

プロジェクト報告

Online Cross-Cultural Collaborative Learning Project in Germany, Taiwan, and Japan¹⁾

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The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Project with foreign universities has become popular due to the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, universities in Germany, Taiwan, and Japan developed joint online intercultural exchange programs. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether collaborative online intercultural learning among students from these countries enhanced their cultural interests and intercultural knowledge.

The project involved conducting COIL initiatives each semester with undergraduate and graduate students from 2020 to 2022. COIL projects took place in the fall 2020 semester, spring 2021 semester, fall 2021 semester, and spring 2022 semester. The duration of each COIL semester was one and a half to two months. In addition to offline interactions, there were two or three online face-to-face meetings.

Virtual Exchanges

Study abroad programs are costly and impractical for cultural courses, and the COVID-19 pandemic has hindered travel (Bozavli, 2021). The Internet provides a dynamic format for communication, enabling students to express ideas, interact, and collaborate with each other (Furstenberg & English, 2016). Virtual exchanges allow

1) This paper is based on research presented at the presentation session titled "From COILability to Sustainability: Examining a Three-year and Three-country COIL Project" at the 2022 International Language Week at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, October 11, 2022.

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students to engage in encounters with people from other cultures (Reynolds, 2021), increasing their awareness and fostering engagement and positive learning outcomes (Machwate et al., 2021).

Classrooms often do not provide sufficient real-life communication and authentic cultural contact (Lee & Markey, 2014), whereas new technologies offer an alternative for communication and widen opportunities for cultural exchange (Commander et al., 2022). Based on the 7Cs of 21st-century learning (Trilling & Fadel, 2009), which include Critical thinking and problem solving; Creativity and innovation; Communication, information, and media literacy; Collaboration, teamwork, and leadership; Cross-cultural understanding; Computing and information and communication technology literacy; and Career and learning self-reliance, the COIL project focused on “communication, information, and media literacy” and “cross-cultural understanding.”

Intercultural competence requires intercultural understanding, the ability to interact effectively both in behavior and communication (Perry & Southwell, 2011), and aspects of both cognitive and affective domains (Hill, 2006). Cultural competence, a vital component of intercultural competence, involves a comprehensive set of attributes. These encompass the acquisition of culture-related knowledge, the cultivation of appropriate attitudes and beliefs, the development of essential skills for engaging in culture-related activities, and the attainment of satisfaction and perceived confidence (Truong et al., 2014). Moreover, it entails a heightened sensitivity to cultural differences, a critical factor emphasized by Straffon (2003). Therefore, it would be important to evaluate whether the COIL project was effective in enhancing students’ cultural interests and intercultural knowledge.

Method

Prior to the live online COIL sessions in the spring of 2021, the students were divided into teams and asked to introduce themselves across universities on a Padlet. Padlet is an online collaborative tool and virtual pinboard that allows users to create digital canvases where they can easily share, organize, and collaborate on various types of content. There were 38 participants, including 10 from Germany, 20 from Taiwan, and 7 from Japan. With English as a common language, students were

assigned two preparatory tasks: first, to introduce idioms, sayings, and proverbs that describe their culture's unique communication style; and second, to present and explain those sayings that are not commonly used in the other two countries by using Padlets. All findings were recorded on a shared platform. After the COIL program, the participants completed a questionnaire about what they learned from the international fellows. They were also interviewed.

Results

Survey Results

For the quantitative research, a questionnaire was administered after the program. Cultural interest was assessed with a question asking if they became very interested in different cultures through the COIL project. Cultural knowledge was assessed by asking participants to rate their perception of whether their knowledge of other cultures had significantly increased as a result of the COIL project. Items were responded to using a 5-point scale, ranging from “very much disagree” to “very much agree.” The results indicated a high percentage of students reporting cultural interest (Figure 1), and students reporting an increase in their cultural knowledge (Figure 2). Specifically, 64% of the participants indicated that their interest in different cultures was enhanced by the project and 70% reported that their cultural knowledge

Figure 1
Percentage of Students Affirming Cultural Interest

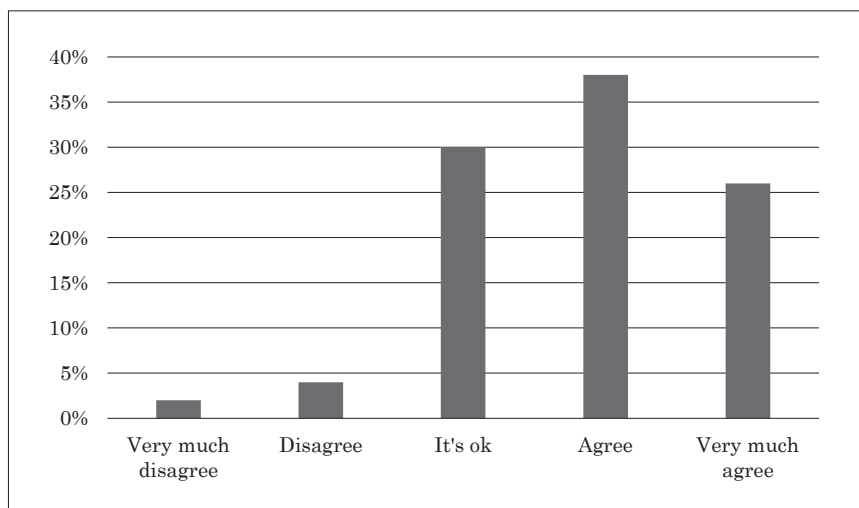
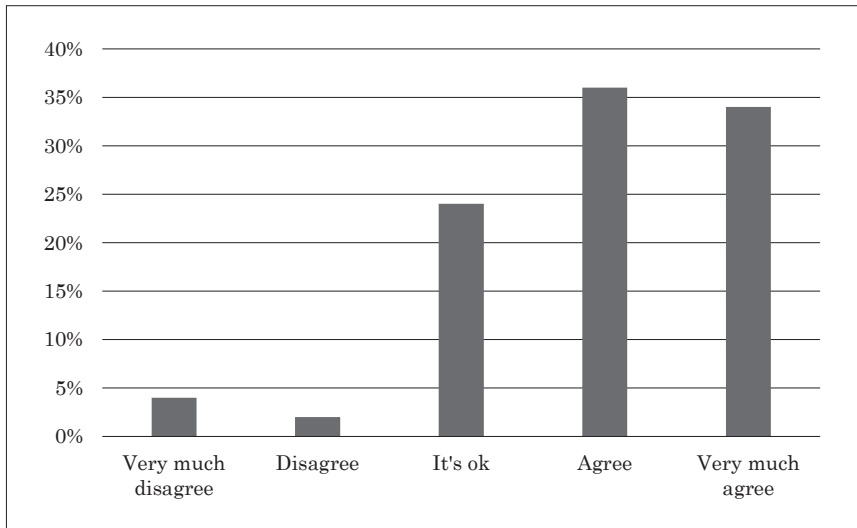


Figure 2*Percentage of Students Affirming Cultural Knowledge*

had increased. The increased cultural awareness was with regard to being more aware of cultural differences, more confident, and more interested. In addition, regarding the technology, the participants found it appealing, motivating, engaging, and interactive, and that it provided instant feedback and increased their digital literacy.

Interview Results

German University Students

The following statements characterize the German students' observations of different learning styles: "Relationship and getting to know each other seemed to be important for Japanese and Taiwanese students," "I had the impression that the Asian academic culture is more group work oriented, especially the Taiwanese academic culture," and "The communication style of the Japanese and Taiwanese were more high-contextual." Many German students mentioned that they learned low- vs. high-context, individualistic view vs. collectivistic view, and person- vs. task-orientation through the students participated in the program.

Taiwanese University Students

The following statements characterize the Taiwanese students' perspectives of different learning styles. "German students think more independently. They were

very active. Taiwanese and Japanese students are much less active. Taiwanese students may seek for a universal or right answer.” Another Taiwanese student commented that “German and Japanese students were more international and showed more respect to people from a different country. German students liked to talk about ideas and share thoughts. Taiwanese and Japanese students liked to chat and establish a relationship.” Taiwanese students learned low- and high-context culture and person vs. task-oriented values through participation in the program.

Japanese University Students

Japanese university students’ observations of different learning styles are characterized by the following statements. “German students were positively speaking out their feelings. Taiwanese students were energetic. Japanese were a little bit shy to say their opinions.” Another Japanese student said “Compared to Germans, Japanese and Taiwanese seem to prefer working in groups.” One student commented “I think maybe it would be better if we could have a small breakout session at the first-time meeting so that we can get to know more about each other, and we may have a better communication in the second meeting.” Japanese students became aware of differences in collectivistic vs. individualistic values and various communication styles through participation in the program.

Discussion

Enhancing Cross-Cultural Engagement and Learning Through Virtual Collaboration

The results indicate that students from diverse cultural backgrounds effectively engaged in project activities, delivered presentations, and exchanged ideas online, thereby acknowledging the enriching experiences of cross-cultural interactions within a virtual environment. The online platform facilitated the recognition of disparities in educational systems, teacher-student relationships, and teaching methods among the three countries, enabling participants to acquire substantial cross-cultural exposure and achieve noteworthy outcomes.

One of the learning outcomes was that there are various cultural idioms and phrases that describe “good” communication styles. Values related to communication style were common to all three countries. To collect more data, there are plans to hold additional COIL sessions of this type with students of different nationalities from

around the world, within the framework of hybrid short-term intensive courses. By learning about different countries and cultures, and hearing various opinions from other students, participants were able to deepen their cross-cultural understanding and learn more about various cultures.

Challenges of the COIL Project

The COIL project faced six challenges. These included language barriers, time zones, technology issues, academic cultures, communication systems, and curriculum differences. Because English is a second language for German, Taiwanese, and Japanese students, it was sometimes difficult for students to communicate what they wanted to say and understand what was being said. Owing to time differences, online meetings were held in the morning in Germany and in the evening in Japan and Taiwan. To connect more than 40 people online in the three countries, there were sometimes issues with poor connectivity and several video and audio problems. The COIL project showed differences in the educational approaches used in different countries; for example, the extent to which teachers provided students with materials and support varied across countries. The communication styles in the three countries differed, particularly between the high-context communication style of Japanese and Taiwanese and the low-context communication style of Germans. Students who participated in this project were from three different countries, with different grade levels, ages, and majors, leading to diverse issues in this context. These issues need to be addressed in the future as technology develops and communication problems are resolved. Differences in teaching and communication styles can be addressed by learning about each other in advance in each country, and by debriefing properly after each COIL project.

Conclusion

Through this project, participating university students from three different countries could connect with each other and expand their world through online exchanges. In addition, through presentations and exchange of opinions, students learned about diverse perspectives and were able to see things differently. By listening to various presentations and discussions from different cultures, they learned to empathize with others and understood the importance of empathy in cross-

cultural interactions.

In summary, this study aimed to determine whether online cross-cultural collaborative learning leads to increased cultural awareness and intercultural competence through the COIL initiatives from 2020 to 2022, which involved students from Germany, Taiwan, and Japan. The results demonstrate the potential and positive effects of online platforms to facilitate intercultural experiences, even under challenging circumstances.

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