
Implementation of COIL Programmes for English Courses in Tertiary Education: An Instructor's Perspective for Participation

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Abstract

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an increasingly popular format of *virtual exchange* which connects two or more academic classes from separate cultures and nationalities through online collaboration. The experiences of one instructor based at a four-year private university in Nagoya are chronicled here showing the motivations, procedures, results and reflections of participation in two COIL programmes implemented in the same academic term for two different English courses each with their own distinctive goals. Projects were undertaken in partnership with a public university in New York and included introductory emails and activities, essay exchanges, joint presentations, completion of logs registering interactions and submission of reflection essays. Although implementation of COIL into syllabi was achieved without undue complication, several improvements are recommended for instructors or facilitators who are considering undertaking such programmes in the future.

1. Introduction

Virtual exchange is an innovative pedagogical model for engaging groups of learners from different cultural and geographical contexts in educational programmes through extended periods of online interaction and collaboration under the guidance of instructors and/or support organisations. O'Dowd (2018) highlights several formats of this umbrella term with Collaborative

Online International Learning (COIL) being one of the largest. The origins of *virtual exchange* programmes lie in the proliferation of the internet in the mid-1990s as individuals began to reach out across borders and without the limitation of distance to share ideas and information with people in common fields and with similar interests (Rubin, 2016). What started as an exchange of emails between interested individuals has, however, expanded into a multitude of organisations and international groups using increasingly diverse digital methods for recruiting members and delivering interactive communication. Various pioneering formats of *virtual exchange* include 'Global network learning', 'virtual mobility', and 'telecollaboration' with the COIL adaptation appearing in 2006 (Rubin, 2016). Its growing popularity has been attributed to the avoidance of any significant financial burdens for either institutions or individual participants, and relative ease it can be adapted to different contexts (Nava-Aguirre et al., 2019). Indeed, formats are modifiable and methodology numerous with length of collaboration possible from several weeks to multiple semesters, goals and assignments adaptable depending on course structures, and location unrestricted with students being able to participate from home, school or even as a component of travel abroad schemes with online projects included as a precursor to the overseas programme (Nishio et al., 2020). Setting it apart from other virtual exchange formats, COIL is also defined by its emphasis on examining how learners from differing cultures and nationalities interpret the subject content of projects when participants collaborate to achieve similar or joint goals, which are often part of a shared syllabus (O'Dowd, 2018).

The introduction of COIL in Japan, began at Kansai University in 2014, where initial programmes were followed by domestic and international symposia and workshops to disseminate further the potential for this innovative pedagogical tool (Rubin, 2016). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) later became involved with programmes conforming to its policies purported in Support for Educational Reform in 2018, choosing ten universities in Japan to implement COIL initiatives supported by public funding. The JPN-COIL Association was created, and regulations were published in the same year outlining objectives and purposes of the programme, which were amended and finalised in

December 2020 (Kansai University, 2020). Only one university in the Chubu region, a four-year private university based in Nagoya, was selected for COIL funding, from which the projects undertaken in the present study are based.

In academic discourse, the benefits of COIL programmes have been examined through various lenses from implementations by institutions to perceptions by students. Rubin (2016), describing methods of application, objectives and positive outcomes at various universities around the world, highlights both the inexpensive nature of COIL and opportunities to develop international partnerships. Similarly, Nava-Aguirre et al. (2019) identify several notable advantages for academic institutions including the provision of a low-cost international communication alternative for students unable to participate in study abroad programmes, and increased awareness of diverse teaching methodology in educational institutions around the world which in turn may be applied in domestic courses or administrative structures. From student perspectives, benefits of COIL have reportedly included improved motivation for study in various fields, greater intercultural sensitivity and enhanced competency in using digital communication devices (Ceo-DiFrancesco & Bender-Slack, 2016; McKinnon et al., 2015; Nava-Aguirre et al., 2019; Nishio et al., 2020).

2. Aims

Although previous studies have outlined the implementation of COIL programmes into course syllabi, the aim of the present study is to chronicle holistically the processes and practicalities of initiating and applying projects in two different university courses each with their own distinctive goals and with students from different academic departments. Only the perspective of the instructor initiating the project – the author - from the host university is considered here and perceptions from students are not recorded. To this end, the section following will consider the instructor's motivations, goals and desired outcomes prior to initiation, with section four identifying the procedures for commencing contact with a partner instructor, the methods for enabling contact between students, practices for providing continued support, and methods of evaluation for given assignments. Section five will summarise

students' interactions with their international partners and their engagement with the various tasks and activities of the projects. The final section will examine the successes of the programme and reflections on how improvements could be made in future to enhance the COIL experience of both instructors and students.

3. Motivations for participation in COIL and desired outcomes

My decision to participate in COIL was made in June 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic, when international travel was curtailed and lessons at the host university alternated intermittently between online and face-to-face formats, severely restricting opportunities for students to physically meet and interact. The host institution had already publicised COIL through several internal formats, which promoted the support given to instructors and comparative ease with which programmes could be initiated. It was hoped that COIL would not only provide an engaging activity helping to alleviate the predicaments and stresses of the time but enable students to explore and realise the increasing range and diversity of digital devices for domestic and international communication.

A further motivation for wishing to undertake a COIL programme was the opportunity to bring meaning to English for first-year students that, until that time, was likely considered an abstract topic without particular practical use, applied either to pass examinations or study as part of a school curriculum. COIL offered these students the opportunity to justify their considerable time, energy and most likely financial investments in learning English and it was hoped see the language not as a set of lexical and grammatical strata, where application allowed only the binary results of correct or incorrect, but as a tool of real communication for undertaking and completing tasks as members of an international team. Results identified in Ceo-DiFrancesco & Bender-Slack (2016), and Nishio et al. (2020), have shown significant gains in motivation for second language learning after participation in COIL; the collaborative nature of projects with students overseas being the greatest contributor of these increases.

By including COIL within course syllabi, it was also anticipated that

improved intercultural competence and greater awareness of aspects of Japanese culture could be achieved by its participants. Passarelli & Kolb (2012) observed in their research on study abroad programmes, how through collaboration with different cultures students' perceptions of the world around them were challenged in turn promoting a greater understanding of their own and other cultures and provided learners with both greater overall knowledge and greater decision-making tools for determining how they could relate to the world. COIL programmes specifically seek to foster these elements of intercultural sensitivity and broader cultural knowledge (The SUNY Center for Collaborative Online International Learning, 2019) and studies by Liu & Shirley (2021) and Nava-Aguirre et al. (2019) have identified COIL projects as adequate alternatives to study abroad programmes for achieving the outcomes outlined in Passarelli & Kolb (2012). Research by Belarga (2018) similarly indicates greater understanding of *own culture* specifically by Japanese students through COIL, reporting not only increased knowledge of Japanese culture and society but increased awareness of how seemingly familiar contexts can be perceived somewhat differently through lenses outside the domestic context.

A further incentive for participation in COIL was the opportunity to relate the philosophy of the host institution, which places great emphasis on global human dignity by embracing diversity, and contribution to international education through individual courses (Nanzan University, 2022). For students and instructors alike, the ideologies of institutions can often be lost when dealing with the day-to-day practicalities of course content. Through COIL it was anticipated that students would not only be able to develop personally but contribute and share their knowledge and philosophies in respective fields, and in doing so be aware of their contributions to the goals of the institution.

4. Procedures

4.1 Initial contact and determining appropriate class matching

In June 2021, I selected one non-elective course for first-year English majors, which I deemed appropriate for the requirements of a COIL project, to commence in mid-September 2021 and finish in early November of the same

year (8 weeks). My decision was based on language ability of the class (approximate to B1–B2 of CEFR), the reported absence of interaction by students in English with non-Japanese, the understanding that students were likely to undertake a study-abroad programme within the following two years, and the reported lack of critical consideration of difficulties faced by L2 Japanese language learners. After contacting the COIL office at the host institution, I received contact details of a potential partner at a public university in New York, USA. I sent an email to this instructor explaining my goals for the course which focussed on writing and reading in English, dates upon which the course started and finished, my hopes for participation in COIL, and number of registered students (twenty-three). My COIL partner in New York replied recommending a suitable course based upon the learning goals of their course, which focussed on writing in Japanese, the Japanese language level of students (lower intermediate), commencement date, and size of the class (twenty students). Since course goals, desired outcomes and class sizes were generally consistent, we decided this would be an appropriate project for both sets of students and continued to the next step which involved deciding appropriate content and group sizes. This COIL project will subsequently be referred to as JELF (Japanese-English Language Focussed).

During the initial email exchange, my COIL partner also expressed interest in finding a potential partner for a class focusing on Japanese culture. Since a non-elective general English course I was teaching for first-year non-English majors ran concurrently with the course in the New York institution and included a segment on “Japan and Japanese Culture”, I emailed the relevant information to my partner for consideration including start and finish dates (mid-September to early November: 8 weeks), language ability of the students in Japan (CEFR B1–A2), course goals and registered student number (twenty-three). Despite respective foreign language abilities being somewhat lower than the JELF course, we decided this would be an appropriate match for a COIL project based on consistent course goals and student numbers (thirty in New York). We agreed to consider appropriate activities for this COIL project which will subsequently be referred to as JCB (Japanese Culture Based).

Emails were the most frequent form of contact between my COIL partner and myself, though we arranged one online video meeting which lasted

approximately one hour in early September; one week prior to the course commencing. During this meeting we discussed the format and content of both projects in conjunction with gaining a better understanding of our partner's institution and its role in respective communities.

4.2 Activity set-up, information transfer and determining content

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, courses at both institutions were being administered online at the time COIL was undertaken. Project outlines, set-up activities and goals were disseminated to students through cloud-based video communication applications (ZOOM) and respective LMS systems. Each instructor was responsible for their own class and at no time did we make individual contacts to students not attending our own institutions. Goals, required procedures, available support, and evaluations of the projects were explained during the first lessons of the autumn academic term.

JELF: Since courses in each institution focussed on writing, it was decided that after an initial activity based on introductions, an essay exchange between groups of students would complement criteria for both courses. The initial introductory activity involved students in Japan writing a short description based on the following title: "Places I have been in Japan and enjoyed, and regional food I like". This was read at the first synchronous video meeting of students to which students based in New York provided responses. The essay exchange involved students at the Nagoya-based institution writing an academic style paper in English on language development or aspects of contemporary Japanese society, while students in New York sent essays in Japanese which related to various grammatical forms taught over their course. Students at both institutions were instructed to identify language and structural errors, explain why those errors were inappropriate, recommend possible alternatives and explain why those alternatives would improve the writing; in effect becoming personalised tutors. Through this activity, it was anticipated that students would consider critically the issues faced when learning respective languages while gaining greater knowledge on their chosen academic subjects. The number of times students could meet, exchange essays and discuss their writing was not specified, though both instructors encouraged students to communicate as often as possible.

JCB: Presentations were a significant element of evaluation for courses in both Nagoya and New York and it was decided such an activity would stimulate interest and interaction, in addition to complementing overall course goals. Requirements included an initial activity focussed on introduction questions for a synchronous online meeting, and the making of a presentation on a topic related to Japanese culture and society for a minimum of 6 minutes as a group. We required students to record and upload their final presentations to an online video sharing platform of their choice, and to provide instructors with the necessary information to view their work at the end of the course. As with course JELF, students were provided with no other timetable though encouraged to contact their partners multiple times through both synchronous and asynchronous online communication applications. I anticipated many students would struggle to conceive or agree on appropriate themes and therefore provided a list of topics which could be followed or discarded as groups determined.

4.3 Groups: Member allocation and initiating contact

For course JELF, we decided to make seven groups of four students (Nagoya 2:2 New York) and three groups of five members (3:2) which accommodated the greater numbers in Japan. For course JCB, we made six groups of five members (2:3), five groups of four members (2:2) and one group of three (1:2) which accommodated the higher numbers in New York. In designating members from the host institution to each group, I considered the overall English communicative ability of students, pairing those with greater competence to those with less. In this way, if communication became problematic, it was hoped students from the host institution could assist each other, most likely in their own language. I determined communicative ability through observance and evaluation of students during lessons over the six months prior to commencement of the project.

After explaining the respective activities, students were required to provide a preferred email address to instructors to which members in their respective groups could contact each other. The email addresses were then shared to other group members in both institutions with the requirement that they write and send an email within the week or reply within twenty-four hours of an

initial contact. By enabling and requesting both sets of students to make initial contact, no student was left waiting for a 'first' email. I provided a template for an introductory email, enabling students based in Japan to add appropriate information where necessary to ensure enough diversity and avoid seemingly generic content. For subsequent contact after the initial email, no direct instruction was provided on which communicative applications students should use, though possible formats were recommended which could enable efficient interaction.

4.4 Activities: On-going support

For both courses, students were required to notify their respective instructors where contact had slowed or activities stalled. My COIL partner and I then periodically shared this information enabling us to remind students of project goals, their responsibilities and required submission deadlines. I required the Nagoya-based students to complete a *contact log* each time they communicated with their overseas partners (table 1). Not only did this serve to make students conscious of the amount of time spent communicating with partners and reflect on interactions, but since I required students to show me the log intermittently, I was able to monitor progress, identify any potential challenges and provide feedback.

Table 1. Sample of *Contact Log* completed by students

Contact Log				
Date of contact	Method	Time talking/ reading/writing	Impression	Date of next contact
<i>October 15th</i>	<i>email</i>	<i>Reading 10 mins, writing reply 30 mins.</i>	<i>I understood the content. I was surprised I could understand it. It took longer than expected to write a reply.</i>	<i>October 18th</i>

4.5 Project Evaluation

Since the quantity and quality of input from partners in New York could potentially influence the performance of any assignments or activities focussing on English language submitted by students in Japan, I based evaluation of the COIL projects on individual reflection reports and completion of the *contact logs*, both of which were submitted at the end of the two courses. I compared the *contact logs* of members in the same group verifying the same-time reflections and identifying any reported differences between members. A greater weighting was given for reflection reports (8:2), which required students to consider and assess their performance over the projects. In evaluating these reports, I prioritised the author's intentions and essay structure over grammatical or lexical accuracy. The following are criteria for those reports.

JELF:

- A. Contact criteria: How many times did you contact your partners?
How did you contact your partners? Evaluate your response times and your partners response times (0 = didn't contact or very slow, 10 = contacted very quickly and often).
- B. Your essay: How did you feel about your partners' corrections to your essay? Do you feel you understood the explanations well?
Would your partners be good teachers of English?
- C. Your partners' essays: How did you feel about your partners' essays? How do you feel about your ability to teach Japanese?
Did you or your partners feel frustrated at any time with explanations?
- D. Overall experience: How did you feel about this experience?
What did you most learn from this project?

JCB:

- A. How did you feel about talking with your partners in New York?
- B. How did you feel about making your presentation and final product?
- C. What did you learn most from this project?

5. Results

JELF: Twenty-one students based at the institution in Nagoya participated in this project to its completion. All members bar one from the emailing list provided by my COIL partner at the New York institution responded to or initiated contact ensuring that all members had access to international partners and were able to interact within one week of commencement of the course. The frequency of contact thereafter varied significantly between groups, from a maximum of seventeen to a low of three which were reported on the *contact log*. The method of contact varied substantially between groups though SNS formats were particularly common. All students were able to make online synchronous video calling at least once with at least one member of their group. Essays were successfully exchanged by all participating members. Final reflections were received by twenty of the Nagoya-based students, nineteen completed in detail sufficient to suggest participants had genuinely reflected and critically appraised both their own performances and perceptions of the project. Students analysed their interactions between members, assessed their partners' Japanese reports, considered their successes and weaknesses in teaching the Japanese language and evaluated the project overall.

JCB: All twenty-three of the Nagoya-based members were able to make contact to their COIL partners within one week and were able to complete respective projects. As with course JELF, after initial contact was made by email students moved to a variety of alternative communication devices. Groups uploaded their presentations to one of two video sharing platforms: Youtube- viewing set to 'unlisted' with the URL sent to the instructor's private email, or Flipgrid - viewing set to 'private' meaning only members of the course in Japan had access to the completed video. Ten of the twelve groups were able to complete the task before the deadline, the remaining two groups finished their presentations within the following month. Presentation format varied from recordings of online synchronous meetings with Powerpoint slides and students visible on screen, to recordings of Powerpoint presentations with only the voice of the participants audible. Of the twenty-two students who completed and submitted their final reflection reports twenty-one articulated

their thoughts in sufficient detail to understand comprehensively their interactions with students in New York and thoughts about the project.

6. Reflections and considerations

This section will consider my progress during the COIL programme identifying activities which I feel were necessary for the achievement of my goals, and areas which could have been included or modified to ensure an improved experience including the initial exchanges with my partner, set-up of initial student contact, choice of projects, support for students and methods of evaluation.

In the initial exchange of emails between instructors, identifying the course goals, language proficiency level of students, hopes for the project, commencement and completion dates of courses and expected number of participating students proved to be essential for deciding project suitability. In the present study, no great differences between any of the above variables existed with those of my COIL partner in either course, resulting in comparatively 'problem-free' project set-up stages. It is recommended that where differences do exist, instructors consider the impact it will have on a potential project, are comfortable turning down potential matches and consider more suitable programmes which are likely to be available. The synchronous online video meeting with my partner was particularly effective not only to discuss issues of the projects, outline potential problems and confirm mutual goals, but also, quite importantly, in building rapport. Contact by email was efficient particularly considering the time difference between New York and Nagoya, but I gained greater understanding of my partner's environment and academic requirements through 'real-time' communication. This meeting occurred only once and in retrospect I should have requested more, perhaps during the mid-point of the course and certainly at its completion.

Since several students that were enrolled in both courses were unable to participate in the projects, the decision to allocate students to groups was justified. No student needed to be reallocated to a different group once the project commenced. I expected the Nagoya-based students to communicate with each other about their projects frequently, but this was reportedly not the

case. It is recommended that time during lessons be allocated for discussions between members of the same group, and between different groups so that experiences and issues can be shared, and suggestions or advice given. Similarly, the sending of initial emails to partners within a lesson should be considered as this would confirm conclusively that projects had begun. In the present study, I requested students to complete this task outside of lesson time resulting in several students delaying their first emails. Providing an email template for students to add their own information was effective both in allowing students to have confidence to initiate contact and in creating enough diversity between emails.

Both projects encouraged learners to engage in introductory activities to 'break the ice'. Although such activities are recommended, it is also worth remembering the apprehension that students may feel when initiating contact and varying degrees of self-consciousness in communicating in a foreign language, which could impact decisions to participate in synchronous meetings. If undertaking a similar COIL in future, I would consider simulating an initial meeting during a lesson to hopefully alleviate some of the initial apprehension and ensure positive first impressions.

By participation in COIL, it is believed the vast majority of students in both countries could achieve the goals initially outlined and justified my motivations for undertaking these programmes. A variety of communication devices and applications were employed which many students had never experienced, or even heard of, before the project. JCB students were also required to overcome the issues of making a single presentation with group members with whom they could not meet directly. This encouraged a certain amount of innovation and cooperation with team members with final formats being diverse.

In comparison to COIL projects reported elsewhere which required certain tasks to be completed weekly, the projects in the present study allowed considerable student autonomy over tasks and contact frequency. The criteria of the *contact log* proved an effective tool for confirming students communicated regularly in addition to information shared between instructors who could encourage and support participants when a lack of response was reported by either party. The logs also ensured students consistently

considered each interaction, arranged a subsequent contact and had reference material for writing reflection reports. Such contact logs may well negate the need for more defined timetables, though feedback and encouragement from instructors is recommended to support and ensure ongoing communication. Further additions to the *contact log* used in the present study are recommended including the requirement of students to register which members were present at each synchronous or asynchronous interaction and an ordinal numbers column for highlighting the quantity of contacts. This would allow instructors a more comprehensive understanding of participant activity, particularly pertaining to the dynamics of groups, and show evidence of overall participation if projects are evaluated by responsibilities undertaken during collaboration. Finally, although there was some apprehension initially regarding differences in language competency between the two courses and how this would influence contact frequency, this proved to be unfounded here. Though the quantity of interactions varied between individuals and groups, little difference was evident between the two courses and frequency appeared to be more determined by individuals' perceptions of the necessity to contact partners for completion of projects than English ability.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to outline the motivations, processes, and reflections of two COIL projects undertaken in 2021 between higher educational institutions in Nagoya, Japan, and New York, USA. Initial undertaking of the projects was stimulated by the prospects of several desirable outcomes for students including opportunities to engage in online activities through diverse digital formats with overseas students during the Covid-19 pandemic, greater motivation for and appreciation of efforts for language-learning, increased intercultural sensitivity and competence, and enhanced awareness of the host institutions' philosophies and ideologies. Course JEFLL also encouraged students in both countries to become aware of the considerations required by non-native speakers writing their respective languages and develop skills to correct errors and teach appropriate language. Course JCB required students to consider critically an aspect of Japanese

culture, whether this was identifiable outside Japan, and develop skills for making available online joint presentations. Although desired outcomes were achieved, on reflection, there remained several improvements to the process of implementation which could have resulted in an overall improved experience for both facilitators and students. These include further online synchronous video meetings between instructors, in-class activities such as sending emails for initial contact, simulation of first synchronous meetings and discussions between same group and different group members, and modifications to the *contact log*. It is hoped that instructors or facilitators will agree to undertake COIL projects in the future and findings here will prove useful or worthy of consideration for those ventures.

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