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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN COIL PROJECTS

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Оскільки глобалізація та цифрова трансформація освіти продовжують прискорюватися, інтеграція міжкультурної комунікації в освітній процес стає дедалі більш необхідною. Проекти спільного міжнародного онлайн-навчання (Collaborative Online International Learning, COIL) дають змогу студентам з різних культур спілкуватися в режимі реального часу, обмінюватися ідеями та спільно створювати знання без необхідності фізичної мобільності. Такий підхід особливо важливий, оскільки сприяє розвитку ключових компетентностей, зокрема глобальної обізнаності, цифрової грамотності, комунікативних навичок та адаптивності, які набувають дедалі більшого значення на сучасному ринку праці.

У цьому дослідженні розглядається роль міжкультурної комунікації у формуванні командної динаміки та результатів навчання в межах COIL-проектів. Воно ґрунтується на участі автора у двох міжнародних COIL-співпрацях, реалізованих у 2024 році: «Подолання викликів через міждисциплінарні рішення» (у партнерстві з Гаазьким університетом прикладних наук, Нідерланди) та «Відкриття спільних наративів спадщини» (з Університетом прикладних наук і мистецтв Еразмуса в Брюсселі, Бельгія). Дослідження аналізує вплив міжкультурної взаємодії на командну співпрацю, залучення студентів і навчальні результати в умовах COIL.

У роботі застосовано якісні та рефлексивні методи, зокрема включене спостереження, аналіз цифрових комунікаційних даних (групових чатів і спільних документів), а також самооцінювання. Теоретичну основу дослідження становлять педагогічні концепції та наукові праці з питань віртуального обміну та міжкультурної компетентності.

Результати дослідження висвітлюють важливість доступних цифрових інструментів, міжкультурної чутливості, гнучких командних структур і активної участі викладачів у сприянні ефективної комунікації. На основі отриманих висновків подано практичні рекомендації щодо вдосконалення проектування та реалізації COIL-проектів.

Ключові слова: спільне міжнародне онлайн-навчання, віртуальний обмін, міжкультурна комунікація, глобальна компетентність, онлайн співпраця, цифрова освіта, залучення студентів, інтернаціоналізація вищої освіти.

ABSTARCT

As globalization and the digital transformation of education continue to accelerate, the integration of intercultural communication into the educational process has become increasingly essential. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects enable students from diverse backgrounds to connect in real time, exchange ideas, and co-create knowledge, all without the need for physical mobility. This approach is particularly relevant, as it helps students develop key competencies such as global awareness, digital literacy, communication skills, and adaptability, which are increasingly vital in today's job market.

This study examines the role of intercultural communication in shaping team dynamics and learning outcomes within COIL projects. It is based on the author's participation in two international COIL collaborations conducted in 2024: "Tackling Challenges through Interdisciplinary Solutions" (in partnership with The Hague University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands) and "Discovering Shared Heritage Narratives" (with Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Belgium). The research investigates how intercultural interaction affects team collaboration, student engagement, and learning outcomes in COIL environments.

The study applies qualitative and reflective methods, including participant observation, analysis of digital communication records such as group chats and collaborative documents, and self-assessment. It is grounded in educational theory and scholarly literature on virtual exchange and intercultural competency.

The findings highlight the importance of accessible digital tools, intercultural sensitivity, flexible team structures, and active instructor involvement in facilitating communication. Based on these insights, the study provides practical recommendations for improving the design and implementation of COIL projects.

Keywords: collaborative online international learning, virtual exchange, intercultural communication, global competence, online collaboration, digital education, student engagement, higher education internationalization.

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INTRODUCTION

Effective cross-cultural communication is a fundamental skill in today's increasingly globalized and digitally connected world. As higher education institutions strive to internationalize their curricula and equip students with the competencies necessary for global citizenship, innovative pedagogical models have emerged to facilitate cross-border collaboration and intercultural interaction. One such model is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), a virtual exchange framework that connects educators and students globally through shared online learning projects. By integrating intercultural communication into academic courses, COIL offers a cost-effective and innovative approach to help students develop global awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and collaborative skills, all without requiring physical mobility (De Wit et al., 2015).

At the core of COIL lies intercultural communication. Unlike traditional online learning or student exchange programs, COIL emphasizes the co-creation of knowledge and peer interaction across diverse disciplinary, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. As students navigate differing communication styles, academic expectations, and social norms, they are challenged to collaborate in ways that are intellectually demanding and culturally responsive. In this sense, communication becomes not merely a tool for completing projects, but the medium through which learning is shaped. The success of COIL experiences depends significantly on students' ability to actively listen, articulate ideas clearly, adapt to new cultural environments, and resolve issues tactfully. Understanding the dynamics of intercultural communication within COIL environments is therefore crucial to maximizing their impact.

The importance of intercultural communication in educational contexts has been widely addressed in scholarly literature. Foundational researchers such as Edward T. Hall (1976), Geert Hofstede (1980, 1991), Milton Bennett (1993), Darla Deardorff (2009), Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama (2010), and Robert O'Dowd (2018) have contributed comprehensive models for understanding cultural variation

and developing effective communication strategies across cultures. These frameworks provide a vital foundation for analyzing the interactional dynamics within virtual exchanges like COIL. While numerous studies underscore COIL's potential to internationalize curricula and foster intercultural competence, relatively few have investigated the pragmatic communication challenges that students face during such exchanges. This study seeks to address that gap by examining real-world communication dynamics in COIL projects and offering practical recommendations to enhance students' intercultural collaboration experiences.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the role and effectiveness of intercultural communication in COIL projects, with a specific focus on how communication practices influence collaboration and learning outcomes in international student teams. **The research objectives** are as follows:

1. To analyze the impact of communication tools and platforms on group dynamics in COIL projects;
2. To identify and address challenges related to intercultural communication in virtual exchange environments;
3. To evaluate pedagogical strategies that foster effective collaboration and the development of intercultural competence in COIL contexts.

The **object** of this research is the COIL model and its implementation in higher education settings. The **subject** of the study is the role of intercultural communication in COIL projects, specifically examining how communication within these projects influences student collaboration and learning outcomes.

The study is based on the author's active participation in two international COIL projects conducted in 2024:

1. "Tackling Challenges through Interdisciplinary Solutions" with The Hague University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands);
2. "Discovering Shared Heritage Narratives" with Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Belgium).

These projects provide a rich empirical basis for analyzing diverse communication settings and their implications for intercultural collaboration.

The methodological basis of the research is grounded in qualitative and reflective methods, including participant observation, analysis of digital communication records (e.g., group chats, collaborative documents), and self-assessment. These methods allow for an in-depth investigation of the communication strategies employed by students and the challenges they face in intercultural interactions. The research also incorporates theoretical frameworks on virtual exchange and intercultural competence, which inform the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

To address the research tasks, the study employs analytical methods to examine the content of student communications and empirical data from the projects, such as digital communication records and surveys. Additionally, the research draws on scholarly sources to provide context and support for its conclusions.

This study's relevance rests in both its pragmatic and reflective aspects. Particularly as COIL continues to grow as a model for internationalization both domestically and abroad, institutions, teachers, and students themselves have to better grasp the communication skills necessary for effective teamwork. Through the sharing of first-hand experiences and the analysis of actual student interactions, this study helps best practices in virtual exchange and intercultural education to be constantly improved.

The thesis is structured into three main chapters:

- Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical framework of the study, introducing key concepts such as *culture*, *communication*, and *intercultural competence*, while examining the role of COIL in global academic collaboration.
- Chapter 2 presents models and approaches to international student collaboration, focusing on COIL as a pedagogical model. It discusses forms of student mobility, technological platforms, institutional strategies, and instructional practices.
- Chapter 3 provides an in-depth analysis of two COIL case studies, focusing

on project design, intercultural communication practices, learning outcomes, and comparative insights. The chapter concludes with implications for improving future COIL implementations.

The Conclusion section summarizes the main findings and discusses the transformative potential of COIL as a teaching tool.

The results of this research were presented at the “AUU Global Synergy through COIL 2.0” professional development program, organized by the Alliance of Ukrainian Universities and hosted by Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv from April 28 to May 2, 2025.

This thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on COIL projects and intercultural communication in higher education, offering practical recommendations for improving the design and implementation of future international online learning initiatives.

CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN EDUCATION

1.1. Culture and Its Communicative Significance

1.1.1. Defining Culture

In this thesis, defining *culture* is essential for establishing a clear foundation for understanding how cultural differences influence communication. Culture shapes people's values, beliefs, behaviors, and social norms, all of which profoundly impact how individuals interact. A precise and inclusive definition allows this research to explore intercultural interaction in a nuanced manner, avoiding generalizations and enabling the development of effective communication strategies that bridge cultural divides.

Although culture is a multidimensional and dynamic concept, various academic disciplines interpret and define it in different ways. Anthropologists, for example, often describe culture in terms of shared customs, rituals, and belief systems that define a community's way of life. Sociologists may analyze culture in relation to social structures, power relations, and group identity. In communication studies, culture is typically understood as a framework that shapes the creation, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in interpersonal and group interactions.

Despite disciplinary differences, most scholars agree on the complexity and layered nature of culture. Lustig and Koester (2010) define culture as "a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices that affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people." This definition highlights culture as learned and collectively constructed, directly influencing human behavior. Similarly, Neuliep (2012) characterizes culture as "an accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal and nonverbal symbol systems," underlining the role of symbolic communication and historical continuity. Carbaugh (1988), approaching from a communication perspective, emphasizes the interactive and interpretive dimensions

of culture by also describing it as a learned set of shared meanings and behavioral expectations.

These definitions suggest that the key features of culture include:

- **Learned:** Culture is acquired through socialization and is not innate.
- **Shared:** Culture is a system of collectively held ideas that shape how members of a group think, feel, and behave.
- **Symbolic:** Culture is transmitted and expressed through language, rituals, art, clothing, and other symbols (Kramsch, 1998).
- **Dynamic:** Culture evolves over time in response to internal and external influences.
- **Integrated:** Culture affects all aspects of life, including communication, identity, and worldview.

Culture is thus not limited to surface-level traditions or practices; it shapes individuals' perceptions, identities, and modes of interaction. As Naik, Baker, and Mohiyeddini (2023) point out, culture encompasses both intangible elements, such as belief systems, religious practices, and social norms, and tangible elements, including language, food, dress, and artistic expression. These elements are transmitted socially, not genetically, and are continuously reshaped by individual experiences and societal changes.

UNESCO (2001) provides a holistic definition of culture as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group that encompasses not only art and literature, but also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.” This definition underscores the deeply embedded and multifaceted nature of culture, suggesting that it is both a guiding compass and a lived experience.

An essential process in the creation and transmission of culture is socialization – the way individuals internalize the values, norms, and customs of their society from an early age. Socialization occurs through various agents, including family, peers, education systems, media, and broader social institutions. Beyond simply

imparting knowledge (Naik et al., 2023), this process plays a critical role in shaping a person's identity, sense of belonging, and worldview. Thus, culture encompasses both the environments in which individuals are raised and the outcomes of their interactions within those environments.

Importantly, cultures are not monolithic. Within any society, there exist subcultures – smaller groups that maintain distinct traditions, norms, or values within the larger cultural context. These may form along lines of ethnicity, religion, geographic region, generation, or profession. Recognizing internal cultural diversity is critical for understanding intercultural communication, as individuals from the same country or institution may come from markedly different cultural backgrounds. Subcultures can enrich, challenge, or transform dominant cultural norms through their distinct perspectives.

Two important subfields that examine the cultural dimensions of human behavior are cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology. Cultural psychology explores how cultural context shapes psychological functioning, arguing that self-concept, emotional expression, and cognition are deeply influenced by culture (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). In contrast, cross-cultural psychology seeks to identify both universal and culture-specific patterns by comparing psychological phenomena across cultures (Berry, 1997).

Closely tied to these ideas is the concept of acculturation – the psychological and social process individuals undergo when adapting to a new culture. Berry (1997) outlines four acculturation strategies:

- Assimilation: Adopting the host culture and discarding the original culture.
- Separation: Retaining the original culture while avoiding interaction with the host culture.
- Marginalization: Losing connection with both original and host cultures.
- Integration: Combining aspects of both cultures into a cohesive identity.

These strategies have significant implications for individuals' mental health, social integration, and sense of identity. Marginalized people, who feel rejected by

both their host and native cultures, often face the highest levels of acculturative stress, with potential consequences for their psychological and physical well-being (Naik et al., 2023).

In our increasingly globalized and interconnected world, understanding culture is not optional; it is a necessity. Global migration, digital communication, international education, and multicultural workplaces have made cultural diversity an everyday reality. While diversity can enhance creativity, collaboration, and empathy, a lack of cultural awareness may lead to misunderstanding, exclusion, and conflict. Henrich et al. (2010) caution against relying solely on Western cultural assumptions in psychological and social research, emphasizing the need for culturally inclusive perspectives. Cultivating cultural awareness is essential for fostering mutual respect, tolerance, and meaningful international cooperation.

1.1.2. Why Culture Matters in Communication

Understanding the importance of culture in intercultural communication is vital for several interconnected reasons. First, culture serves as a framework for interpretation. People decode messages, actions, and events through their cultural lens; in intercultural encounters, these differing frameworks can result in misunderstanding or confusion.

Second, culture shapes communication styles. The degree of directness, the use of silence, and reliance on nonverbal cues vary significantly across cultures. Recognizing and adapting to these stylistic differences enhances communicative effectiveness, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and reduces the likelihood of conflict.

Third, developing cultural competence is essential in today's diverse societies. By learning to respect cultural differences, individuals cultivate empathy, reduce ethnocentrism, and contribute to more inclusive social, academic, and professional interactions.

Finally, cultural awareness facilitates global collaboration. Whether in international business, diplomacy, education, or social relations, success

increasingly hinges on the ability to navigate cultural diversity with sensitivity and insight. As Hoggart (1972) noted, culture is intrinsically linked to communication, acting as a means by which people 'connect' and make sense of their world.

1.1.3. Key Elements of Culture

Culture is a multifaceted system composed of both visible and invisible elements that shape human thought, behavior, and interaction. These elements form the foundation of how societies communicate, organize life, and interpret the world. Table 1 below summarizes key elements of culture with definitions and examples:

Table 1. *Key Elements of Culture*

<i>Element</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Language	A system of symbols used for communication; the key to cultural expression and identity	English, Arabic, body language, slang, dialects
Beliefs	Accepted truths or convictions within a culture	Religious beliefs, superstitions, worldview
Values	Standards of what is good, right, desirable, or important	Individualism, collectivism, freedom, respect for elders
Norms	Expected behaviors and rules within a society	Dress codes, table manners, greetings
Customs & Traditions	Practices passed down through generations that structure daily life and ceremonies	Weddings, holidays, rites of passage
Symbols	Signs or objects that carry particular meanings recognized by members of a culture	Flags, religious icons, logos, national anthems
Social Institutions	Structured groups that organize society and reflect cultural values	Family, education, religion, government

Art & Literature	Creative expressions that reflect cultural values and perspectives	Music, poetry, painting, folklore
Technology & Tools	The material products of culture that help people meet needs or solve problems	Smartphones, farming tools, clothing
Economic System	Cultural organization of work, production, and exchange	Barter, capitalism, communal labor
Political Systems	Organization of power and authority	Democracy, monarchy, tribal council
Rituals & Ceremonies	Formal activities rooted in cultural beliefs and customs	Graduation, funerals, religious services
Food and Cuisine	What people eat, how they prepare it, and the meanings around it	Sushi in Japan, Borshch in Ukraine, fasting in Ramadan
Cultural Artifacts	Tangible objects created by a culture that reflect its beliefs and practices	Pottery, architecture, traditional clothing
Dress and Appearance	Cultural standards regarding clothing, hairstyle, and presentation	Hijab, business suits, tattoos, piercings
Gender roles	Expectations and norms regarding behaviors based on gender	Gender-based work roles, family responsibilities
Time orientation	Cultural perception of time (linear vs cyclical; present vs future orientation)	Punctuality, siesta culture, long-term planning

Together, these elements reflect both the tangible and intangible dimensions of culture. Language and symbols convey meaning and identity, while beliefs, values, and norms guide perceptions and conduct. Customs, rituals, and traditions reinforce continuity and community belonging. Broader systems, such as social

institutions, economic models, and political structures, organize and sustain societal life.

Additionally, culture is expressed through art, literature, and technology, which encapsulate collective creativity and adaptation. Elements like food, dress, gender roles, and time orientation add further richness to cultural understanding, revealing how people interact with the world and each other.

Recognizing and analyzing these elements is essential for navigating diverse cultural contexts, fostering intercultural communication, and building global competence.

1.1.4. Foundational Scholars and Theories on Culture

The study of culture in communication has been shaped by key contributions from foundational scholars. Their work has provided essential frameworks for understanding how culture influences human behavior, communication, and interaction. Below are some of the most influential scholars in this field:

- Hall (1976) introduced the distinction between high-context and low-context communication, framing culture as a communicative structure that influences how messages are conveyed and understood (Hall, 1966, 1959).
- Geertz (1973) emphasized the interpretive nature of culture, describing it as a system of symbols and meanings, best understood through “thick description.”
- Hofstede (2001) developed the Cultural Dimensions Theory, which compares societies along key dimensions, such as power distance and individualism, offering insights into cultural variation.
- Lustig & Koester (2010) presented a comprehensive model of how cultural elements shape behavior and communication in diverse contexts.
- Ferraro (2006) provided practical insights into applying cultural understanding in global business, focusing on how cultural differences impact international interactions.
- Neuliep (2012) expanded on intercultural research by classifying cultural

traits and characteristics, enhancing the understanding of cultural diversity.

These contributions collectively inform the theoretical frameworks presented in Table 2, which presents a summary of key cultural theories and their applications.

Table 2. *Theoretical Approaches to Culture*

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Scholar(s)</i>	<i>Key Concepts</i>	<i>Application</i>
Cultural Dimensions Theory	Geert Hofstede	Identifies cultural differences in six dimensions (e.g., power distance, individualism)	Business, intercultural negotiation
High/Low Context Communication	Edward T. Hall	High-context: implicit messages; Low-context: explicit communication	Interpersonal and intercultural communication
Symbolic Interactionism	George H. Mead, Herbert Blumer	Culture is created through daily social interaction and use of symbols	Micro-level culture (e.g., identity construction)
Cultural Materialism	Marvin Harris	Material conditions (economy, environment) shape culture	Anthropology, social development
Interpretive/Meaning-Centered Theory	Clifford Geertz	Culture is a system of meanings; analyzed through symbols and	Ethnographic studies, thick description

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Scholar(s)</i>	<i>Key Concepts</i>	<i>Application</i>
		narratives	
Cultural Hegemony	Antonio Gramsci	Dominant cultures maintain power by shaping norms and values	Media, education, ideology studies
Encoding/Decoding Model	Stuart Hall	Media messages are encoded by creators and decoded differently by audiences	Cultural/media studies
Cultural Studies Theory	Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams	Focus on how power, ideology, and identity are shaped through cultural practices	Media, identity, race, and gender studies
Cultural Convergence Theory	Everett Rogers	Cultures become more similar with communication and globalization	Global communication, modernization
Diffusion of Innovations Theory	Everett Rogers	Cultural ideas and practices spread through social systems over time	Innovation adoption, cross-cultural change
Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)	Milton J. Bennett	Stages of intercultural sensitivity from	Intercultural training, education

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Scholar(s)</i>	<i>Key Concepts</i>	<i>Application</i>
		ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism	
Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence	Darla K. Deardorff	Components: attitudes, knowledge, skills → internal and external outcomes	Assessment of intercultural competence
Face-Negotiation Theory	Stella Ting-Toomey	Cultural differences in handling conflict and maintaining “face” (self-image)	Interpersonal and international conflict
Postcolonial Theory	Edward Said, Homi Bhabha	Examines how colonial history affects culture, identity, and representation	Literature, identity, intercultural dialogue

These theoretical frameworks collectively offer tools for analyzing how culture informs perception, communication, identity, and societal structures. For example, Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory enables cross-cultural comparisons in organizational behavior, while Hall’s High/Low Context Communication Theory sheds light on communication styles across different societies (Bhabha, 1994; (Deardorff, 2006; Hall, 1973; Rogers, 2003).

Geertz’s interpretive theory focuses on the symbolic nature of culture, advocating for a deep, contextual understanding through “thick description.” Meanwhile, Mead and Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes how culture is created and maintained through social interactions, with a particular focus on identity construction.

Harris's Cultural Materialism shifts attention to how material conditions, such as economic and environmental factors, shape cultural practices. Critical theories, such as Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony and Hall's Cultural Studies Theory, explore the role of power and ideology in sustaining dominant cultural narratives. The Postcolonial Theory of Said and Bhabha further addresses the impact of colonial histories on cultural identity and intercultural relations. In "Culture and Society" (Williams, 1958), he explored the historical development of the concept of culture, deeply influencing cultural studies. His work "Keywords" (Williams, 1976) further illuminated the changing meanings of fundamental cultural terms over time.

In applied contexts, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Milton Bennett and Darla K. Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence guide the development of intercultural competence, particularly in education and training. The Face-Negotiation Theory by Stella Ting-Toomey offers a framework for understanding conflict management in intercultural communication.

Scholars such as Lustig & Koester (2010), Ferraro (2006), and Neuliep (2012) bridge theory and practice, offering valuable insights for navigating cultural interactions in global business and intercultural research. These frameworks provide essential tools for scholars, educators, and practitioners in our increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

1.2. Communication and Its Role in Intercultural Learning

1.2.1. Defining Communication

This section explores the diverse forms and functions of communication, highlighting its significance in both cultural and intercultural contexts. Communication is not merely the exchange of words; it is a dynamic, multifaceted process that involves verbal and nonverbal signals, gestures, tone, symbols, cultural references, and contextual cues. Through communication, individuals express thoughts, share emotions, and build relationships within and across cultures.

In intercultural settings, communication becomes even more critical. Each culture possesses unique norms, values, and communication styles that, if misunderstood or ignored, can lead to conflict. For example, while one culture may value directness, another may perceive it as impolite. Successful intercultural communication requires openness, cultural awareness, and adaptability.

Effective intercultural communication fosters respect, empathy, and collaboration. It reduces stereotyping, supports mutual understanding, and bridges cultural divides. In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to communicate across cultures is essential for thriving in education, business, diplomacy, and everyday life.

Scholars have defined communication in various ways, shaped by their disciplinary and historical contexts. Below are key perspectives:

- Frank Dance (1970): “Communication is the process by which people seek to share meaning via the transmission of symbolic messages.” Dance identified 126 definitions and proposed the *Helical Model*, emphasizing communication as dynamic and evolving.
- Dean C. Barnlund (1970): “Communication is the process of creating, interpreting, and negotiating shared meaning.” Barnlund viewed communication as continuous, reciprocal, and interactive, stressing that meaning is co-constructed.
- Shannon & Weaver (1949): “Communication involves a sender, a message, a channel, a receiver, and noise that may affect the message delivery.” Their *Transmission Model* introduced foundational concepts but has been critiqued for its linearity and lack of contextual sensitivity.
- Robert T. Craig (1999): “Communication is a practical discipline... a necessity of social life.” Craig advocated for a multidisciplinary view, proposing the *constitutive metamodel* that integrates diverse theoretical traditions.
- Lustig & Koester (2010): “Communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people create shared meanings.”

Their work focuses on intercultural dimensions and stresses how culture shapes interpretation and meaning-making.

- Julia T. Wood (2004): “Communication is a systemic process in which individuals interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings.” Wood emphasizes the symbolic and interconnected nature of communication within cultural and relational systems.
- I. A. Richards (1920s): “Communication takes place when one mind affects another.” Richards focused on interpretation and the importance of context in meaning-making.
- John Fiske (1990): “Communication is social interaction through messages.” He highlighted how messages convey meaning within cultural systems and social structures.
- David K. Berlo (1960): “Communication is the process of transmitting ideas, information, and attitudes... through symbols.” Berlo introduced the *SMCR Model* (source, message, channel, receiver), analyzing how each component influences communication.
- Ronald B. Adler & George Rodman (2006): “Communication is the process of creating meaning through symbolic interaction.” They emphasized meaning-making through symbols in various personal and cultural contexts.

These definitions underscore that communication is not fixed or uniform. It is symbolic, interpretive, contextual, and inherently influenced by culture. Understanding its complexity is key to navigating intercultural interactions effectively.

1.2.2. Why Communication Matters in Intercultural Contexts

Understanding communication is vital in intercultural communication for several key reasons:

1. To avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations: In intercultural interactions, individuals often bring unique cultural assumptions, values, and communication styles. What may seem clear and direct in one culture can be

perceived as rude or confusing in another. Recognizing how language, tone, gestures, and nonverbal cues vary across cultures helps minimize misunderstandings, reduce conflict, and promote respectful dialogue.

2. To enhance cultural sensitivity and awareness: Cultural standards deeply influence communication. Understanding how communication functions across cultures helps individuals recognize differences in high-context vs. low-context communication, directness vs. indirectness, and emotional expressiveness. Sensitivity to these variations is essential for avoiding ethnocentrism and fostering empathy in intercultural interactions.
3. To build trust and relationships: Trust, the foundation of any relationship, is developed through respectful and consistent communication. Understanding communication allows individuals to navigate relational dynamics, including politeness, face-saving behaviors (Ting-Toomey), and preferred interaction styles, which strengthens personal and professional relationships.
4. To adapt messages for cultural appropriateness: Effective communication requires adapting messages to align with cultural norms, including adjusting tone, word choice, gestures, and timing. Being adaptable and culturally aware ensures clarity, respect, and mutual understanding in intercultural settings (Lustig & Koester, 2010).
5. To co-construct shared meaning: Communication is not just about transmitting information but about negotiating and co-creating meaning (Barnlund, 1970). Each person's cultural background influences the meaning of cross-cultural interactions, and a strong awareness of communication theory encourages individuals to seek clarification, challenge assumptions, and cooperate toward mutual understanding – essential for teamwork, cooperation, and conflict resolution.
6. To function effectively in a globalized world: As societies become more cosmopolitan and workplaces more globalized, the ability to navigate cultural boundaries has become a crucial skill. Effective communication is essential in international education, diplomacy, business, and virtual exchanges such as

COIL initiatives. Without an understanding of communication, individuals risk misalignment, alienation, and failure in cross-cultural projects.

Thus, understanding communication is not only an intellectual exercise but also a practical necessity for success in cross-cultural interactions. It enables individuals to move beyond surface-level exchanges, fostering meaningful relationships, mutual respect, and effective teamwork in an increasingly interconnected world. Such discussions often extend to the broader implications of intercultural communication in a globalized world, especially concerning social justice (Sorrells, 2015).

1.3. Intercultural Communication in Global Academic Collaboration

1.3.1. Defining Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of ideas, meanings, and values between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It encompasses verbal and nonverbal communication, contextual awareness, and the negotiation of meaning across cultures. Deardorff (2009) defines it as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”

Effective intercultural communication extends beyond overcoming language barriers. It requires sensitivity to implicit values, behavioral norms, and worldviews that influence how messages are interpreted. In an increasingly globalized and migratory world, this ability is essential across social, educational, and professional domains. These definitions align with comprehensive understandings of intercultural communication as a reader (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2013).

A psychological perspective reveals that cultural environment shape not only behavior but also cognitive and emotional development (Naik et al., 2023). While cross-cultural psychology examines how different cultures influence human behavior, cultural psychology focuses on how individuals internalize and transmit cultural values over time.

Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context (e.g., Japan, Arab countries) and low-context (e.g., Germany, USA) cultures illustrates how communication styles vary. High-context cultures rely heavily on implicit messages and nonverbal cues, while low-context cultures favor directness and explicit communication. Misunderstandings often arise when individuals interpret messages through their own cultural frameworks. Further insight into how cultural differences shape communication can be gained from comprehensive works on cross-cultural and intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2003).

Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) further illustrates that intercultural competence is not innate but developed. The model outlines a progression from ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization) to ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration). Core skills in this progression include empathy, tolerance, and active listening.

1.3.2. The Role of Intercultural Communication in Student International Collaboration

Student international collaboration connects teachers and students across borders to engage in shared academic work. In this context, intercultural communication is not just beneficial; it is essential for collaboration, learning, and student growth. As participants navigate linguistic, cultural, and educational differences, their ability to communicate clearly, respectfully, and flexibly becomes key to project success.

The most immediate function of intercultural communication in student international collaboration is to foster mutual understanding and cooperation. Students from diverse backgrounds must negotiate varying ideas, practices, and assumptions. Effective communication enables them to view these differences not as barriers but as resources that enrich the learning process. Skills such as active listening, meaning negotiation, and adaptation to differing interaction styles help build trust, manage conflict, and create a collaborative atmosphere, especially crucial in the early stages of team formation.

A core educational goal of student international projects is the development of global competency – the ability to engage constructively with cultural diversity and address shared global challenges. Intercultural communication underpins this competency. Through international collaborative learning, students move beyond studying cultural differences to experiencing them first-hand. By co-constructing meaning and reflecting on their own cultural assumptions, they develop empathy, reduce ethnocentrism, and become more open-minded communicators.

Furthermore, intercultural communication plays a practical role in achieving shared academic goals. Most student international projects involve joint assignments or co-authored outputs that demand close collaboration. To succeed, students must articulate ideas clearly, interpret feedback constructively, and navigate group decision-making across cultural lines. This ensures that all voices are heard, expectations are aligned, and the final outcomes reflect true collaboration. Teachers, too, rely on intercultural competence to set goals and evaluate work across diverse educational contexts.

However, student international collaboration is not without its challenges. It often involves time zone differences, language limitations, and unequal access to digital resources. Here again, intercultural communication is crucial. Students must learn to manage synchronous and asynchronous interactions, interpret unfamiliar communication styles, and remain patient through cultural or technical delays. Even when a shared language like English is used, variations in fluency, idiomatic use, tone, and expectations can lead to misunderstandings. Sensitivity, flexibility, and the willingness to clarify and interpret generously are essential for sustaining dialogue.

Beyond logistical and collaborative functions, intercultural communication enriches the overall learning experience. By engaging with peers from different cultures, students are exposed to new perspectives, prompting intellectual curiosity and deeper engagement. Viewing familiar topics through alternative cultural lenses fosters critical thinking and broadens academic horizons. Thus, intercultural communication acts as both a conduit for collaboration and a catalyst for personal and intellectual growth.

Thus, intercultural communication forms the foundation of student international projects. It supports effective teamwork, cultivates essential 21st-century skills, and transforms student learning. For student international projects to reach their full potential, institutions and educators must prioritize preparing students for intercultural engagement – through guidance, resources, and reflective practice. In doing so, they contribute not only to successful projects but also to the broader goal of developing globally competent, culturally aware graduates.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

Chapter 1 has provided the essential theoretical foundation for understanding the nature and role of intercultural communication in education. It began by defining culture as a dynamic, learned, and socially transmitted system that shapes values, behaviors, and social interactions. This laid the groundwork for exploring communication as a core human process for creating and sharing meaning, particularly in culturally diverse contexts.

The chapter then introduced intercultural communication as a symbolic, contextual, and evolving exchange between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Emphasis was placed on its significance in fostering mutual understanding, empathy, and collaboration in an increasingly globalized world. Key barriers to effective intercultural communication, such as language differences, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and misinterpretation, were critically examined.

In its final sections, the chapter surveyed a range of intercultural communication initiatives, from traditional in-person events to innovative digital collaborations. Special attention was given to projects that promote meaningful cross-cultural engagement, including virtual exchanges, narrative-based learning, and community-driven activities.

By outlining these theoretical perspectives and practical approaches, Chapter 1 establishes a solid conceptual framework for the chapters that follow, which will delve into real-world examples of intercultural communication through COIL projects.

CHAPTER 2. MODELS AND APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COLLABORATION

2.1. Forms and Benefits of Student International Projects

Student international projects are diverse initiatives designed to develop participants' ability to understand, interact, and cooperate across cultural and linguistic boundaries. These projects vary in format, context, and objectives, but all contribute to the development of intercultural competence. Four major types include:

- *Physical exchange and mobility programs:* Students (secondary and undergraduate) spend time abroad engaging in formal education, internships, cultural immersion, and everyday interactions. Programs such as Erasmus+ and international internships foster cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and metacognitive aspects of intercultural competence, especially among those with limited prior exposure. Key features include experiential and transformative learning (e.g., language acquisition, cultural intelligence development, resilience building), integration into local academic and social life, and assessment via tools like the Cultural Intelligence Scale and reflective narratives (Caruana, 2011).
- *Virtual exchange and telecollaboration:* Technology-mediated online projects connect participants across countries for structured interactions aimed at language learning, cultural exchange, and collaboration. For example, eTandem facilitates synchronous communication where language learners alternate between their native and target languages through tasks like information exchange and group projects. Enhanced intercultural communicative competence (ICC), including motivation, empathy, linguistic flexibility, and cultural awareness, is a core impact. Such initiatives often utilize internet-mediated approaches for foreign language education and intercultural learning (Belz & Thorne, 2006), (Baroni, Dooly, & O'Dowd,

2019), (Blake, 2013), (Dooly, 2008), (Guth & Helm, 2020), (Guth, Helm, & O’Dowd, 2012), (Lewis, O’Dowd, & Kern, 2019), (Lomicka & Lord, 2009).

- *Classroom and curriculum-based projects:* These projects take creative forms within educational and community settings to improve cross-cultural understanding. Intercultural language and communication courses are common, integrating experiential activities such as role-plays, debates, simulations, reflective journals, and critical analyses. Language education (EFL, French, etc.) often revolves around intercultural awareness. Storytelling and cross-border student collaborations offer additional meaningful strategies (Byram & Wagner, 2018), (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), (Räsänen, 2007).
- *Research, assessment, and policy-oriented projects:* Focused on developing, validating, and comparing instruments measuring intercultural competence and cultural intelligence, these projects also map progress via longitudinal and cross-sectional studies and analyze the impact of intercultural interventions. This research informs educational policies and program design.

Table 3 provides an overview of each project type, typical formats, contexts, and outcomes.

Table 3. Student Intercultural Project Types

<i>Project type</i>	<i>Main formats</i>	<i>Contexts</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Study abroad & mobility	Exchange/internship, immersion, reflection	Higher education	CQ and ICC gains, global careers, resilience
Telecollaboration / virtual exchange	eTandem, peer mentoring, digital storytelling	Education, mentoring	ICC, digital literacy, cultural awareness
Classroom / curriculum-based projects	Simulations, portfolios, story exchanges, role-play	School / university	Intercultural mindset, proactivity,

			creativity
Research and assessment projects	Development of scales, meta-analysis, reviews	Research, policy	Measurement tools, improved policy and understanding

By engaging students in real-life or virtual interactions, these initiatives enhance a range of essential skills, such as motivation, teamwork, and critical thinking. Outcomes often include increased intercultural sensitivity, self-confidence, and readiness for multicultural collaboration.

Mobility and mentoring programs expose students to different cultures, fostering language proficiency, adaptability, and resilience. These experiences promote personal growth, expand networks, and challenge stereotypes, resulting in higher cultural intelligence and improved communication skills.

Curriculum-based projects integrate language and culture, preparing individuals for global citizenship through experiential learning. Participants develop practical language use, empathy, and a comprehensive understanding of cultural nuances, leading to enhanced intercultural communication abilities.

Across all project types, participants typically experience improved adaptability, broadened perspectives, and greater preparedness for global engagement.

2.2. Understanding Collaborative Online International Learning

In today’s globalized world, education increasingly transcends physical and cultural borders. One of the most innovative responses to this shift is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) – an approach that connects students and professors across countries through digital technologies for cooperative learning experiences. Rather than relying on physical mobility, COIL fosters virtual mobility, making internationalization accessible from home. This means students can

experience international collaboration and cultural exchange simply by participating in COIL projects without traveling abroad. This commitment to 'internationalization at home' (Beelen & Jones, 2015) means students can experience international collaboration and cultural exchange simply by participating in COIL projects without traveling abroad.

COIL projects enable learners to collaborate on shared assignments across cultural and national lines, developing intercultural competence, digital literacy, and global awareness. According to the SUNY COIL Center, a pioneer in this approach, COIL aims to “develop students’ cross-cultural communication and collaboration skills by connecting university classes in different countries.”

Grounded in constructivist learning theories, which emphasize group knowledge creation, COIL aligns with 21st-century educational goals such as communication, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. Research shows that alongside disciplinary knowledge, COIL helps students appreciate multiple perspectives and adapt their communication strategies. Intercultural communication is especially critical, as students navigate diverse cultural norms, time zones, and language barriers. Scholars like Michael Byram and Darla K. Deardorff have long emphasized intercultural competence as essential in modern education, and COIL provides a practical environment for its development (Helm, 2020; Knight, 2004).

Beyond student outcomes, COIL supports broader institutional goals, especially in contexts where traditional student mobility is limited by financial, political, or health-related factors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions adopted COIL as an alternative pathway for international engagement. Researchers Guth and Helm highlight how virtual collaboration in COIL fosters mutual understanding and teamwork among diverse students, even in politically sensitive contexts (Guth & Helm, 2010). This demonstrates COIL’s dual potential for academic enrichment and fostering global citizenship and peace education.

In recent years, COIL has gained significant traction and become an integral part of many educational institutions (Rubin, 2017). COIL creates equitable, team-taught environments where faculty from different cultures co-develop syllabi

focused on experiential and collaborative learning. Institutions such as the Institute for Innovative Global Education (IIGE) at Kansai University have formalized COIL programs and documented best practices through databases of successful international partnerships. As a result, COIL is increasingly recognized not as a temporary response to crisis, but as a for integrating intercultural collaboration into higher education.

2.3. Institutional and Pedagogical Pathways for COIL Implementation

COIL has emerged as a transformative educational model for fostering intercultural competence and global collaboration. Institutions around the world have embraced COIL to internationalize their curricula, enhance teaching practices, and provide inclusive global experiences. Several case studies illustrate the varied institutional pathways and pedagogical adaptations that support the effective implementation of COIL.

At the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, COIL was first introduced in 2014 through a virtual partnership with a Finnish institution. Its initial success led to a broader, institution-wide rollout, supported by faculty training initiatives aimed at enhancing intercultural sensitivity and collaborative pedagogy. To strengthen international engagement, the university also launched hybrid summer institutes that combine online and in-person components, offering students a blended model of global learning.

Similarly, DePaul University in Chicago, USA, integrated COIL into its global engagement strategy between 2010 and 2012. By offering courses such as a graduate-level partnership with the University of Birmingham focused on creative writing and cross-cultural editing, DePaul demonstrated the value of COIL in advanced academic contexts. Institutional infrastructure, including instructional designers and faculty incentive programs, played a critical role in scaling COIL initiatives across departments.

In Asia, Kansai University in Osaka, Japan, has become a prominent example

of COIL integration within English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs. Since joining the SUNY Global Partner Network in 2014, the university has implemented around 30 COIL-enhanced courses. These programs are notable for mixing local and international students in collaborative projects, which has led to measurable improvements in students' intercultural competence and English language skills. The university supports this model through extensive consultations, facilitator guidance, and robust technical resources.

In the United States, the University of Washington-Bothell has leveraged COIL as an accessible alternative to traditional study abroad programs. Targeting a diverse student body, the university aligns COIL with institutional goals of entrepreneurship and inclusive education. Comprehensive faculty development ensures that COIL is effectively embedded across different curricular areas, further democratizing access to global learning.

Also in the United States, SUNY Ulster Community College in New York recognized the unique barriers community college students face when studying abroad. To address these challenges, the institution institutionalized COIL in departments such as business and art & design. Early faculty champions played a pivotal role in raising awareness and garnering departmental support. These efforts have contributed to increased student engagement, improved intercultural skills, and greater retention.

Beyond institutional initiatives, discipline-specific and project-based COIL implementations reveal the model's adaptability across diverse academic fields. A notable example is the Public Speaking COIL project connecting the American University of Ras Al Khaimah (UAE) and a U.S. university. Using asynchronous, group-based learning, students enhanced their verbal and digital communication skills while developing cross-cultural relationships. Despite logistical hurdles such as time zone differences and a condensed project timeline, the initiative successfully fostered intercultural awareness.

In the field of language teacher education, a COIL collaboration between pre-service teachers in Spain and the USA facilitated meaningful exchanges on

pedagogical challenges in multicultural classrooms. Through video reflections and joint problem-solving activities, participants deepened their intercultural competence and expressed increased interest in future international opportunities, underscoring COIL's potential in preparing globally minded educators.

Synthesizing insights from these diverse implementations, several key themes emerge:

- COIL fosters authentic intercultural exchange through collaboratively designed, team-taught modules across institutions.
- Institutional support, including faculty training, technical assistance, and policy alignment, is essential for ensuring the sustainability and expansion of COIL initiatives.
- COIL demonstrates curricular flexibility, finding application in both general education and discipline-specific courses, from business and public speaking to teacher training and creative writing.
- Outcomes consistently highlight enhancements in language proficiency, global competence, and intercultural sensitivity.

While challenges remain, such as time zone coordination, program duration, and resource inequality, these are increasingly addressed through asynchronous formats, adaptable course design, and cross-institutional collaboration. As these case studies illustrate, COIL represents a scalable, inclusive pathway for integrating global learning into higher education across diverse contexts.

2.4. Digital Tools and Platforms in COIL

Digital technologies serve as the core infrastructure for COIL, facilitating interaction, knowledge exchange, and project development across borders. These tools fall into two primary categories: synchronous and asynchronous.

Synchronous tools, such as video conferencing platforms, support real-time engagement. They allow students to participate in live discussions, group meetings, and collaborative brainstorming sessions. These tools often mirror in-person

classroom dynamics and can foster immediacy and rapport among participants. However, they also require stable internet connectivity and careful scheduling across time zones, which can present logistical challenges.

Asynchronous tools, including collaborative document editors, discussion forums, shared calendars, and video messaging applications, enable students to work at their own pace. These platforms provide opportunities for reflection, drafting, and editing over extended periods. Asynchronous modes of communication are especially important in COIL settings, where participants may come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and need more time to formulate thoughtful contributions.

The usability and accessibility of these digital tools significantly influence how participants engage with COIL projects. Differences in language options, interface design, institutional support, and technological familiarity may impact users' comfort and participation. Some platforms are widely used globally, while others are localized, potentially causing confusion or technical difficulties. Adaptation to unfamiliar technologies can be a source of cognitive load, particularly when instructions, navigation, or terminology are presented in a foreign language.

In addition, students' prior experiences with digital learning environments and their cultural attitudes toward technology affect how effectively they utilize these tools. For some, digital communication is second nature; for others, it may represent a new or less intuitive learning mode. These factors together shape the quality and inclusiveness of the virtual learning environment within a COIL project.

2.5. Pedagogical Practices in COIL

COIL pedagogies are structured to support student collaboration, intercultural engagement, and the co-construction of knowledge. While formats may vary, most projects combine task-based learning with intercultural reflection, fostering both academic and interpersonal development.

Team-based work is central to COIL pedagogy. Within student groups, roles

are frequently assigned or assumed to ensure task distribution and coordination. Common roles might include team leader, discussion facilitator, researcher, editor, or technical coordinator. These roles help clarify responsibilities, structure collaboration, and simulate real-world professional contexts. However, interpretations of these roles and the ways students carry them out can be shaped by cultural norms related to authority, initiative, and group hierarchy.

A characteristic feature of COIL projects is the creation of a shared output. These deliverables, whether academic reports, multimedia presentations, digital campaigns, or other artifacts, emerge from sustained intercultural collaboration. The process of negotiating ideas, formats, and content deepens students' understanding of both the subject matter and each other's cultural perspectives.

The pedagogy of COIL also engages with the dynamics of intercultural communication. Differences in linguistic proficiency, academic expectations, and communication preferences often influence how students interact. These variations can lead to challenges in clarity, participation, or mutual understanding, especially in group discussions and collaborative writing tasks. Conflict resolution approaches may also differ, affecting how teams manage disagreement or feedback.

The presence and role of educators or facilitators can shape the learning experience by guiding interaction, setting expectations, and supporting reflection. However, students themselves are often active agents in navigating and negotiating cultural diversity. Through these processes, COIL pedagogy emphasizes autonomy, empathy, and intercultural awareness, contributing to students' broader global competencies.

Conclusion to Chapter 2

This chapter has outlined the key models and approaches to international student collaboration, with particular emphasis on the COIL conceptual and practical dimensions. Beginning with an overview of the forms and benefits of international academic projects, the discussion highlighted how such initiatives not only expand

disciplinary knowledge but also cultivate intercultural sensitivity, global awareness, and collaborative competencies among students.

The chapter then examined COIL as a structured yet adaptable framework for facilitating transnational educational partnerships. By enabling co-developed learning experiences between institutions, COIL offers an inclusive platform for engaging diverse student populations in meaningful intercultural interaction – often beyond the reach of traditional mobility programs.

Further attention was given to the institutional and pedagogical factors that shape the success of COIL projects. Institutional commitment, faculty preparedness, and curricular integration were shown to be central to sustainable implementation. At the same time, digital infrastructure plays a critical role in shaping student engagement. The effectiveness of digital platforms depends not only on their technical functionality but also on their accessibility, cultural neutrality, and ease of use across linguistic contexts.

Finally, the chapter explored pedagogical practices that enhance collaborative learning and intercultural dialogue. The design of student roles, the nature of project outputs, and the facilitation of team dynamics all influence how students experience and navigate intercultural communication. These pedagogical choices intersect with broader cultural and technological considerations, demonstrating the complexity of orchestrating successful COIL experiences.

In sum, Chapter 2 has provided a comprehensive view of the strategic, institutional, and pedagogical elements involved in international student collaboration through COIL. Despite the growing interest, challenges in telecollaboration, particularly in European higher education, have been consistently identified (Helm, 2015). It sets the stage for the following chapter, which will present empirical case studies that illustrate how these frameworks and practices are realized in diverse educational contexts.

CHAPTER 3. CASE STUDIES IN PRACTICE: INSIGHTS FROM TWO COIL PROJECTS

3.1. Project 1: Overview and Context

Project 1, “Tackling Challenges through Interdisciplinary Solutions,” was a COIL project between Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine) and The Hague University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands). It brought together undergraduate students from the faculties of law and philology, encouraging them to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and idea exchange. Students were assigned to multicultural teams based on their academic interests, which fostered participation, peer learning, and individualized learning paths.

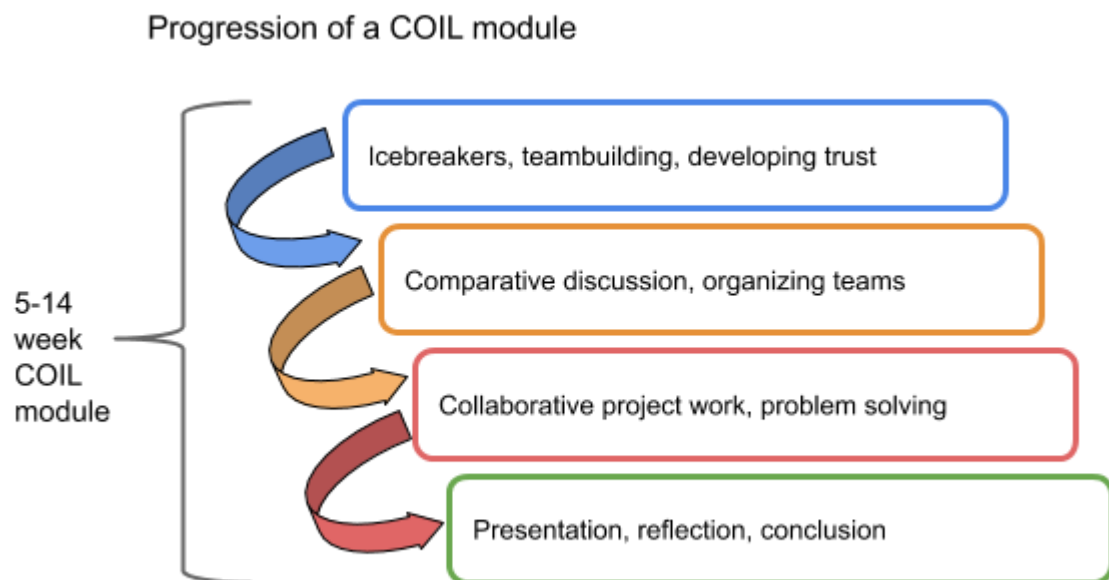
The primary aim of the project was to cultivate critical thinking, intercultural communication, and problem-solving skills through international collaboration on contemporary global challenges. It was designed to prompt students to view social issues from multiple disciplinary perspectives and to foster collaborative thinking and mutual respect. The participants were predominantly second- and third-year bachelor’s students, who were expected to engage in team-based research, project development, and the creation of digital deliverables.

The eight-week project ran from September 23 to November 17, 2024, and was conducted entirely online. Students collaborated in small groups of 6–7 using a suite of digital tools. Telegram served as the primary platform for informal and spontaneous communication, while Zoom was used for synchronous meetings and Microsoft Teams for formal coordination and final presentations. Additional platforms such as Google Docs and email were employed for document sharing and collaborative writing. The project culminated in group video presentations, each showcasing the team’s proposed solutions to the selected issues.

3.1.1. Project Design and Implementation

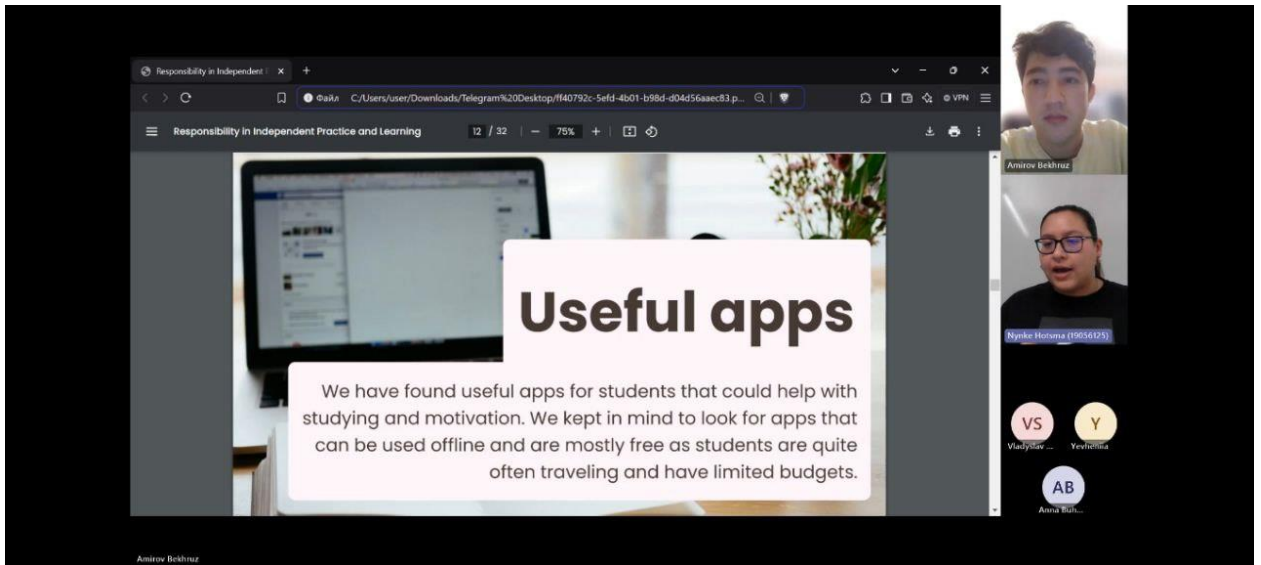
The project followed the SUNY COIL four-phase model, which includes icebreaking, team formation, collaborative research, and final reflection (Figure 1). This structure encouraged both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, reflective learning, and gradual intercultural engagement. The model aligned well with the project goals, providing a scaffolded experience that was academically rewarding and interculturally enriching.

Figure 1. *SUNY COIL Center's Four-Phase Model*



Students worked in small international teams and managed their own schedules. Telegram group chats served as the main communication hub, creating a relaxed, student-driven environment. While no fixed meeting schedule was imposed, teams occasionally held video calls via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, especially during the preparation of final presentations (Figure 2). This flexibility allowed participants to balance their academic and personal responsibilities.

Figure 2. *Final Microsoft Teams Meeting for Group Presentation*



Each team drafted a team charter early in the project, outlining roles, responsibilities, expectations, and preferred modes of communication. In my group, I acted as the project manager and primary communicator, supporting task coordination and group morale. Other members assumed roles such as content creators, researchers, and editors (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Team Charter: Roles, Duties, and Communication*

Belgium–Ukraine COIL Project 2024		
<i>Team Charter Template</i>		
CHARTER FOR TEAM # 3		
The Challenge you have chosen: Responsibility in independent practice and learning		
Purpose (What is the purpose of being a team?): To empower students to take ownership of their learning by fostering a sense of responsibility. This encourages effective time management.	Goals (What are measurable and specific goals that support and link to the purpose?): To develop self-directed learners who can identify their strengths and weaknesses, seek resources independently, and reflect on their progress. This responsibility makes students navigate their studies successfully.	
Team Member Roles and Responsibilities		
Name & email	Role	Task
Angeline Gaarie angelinegaarie@gmail.com	Editor/Quality Control	-Check that all elements of the project align with the assignment's criteria and quality standards. -Reviewing the work for grammar, consistency and accuracy.
Bekhruz Amirov	Project Manager /	-Manage the timeline.

Although instructors from both universities were present throughout the project, they acted primarily as observers and provided general guidance, stepping in only when necessary. This non-intrusive facilitation model empowered students to take ownership of their learning and collaboration.

The project phases were divided as follows:

- Weeks 1–2: Icebreakers and team building
- Weeks 3–6: Topic selection, research, and content development
- Weeks 7–8: Video production and final presentations

Teams coordinated using informal check-ins, audio messages, and shared digital documents. Challenges such as time zone differences and varying levels of engagement did arise but were generally overcome through team flexibility and strong motivation.

Overall, the project fostered a culturally sensitive and inclusive learning environment. The combination of student-led decision-making, defined roles, and strategic use of digital tools contributed to a collaborative atmosphere that balanced structure with autonomy. Informal digital platforms, especially Telegram, proved essential in cultivating cross-cultural trust and fluid communication.

3.1.2. Intercultural Communication in Practice

Intercultural communication developed organically through informal, student-led interactions. English served as the common working language, and while all participants were proficient, cultural backgrounds influenced communication styles. Initially, conversations were formal and task-oriented, but as relationships deepened, communication became increasingly relaxed, humorous, and personal.

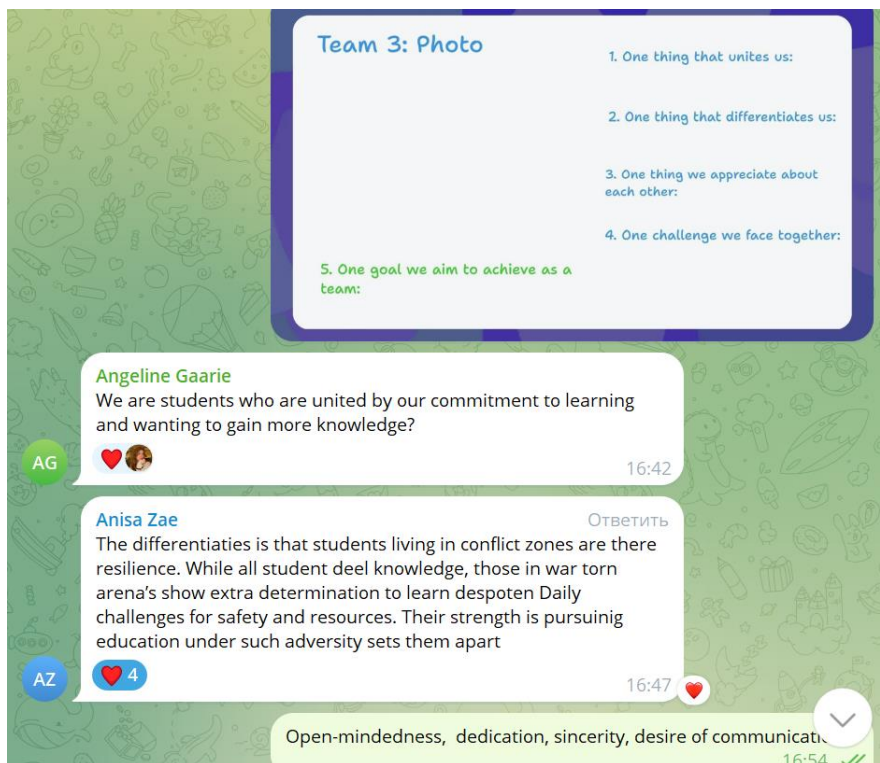
Icebreaker activities were essential in fostering trust and openness (Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Group Poster from Icebreaker Activity*



One key moment involved a misunderstanding related to humor, which highlighted subtle cultural differences in expression. Although the incident was brief, it emphasized the importance of tone awareness and respectful clarification in cross-cultural settings. The team navigated this moment constructively, using it as a learning opportunity to deepen mutual understanding (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Telegram Chat Used to Design the Group Poster*



Throughout the project, students demonstrated high levels of adaptability. Communication practices such as turn-taking, feedback delivery, and expressions of disagreement were managed with cultural sensitivity. Telegram supported this through frequent, responsive, and humanized interactions. The platform's informal nature helped to foster empathy, shared responsibility, and genuine interest in one another's perspectives.

From my perspective, the collaboration was smooth and free of major conflicts. Group members were consistently open to diverse viewpoints and remained respectful of cultural boundaries. The project successfully enhanced students' sensitivity to tone, word choice, and group dynamics, ultimately cultivating deeper intercultural awareness.

3.1.3. Learning Outcomes and Reflections

The project significantly strengthened students' soft skills in time management, digital communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. More importantly, it provided a practical context for the development of intercultural competence, as students engaged in sustained, meaningful interaction with peers from different cultural and academic backgrounds.

Academically, the project required students to engage in critical thinking, plan complex tasks, and communicate ideas clearly. The interdisciplinary setup – blending law and philology – challenged participants to integrate varied academic perspectives in defining problems and proposing solutions.

Culturally, students became more attuned to group dynamics, communication styles, and social norms. Informal conversations via Telegram promoted respectful negotiation of cultural boundaries and nurtured cross-cultural friendships. For many, this was their first sustained academic collaboration with international peers, which made the experience profoundly transformative.

Self-assessment surveys conducted post-project asked students to reflect on their satisfaction, skill development, emotional experience, and interest in future COIL initiatives. Although there was no formal grading rubric for intercultural

growth, the surveys revealed widespread appreciation for the international collaboration opportunity.

A standout contribution came from Nynke, a teammate who independently designed and conducted a student survey to explore challenges and attitudes toward self-directed learning. Her initiative added a research dimension to our final presentation and enriched our findings with first-hand insights. This effort demonstrated advanced research skills, initiative, and a keen understanding of student agency in interdisciplinary projects (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Student-Created Survey Summary from Final Presentation*



digital storytelling. Teams were formed based on student interests and project topics, promoting ownership and diversity in outcomes.

The project aimed to foster intercultural awareness through the co-creation of digital narratives highlighting cultural heritage from both countries. Students engaged in cross-cultural research, storytelling, and peer learning with a focus on teamwork and mutual respect. It targeted bachelor-level students and emphasized international education, soft skills, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

3.2.1. Project Design and Implementation

Centered on the cultural and natural heritage of Ukraine and Belgium, the project promoted intercultural understanding through collaborative storytelling. Teams of six—three students from each country—were formed based on shared interests in themes such as architecture, music, food, festivals, or sports. My team chose popular sports, with each member researching and presenting a culturally significant sport from their own country. Roles such as project manager, communication assistant, researcher, content creator, and editor were assigned early on; I served as project manager, coordinating progress and deadlines (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Meeting Minutes: Team Roles & Action Steps*

Belgium–Ukraine COIL Project 2024

Meeting Minutes Template

MEETING MINUTES # 11

Team # **11**

Meeting purpose: **Discussion in regarding to the video**

Date: **_31 October 2024** Start time: **10AM (Brussels)/ 11 AM (Kyiv)** End time: **11AM (Brussels)/ 12AM (Kyiv)**

Meeting attendees (list by name):
Valeria Rusnak, Behruz Amirov, Alexandra Camilo Figueredo, Alexander Willems

Absent (list by name and indicate if the participants notified the team about their absence ahead of time):
Arina Yakivets, Yasynskiy Daniil

Agenda item #1: Taken from Agenda
Information for the video.

Agenda item #2: Taken from Agenda
Idea's how to improve.

Agenda item #3: Taken from Agenda
Ideas for the introduction of certain players and how we are going to create our video.

The project used a blended model: asynchronous collaboration via WhatsApp and four Zoom sessions for major milestones – introductions, topic selection, planning, and final reflection. Despite requiring high levels of self-discipline, this format offered flexibility.

Coordination and planning were primarily student-led. Tasks and deliverables were agreed upon collaboratively. Individual contributions to the final product – a 10-minute digital video – were submitted and compiled collectively. Although we did not use shared editing platforms in real time, content was exchanged and reviewed efficiently (Figure 8).

Figure 8. *Task Distribution Table of Sports Topics*

Action Items	Responsibility	End product	Due Date
1. Alexander Willems examines Belgian and Ukrainian football, including the common passion, club-level competitions, player transfers and coaching influence	2. Alexander Willems – researcher of Belgian and Ukrainian football 3. Valeria Rusnak – researcher of Ukrainian tennis 4. Alexandra Camilo Figueredo – researcher of Belgian Tennis 5. <u>Behruz Amirov</u> – researcher of Ukrainian and Belgian Athletics 6. <u>Arina Yakivets</u> – researcher of Ukrainian and Belgian Athletics	Final video.	Next meeting – 7 th of November 2024

Minor challenges such as uneven participation and scheduling conflicts arose, but overall, the team remained respectful and organized. The design encouraged creativity, independence, and intercultural learning.

3.2.2. Intercultural Communication in Practice

English served as the working language. Despite some variation in fluency, communication remained inclusive and effective. Initial exchanges were formal and task-oriented, but became more relaxed as familiarity grew.

WhatsApp was our primary tool for coordination, updates, and informal dialogue. Early messages focused on logistics, but gradually evolved to include personal insights and cultural reflections, enhancing rapport. While Zoom sessions were limited, they were instrumental for direct discussion and clarification.

Although one member's limited involvement affected group dynamics, the team maintained a positive and fair approach. We introduced ourselves creatively through a digital poster highlighting personal identities and cultural values. My contribution, *Bekhruz Beats the Borders*, reflected a commitment to bridging cultural divides (Figure 9).

Figure 9. *Team Poster with Creative Self-Introductions*



While occasional differences in pace and tone were observed, no major misunderstandings occurred. The project reinforced the importance of adaptability, clarity, and emotional intelligence in sustaining cross-cultural collaboration.

3.2.3. Learning Outcomes and Reflections

The project fostered both academic and intercultural growth. Students gained experience in research, digital storytelling, and asynchronous collaboration, while enhancing awareness of cultural identity and heritage.

Academically, participants learned to curate and present digital content for an international audience, using skills in narrative design, content selection, and visual communication. The experience strengthened their ability to meet deadlines, work independently, and collaborate across cultures and time zones.

Intercultural learning emerged through shared tasks and reflection. Students developed awareness of communication styles, role expectations, and subtle cultural differences in tone and timing. Despite challenges such as unequal participation, the group responded with empathy and adaptability, underscoring the value of respectful collaboration.

A post-project survey invited reflection on skills gained in teamwork, digital communication, and cultural exchange. While some students wished for more structured guidance and informal bonding opportunities, most appreciated the international collaboration and creative autonomy. Compared to the previous project, this experience felt more academically formal but somewhat less cohesive in terms of team bonding.

Overall, the project encouraged both individual and collective development. Students left with a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and greater confidence in navigating international teamwork.

3.3. Comparative Insights

A comparison of the two COIL projects – “Tackling Challenges through Interdisciplinary Solutions” and “Discovering Shared Heritage Narratives” – reveals both shared strengths and marked differences in structure, communication, and impact. While each project successfully fostered intercultural collaboration and

digital teamwork, they differed in design, student engagement, and group dynamics.

Table 4 summarizes the key distinctions and commonalities:

Table 4. *Comparative Overview of Two COIL Projects: Key Features and Outcomes*

Aspect	<i>Project 1: Tackling Challenges</i>	<i>Project 2: Shared Heritage Narratives</i>
Duration	8 weeks	10 weeks
Partner	TSNUK (Ukraine) + THUAS (Netherlands)	TSNUK (Ukraine) + EhB (Belgium)
Main theme	Solving challenges (law & philology)	Cultural heritage (sports, arts, celebrities, etc.)
Team	6–7 students per group	6 students per group (3 from each country)
Communication style	Informal, flexible, spontaneous	More formal initially, later semi-relaxed
Main communication tools	Telegram, Zoom, Microsoft Teams	WhatsApp, Zoom
Instructor involvement	Minimal, supportive	Minimal, largely limited to task monitoring
Student motivation	High and consistent across the group	Uneven; one participant minimally involved
Final product	Group video with solutions to chosen challenges	Digital heritage video combining national elements
Level of team cohesion	Strong bonding and natural group dynamic	Functional but slightly fragmented
Learning reflections	Focused on communication, teamwork, and flexibility	Focused on intercultural understanding and structure

These findings point to several core insights. Communication tools and tone played a critical role in shaping group cohesion. In Project 1, informal platforms like Telegram facilitated quick, humorous, and open dialogue, which helped to foster trust and strengthen bonds. By contrast, the more formal start of Project 2 limited early rapport, possibly contributing to lower engagement from one team member and a more task-oriented atmosphere.

Student motivation across both projects was influenced less by instructor presence and more by the perceived relevance of the topic. In both cases, minimal instructor involvement encouraged independence. However, when the theme resonated with personal interests, students displayed greater enthusiasm and creativity, suggesting that content alignment is key to fostering intrinsic motivation.

Intercultural adaptability was another prominent takeaway. Students in both projects demonstrated sensitivity and flexibility when working across cultures. Still, Project 1 provided more visible examples of natural cross-cultural dialogue, while Project 2, framed by clearer structural expectations, shaped more regulated patterns of communication. This contrast highlights how project design can influence not only outcomes but the quality of interaction itself.

Technological and pedagogical dimensions also shaped the learning experience. Despite the user-friendliness of platforms like Zoom or WhatsApp, both projects depended heavily on student initiative. In Project 2, the integration of the Canvas platform proved problematic due to language barriers and navigation challenges. As a non-Dutch speaker unfamiliar with Canvas, I relied on teammates for direct links to updates. This revealed the need for preparatory technical orientation and accessible, multilingual tools in global collaborations.

Beyond structural analysis, participating in both projects provided me with a unique vantage point to reflect on my own growth. Being both a participant and a silent observer allowed me to trace shifts in my intercultural, digital, and interpersonal competencies. One of the most striking changes was the development of my cultural sensitivity. I became more attuned to subtle differences in tone and communication style, more open to diverse viewpoints, and more confident in

adapting my own behavior to fit the context. Collaborating with Belgian peers, for instance, prompted me to be more direct and proactive in order to maintain effective dialogue.

The digital dimension of the experience, particularly in navigating Canvas, tested my patience and resilience. The lack of language-switching options and unclear icons made the platform feel alienating. Yet, this frustration became a powerful insight: digital tools should simplify – not complicate – cross-cultural exchange. Future COIL designs would benefit greatly from tutorials and multilingual support systems that ensure equitable access from the start.

My approach to teamwork also evolved significantly. Taking on project management roles in both collaborations pushed me beyond my usual passive role. I learned to coordinate tasks, address group tension, and motivate peers, often relying on empathy rather than authority. Communication proved to be the key driver of success, from assigning responsibilities to maintaining morale. These experiences helped me build leadership skills and taught me the value of flexibility, clarity, and follow-through.

Academically, I gained a deeper understanding of cultural themes that initially seemed light, such as sports or fashion, but later revealed rich social and historical significance. I honed my research, citation, and presentation skills, and grew more confident in public speaking, especially during final presentations. In parallel, my English fluency and academic vocabulary improved naturally through active use.

Perhaps most importantly, I grew as a person. I became more self-aware, more communicative, and more adaptable. If I were to rate this personal transformation, I would say I progressed from a version “100” of myself to “150” – a more capable, engaged, and resilient version. This growth, I believe, is as meaningful as any academic achievement.

Observing participant behavior also yielded useful insights. While many students were enthusiastic about making international friends or practicing English, fewer were fully invested in the project's deeper intellectual goals. This mismatch between project vision and individual motivation highlighted a common challenge

in virtual exchange: sustaining deep engagement. Moreover, I noticed that irregular participation, especially in Project 2, dampened group morale. Where informal bonding opportunities were present, as in Project 1, student motivation and cooperation were noticeably stronger.

Would I participate in COIL again? Absolutely, but only if the theme aligned with my current passions. Authentic engagement stems from relevance. Drawing on everything I have learned, I would even be open to managing a future COIL initiative, committed not only to my own growth but to cultivating a space where others can experience the same discovery and development I did.

3.4. Implications for COIL Practice

Participation in and observation of two distinct COIL projects offer valuable lessons for improving virtual intercultural learning. Both demonstrated COIL's potential to foster meaningful student connections, but some design choices, facilitation methods, and institutional practices were particularly influential.

A key factor in success was the adaptability of communication tools. Informal platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp encouraged more natural, personal exchanges that built trust. Incorporating such tools alongside official learning systems can deepen emotional connection and teamwork.

Clear role definition also proved essential. Teams that assigned roles early, such as project manager, editor, or communicator, worked more effectively and responsibly. Involving students in setting team plans and dividing tasks fosters ownership and smoother collaboration.

Finally, allowing students to choose topics that resonate with them, whether academic challenges or cultural themes, increased motivation and engagement. Projects offering such choice tend to secure more genuine and sustained participation.

The projects highlighted the importance of supporting both digital literacy and intercultural competence. Challenges with unfamiliar platforms like Canvas

underscored the need for tutorials or orientations before projects begin. Likewise, teaching basic intercultural communication skills, such as interpreting tone and managing expectations, can help participants navigate differences more smoothly from the outset.

While instructor presence was minimal to promote student autonomy, accessible teacher support remained critical for answering questions and resolving issues. The optimal facilitation balance appears to be one of guided independence paired with ready assistance.

Peer feedback mechanisms worked well in both projects to encourage reflection on learning processes and content understanding.

Introducing informal social interactions such as virtual coffee breaks or cultural sharing sessions could enhance bonding and investment, especially in more formal projects similar to Project 2.

To better track intercultural growth, structured assessment tools such as rubrics or standardized review forms could complement or replace self-evaluation.

Future research should explore how COIL participation influences students' long-term interests in global education, career choices, and attitudes toward diversity. Further investigation into team dynamics, motivational factors, and equitable involvement will help optimize virtual intercultural collaboration.

Conclusion to Chapter 3

This chapter examined two COIL projects – “Tackling Challenges through Interdisciplinary Solutions” and “Discovering Shared Heritage Narratives” – through a practical and comparative lens. It explored how students from diverse cultural, academic, and national backgrounds engaged in meaningful online collaboration.

Both projects demonstrated their potential to support intellectual growth and the development of intercultural competence. The first project was notable for its

informal, student-led communication and strong sense of team cohesion. In contrast, the second project offered a more structured experience that emphasized analytical thinking and research-based inquiry. Regardless of the differences in tone and structure, both initiatives enabled students to strengthen communication skills, navigate cultural differences, and collaborate effectively across borders.

The chapter also identified essential elements that contribute to the success of COIL projects. These include the value of flexibility, the encouragement of student autonomy, the integration of informal communication tools, and the importance of intentional and responsive project design. The case studies revealed how students were challenged by unfamiliar digital platforms but also experienced moments of connection and insight that advanced their learning.

In conclusion, these projects illustrate the increasing significance of COIL in higher education. They show that virtual intercultural collaboration, when approached with empathy, openness, and thoughtful planning, can offer profound educational experiences. Such initiatives not only deepen students' engagement with academic content but also enrich their understanding of themselves, of others, and of the interconnected world they inhabit.

CONCLUSION

COIL projects represent a significant development in international education by integrating global learning directly into students' regular academic experiences. In these virtual and cross-cultural collaborations, intercultural communication is not an additional component but the central force that shapes the quality and depth of the entire experience. It enables students from diverse linguistic, academic, and cultural backgrounds to connect, collaborate, and co-create meaningfully, regardless of physical distance. As this research has demonstrated, the fundamental aims of COIL – promoting mutual understanding, developing global competence, and enhancing collaborative learning – depend, above all, on effective communication.

The analysis of two COIL projects titled “Tackling Challenges through Interdisciplinary Solutions” and “Discovering Shared Heritage Narratives” identified several elements that strongly influence the quality of intercultural interaction. The level of student engagement and smoothness of communication were directly affected by the accessibility and familiarity of the digital tools used. Platforms that lacked user-friendliness and language accessibility, such as Canvas, often hindered interaction, whereas more familiar applications like Telegram encouraged dynamic and inclusive communication. This observation underscores the need for thoughtful onboarding and the use of tools aligned with students' language abilities and prior digital experience.

The composition of student teams and the assignment of specific roles also contributed to successful outcomes when implemented flexibly and collaboratively. When students clearly understood their roles and felt ownership, whether as coordinators, editors, or researchers, they demonstrated higher levels of motivation and involvement. At the same time, project organization should remain adaptable to ensure that role assignments do not reinforce cultural assumptions or overlook individual strengths.

The design and content of project tasks were equally important in sustaining engagement. Creative, product-oriented assignments such as digital storytelling or

student-authored guidebooks gave students a stronger sense of purpose and connection to the task. In contrast, research-heavy or presentation-based projects, although academically valuable, tended to lack emotional resonance unless their outcomes were clearly relevant or impactful. Project 1, for instance, demonstrated that student-generated initiatives with personal significance could lead to more meaningful and satisfying learning experiences when sufficient time and flexibility were provided.

Language proficiency emerged as both a challenge and an opportunity. Although English was the designated working language in both projects, varying degrees of fluency occasionally affected participation and group cohesion. Nonetheless, communication difficulties were often mitigated by empathy, attentive listening, and an inclusive atmosphere. The ability to adapt communication styles and engage respectfully across linguistic differences proved just as critical as fluency itself.

The role of instructors and institutional support also played a key part in shaping the experience. Teachers who provided timely feedback, maintained open communication, and positioned themselves as facilitators rather than mere evaluators helped foster a more responsive and student-centered learning environment. Informal communication spaces, such as group chats that included supervisors, contributed to greater cohesion and dialogue. Additionally, allowing students to express preferences in choosing topics, communication tools, and project formats led to greater ownership and engagement.

Despite the strengths of COIL, several persistent challenges remained. These included uneven levels of participation, coordination across time zones, and differing degrees of motivation. While some students were highly engaged and eager to learn, others participated primarily for grades or social reasons. Such disparities sometimes affected team morale and fairness in workload distribution. The contrast between the informal, flexible structure of the first project and the more rigid, task-focused format of the second highlighted the importance of balancing structured guidance with opportunities for interpersonal connection. In digital environments

where nonverbal cues are limited, consistent communication, informal bonding, and frequent check-ins proved vital for maintaining momentum and collaborative spirit.

Taken together, the findings support the view that COIL projects can offer transformative learning experiences when guided by inclusive design, flexible management, and sustained intercultural communication. Students gain more than academic knowledge. They develop vital competencies in adaptability, intercultural awareness, teamwork, and self-confidence – skills essential for navigating today’s globalized professional environments. These results emphasize the need for continuous investment in COIL programs, including support for faculty training, appropriate digital infrastructure, and the design of learner-centered curricula.

In a world where intercultural interactions are becoming increasingly frequent and complex, COIL presents a powerful approach to preparing students for global citizenship. When educators treat communication as both a goal and a process, these virtual projects do more than connect classrooms. They build bridges of understanding and collaboration that reach far beyond the immediate scope of the academic term.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COIL – Collaborative Online International Learning

ICC – Intercultural Communicative Competence

CQ – Cultural Intelligence

SUNY – State University of New York

IIGE – Institute for Innovative Global Education

SMCR – Source-Message-Channel-Receiver (Model)

EhB – Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

DMIS – Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

IIGE – Institute for Innovative Global Education

AUU – Alliance of Ukrainian Universities

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