluctance to engage in reflective practices, highlighting a critical need for pedagogical strategies that promote introspection. As Mezirow (1990) argues, intercultural understanding requires ongoing self-reflec-

tion and analysis. Without this, students risk relying on preconceived notions rather than developing genuine intercultural awareness.


Conclusions


The study presented in this article has analysed the implementation of a COIL project designed by four university teachers from two different HE contexts with no prior experience of introducing COIL in university settings. The results of the study may be of interest to teachers wishing to implement such experiences in their own contexts, especially in view of the growing interest in this methodology, which has been ascribed to the sudden switch to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anzai & Shimizu, 2023; Kučerová, 2023) and the normalisation of digital learning opportunities (Pardo Kuklinksi & Cobo, 2020). Motivated by the potential to generate authentic intercultural experiences for their students, the teachers immersed themselves in an experience which harnessed the digital skills they had gained during the pandemic and provided an opportunity for themselves and their students to engage in cross-cultural learning activities.

Although the benefits and challenges identified are largely in line with previous studies (Anzai & Shimizu, 2023; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016), our study makes a relevant contribution to the literature by identifying key issues that could be investigated further: (benefits) the need to provide added value when implementing COIL in view of students' increasing access to intercultural experiences in their personal lives; the positive impact on learners' self-perceived communication competence; (challenges) the need to dedicate time to careful task design and logistical matters, while remaining flexible to ensure authentic intercultural exchanges. Finally, while the experience appeared to enhance intercultural understanding for some participants, this was not universal. We therefore recommend a cautious approach when setting expectations, acknowledging that such outcomes may vary among students.

Our study was limited to a comparative analysis of two university settings. On the one hand, we acknowledge this as a limitation, as our participant sample was skewed towards young female students with similar educational backgrounds. On the other hand, this limitation may be an inherent feature of studies analysing COIL projects designed by partners within the same discipline. Despite these constraints, our study makes an original contribution to the literature by responding to the call for more qualitative analyses of COIL implementations (Müller-Hartmann, 2016), focusing on the student perspective, and identifying factors that promote or hinder the effective development of intercultural understanding in such contexts. We hope these findings will serve as a catalyst for further reflection and research on this growing phenomenon in higher education.

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