

Student Reactions to Basic COIL for Business English

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Abstract

This paper describes the results and implications of a reflective research project on adopting Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) language and intercultural exchanges in Business English Oral Communication classes, particularly student impressions of the two implementation styles that were incorporated in these classes. Qualitative data was collected via anonymous online surveys conducted after implementation of each of two distinct types of virtual exchanges during the 2019 academic year. Respondents were from convenience samples of intact classes taught by the researcher and another instructor. The research aimed to illuminate what elements of these virtual exchanges these learners liked and did not like, what elements were challenging, what elements were considered motivating and effective, and the reasons for these impressions. The paper outlines how the exchanges were planned and conducted using different online tools and methods, presents survey results, and describes instructor reflections and subsequent methodological adjustments. It is hoped that this information will help instructors in similar contexts provide more motivating and effective exchanges in the future.

Keywords: COIL, Virtual exchange

1. Introduction

Background

In late 2018, I was asked to consider implementing virtual exchanges in some of my courses as part of the five-year NU-COIL Program, an initiative which aimed to build more collaboration between the university and partners in the USA, with a focus on online exchanges and promoting student mobility (Nanzan University, n.d. a., 2023). This program was selected for support by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology - Japan (MEXT) (MEXT, 2018; Nanzan

University, 2023).

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a model of telecollaboration, or virtual exchange (see O’Dowd, 2016, for a detailed discussion of the naming of these types of activities), and State University of New York (SUNY) is considered a key locale for the origin and development of COIL (de Wit, 2013; Ramírez-Marín, et al, 2020). The SUNY *Faculty Guide for Collaborative Online International Learning Course Development* noted that the SUNY Center for Collaborative Online International Learning was created in 2006 and stated, “COIL seeks to build bridges between study abroad, instructional design and teaching faculty through team-taught courses, thereby promoting, integrating and enhancing international education experiences across curricula. (SUNY, n.d., p. 1). Similarly, Vahed and Rodriguez (2021) stated that “COIL uses internet-based tools to foster meaningful exchanges between university-level teachers and students with geographically, culturally and linguistically distant peers” (p. 597) while de Wit (2013) noted that in COIL, “technology is used to develop a more interactive and collaborative way of international teaching and learning”. The COIL framework of faculty and learner cooperation and interaction internationally via online technologies allows for various models (de Wit, 2013). The NU-COIL program adopted three general categories of COIL, known as Basic (language and cultural exchange), Academic (completing a unit of academic work with common learning objectives in cooperation with classes in different universities), and PBL (cooperating with an external organization and students in two or more universities on a project) (Nanzan University, n.d. b., 2023). I considered the Basic model, particularly focused on language exchanges, as most suitable for the Business English courses.

I chose to plan and implement these COIL virtual exchanges as I felt they would benefit my learners by allowing them to practice using English with skilled speakers other than their classmates and by exposing them to peers who were studying within a different culture. Recent research into COIL and similar exchanges have indicated a number of benefits related to linguistic and intercultural skills can be gained (Belz, 2003; Boehm, et al, 2010; Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; de Wit, 2013; Godwin-Jones, 2019; Lázár, 2015; Ramírez-Marín, et al, 2020). O’Dowd (2007), in the introduction to a book on various types of online intercultural exchanges, stated that “it is argued that learners can become aware that communicating in a foreign language involves not only the exchange of information, but also the expression of speaker identity and development of relationships in situations of

intercultural contact.” (p. 4). Ramírez-Marín, et al (2020) stated that their research showed that COIL activities “prompted reflexion [sic] on issues related to language learning, cultural understanding, and common life experiences, and that it was conducive to the development of aspects of cross-cultural competence.” (2020, p. 119). Villar-Onrubia and Rajpal (2016) describe COIL-type activities as a type of “virtual mobility” and state that they are “one of the most flexible, versatile and inclusive approaches in the provision of experiential learning opportunities aimed at facilitating students’ intercultural competence development” (p. 81) while Bruhn (2017) described COIL as “an especially successful model of virtual mobility” (p. 6). O’Dowd and O’Rourke (2019) stated that language classes have seen a marked increase in virtual exchanges and that “synchronous communication has become progressively easier and more accessible to students” who are involved in them (p. 2). Yang, et al (2014) found that the students involved in their study thought using real-time audio-video communication platforms in online collaboration could allow them “to have more in-depth conversations” (p. 216). Similar to my own motivations, O’Dowd’s research into language educators who were learning to telecollaborate found that “All four informants reported having chosen to engage in telecollaboration due to its potential for authentic communication in their classrooms and for raising awareness of the cultural aspects of language learning.” (2015, p. 74).

Context

A dedicated office was set up at the university to support the implementation of the NU-COIL Program, and staff from this office introduced me to faculty members at two partner universities in the USA who were interested in virtual exchanges. Both of these faculty members were teaching Japanese language courses at their respective universities and were interested in creating more opportunities for their students to speak with Japanese students in both English and Japanese. Godwin-Jones (2019) concluded benefits from virtual exchanges are variable and “that exchanges need to be set up with care as well as with an awareness of best practices.” (p. 8). With this in mind I engaged in initial email exchanges with the prospective partners, and we discussed having credit-bearing assignments in our respective classes involving English and Japanese conversation, with each of us deciding on the specific activities, learning objectives and assessments for our own students. These parameters fit within the Basic COIL category of exchanges

focused on language and culture (Nanzan University, n.d. b). Since one partner wanted to do exchanges in their spring term and the other in their fall term, I agreed to partner with both of them.

I decided to include these COIL telecollaborative exchanges in a set of Business English Oral Communication (BEOC) classes, which were taught over four academic terms, 8-week “quarters”, between April 2019 and February 2020. The BEOC classes were elective language courses offered by the Department of Business Administration and all the enrolled students were second-year students majoring in Business Administration who had signed up to take these courses for all four quarters. I was coordinating the curriculum and teaching one section of 10 students while an adjunct instructor on a part-time contract was teaching the other section of 9 students. The adjunct instructor agreed to have their section participate in the exchanges when I proposed it and offered to take on the responsibility of managing the activities. Being a novice myself in virtual exchanges, I agreed to follow both of the respective partners’ differing concepts of how to conduct the exchanges, and also concluded that this could provide an opportunity for a formal qualitative survey to explore the reactions of my learners to these virtual exchanges. Bohem, et al (2010) concluded that there was a need to research various benefits and establish best practices for these kinds of exchanges. Also, Zhu (2012) noted that learner opinions about these exchanges are key: “The degree of student learning satisfaction with an e-learning environment plays an important role in the adoption of e-learning or blended learning.” (p. 127).

The first exchange was scheduled to take place during the first two weeks of my university’s first quarter (Q1), which ran from early April to early June. We opted for determining partners, giving the students each other’s email contact information, and letting them arrange between themselves the timing and online platform for their virtual meetings. There was no whole-class synchronous session arranged, and in this sense the exchange was asynchronous. Ultimately, the students in the USA were all volunteers for the exchanges and did not have a required course assignment, while the Nanzan University students were given a graded assignment as an element of their BEOC class in Q1. The assignment was explained in class as well as in written form (Appendix A). They were expected to email their assigned partner and agree on a meeting time and the technology to use for meeting. They were directed to begin by chatting briefly in any combination of Japanese and English to start to get to know each other, and then

to proceed to conduct a recorded interview of their partner in English that would include at least five open-ended questions as well as to ask for clarification and further information as needed. These tasks reflected language functions that were part of the classroom practice early in Q1. Finally, the students had to share their recordings with me for feedback and assessment.

The second exchange was scheduled to take place in the third quarter (Q3), which ran from mid-September to mid-November. Two dates in October were agreed upon for the exchanges, which were scheduled to take place synchronously during times the students in the USA were in their regularly scheduled Japanese classes and in a computer lab. Since the session start times in Japan were 10: 30 pm and 11: 30 pm on Friday evenings, the Nanzan University students attended from home or any other location they chose. Before the start of Q3 they were notified of the dates and times and asked to keep their schedules clear. Again, they were given both an oral and written description (Appendix B) of the assignment, which was an element of the Q3 BEOC courses. They needed to prepare by making sure they could sign into and use Skype on their own device and practice making and recording a call, and then to share their Skype contact with the instructor at the partner school. During the actual exchange time they were expected to spend about half of their 40 minutes using simple Japanese with their partners and then half using English language which they had studied and practiced in their classes. Similar to the Q1 exchange, the students had to share their recordings with me for feedback and assessment.

In summary, the key differences were that in Q1 the students had to arrange their own meetings and preferred technology with their partners while in Q3 the sessions were prescheduled and the technology predetermined, in both quarters the students in Japan had graded assignments but in Q1 the partners were volunteers and had no assignment to complete for their Japanese class while in Q3 the partner students also had graded assignments, and in Q1 the exchanges could be accomplished with perhaps only 10 minutes of speaking time and primarily in English while the Q3 exchanges were expected to be 40 minutes and split fairly evenly between English and Japanese.

2. Methodology

Early in 2019, I developed a research proposal and it was approved by

institutional review. I aimed to answer the following three research questions:

Research question 1: What elements of these COIL virtual exchanges do these students like and dislike, and why?

Research question 2: What elements of these COIL virtual exchanges in 2019 did these students find challenging, and why?

Research question 3: What elements of these COIL virtual exchanges in 2019 did these students find motivating and/or effective, and why?

I developed two surveys which consisted of open-ended questions to elicit qualitative responses to address the research questions, one of which was conducted after the Q1 exchanges and the other after the Q3 exchanges. The data was collected anonymously online as typed text, with students given both an oral and a written explanation of the research in class and provided with a link for them to access the survey if they agreed to participate. The adjunct instructor also assisted with implementation of the surveys through sharing the explanations and links to the surveys during his classes. The questions were provided in Japanese with responses in Japanese encouraged since this was the community language and apparent first language of all the research participants. After each implementation of the survey, I downloaded the responses and then translated the Japanese to English for analysis and did basic coding to group similar responses and identify trends.

The first administration of the survey included six open-ended questions, while a seventh question was added only in the second administration since it asked for a preference between the two styles of exchanges. The survey questions, translated to English, were as follows (see Appendix C for the Japanese versions).

1. How did you feel about the virtual exchange you had with students from [name of exchange partner university] this term? Please elaborate.
2. Did you dislike anything about the virtual exchange you had with students from [name of exchange partner university] this term? Please elaborate.
3. Were there any difficulties or challenges with the virtual exchange you had with students from [name of exchange partner university] during this term? What have you done to overcome these challenges? Please elaborate.
4. Did the virtual exchange with students from [name of exchange partner university] during this term help you improve your English? If so, in what way did it help?
5. Did the virtual exchange with students from [name of exchange partner

university] this term make you want to study English more? If so, please explain in detail why.

6. Also, if a future virtual exchange were to take place, what do you think would be a good way to do it? Please elaborate.
7. Comparing the Quarter 1 virtual exchange and the Quarter 3 virtual exchange, which way of doing it do you think is better? Please elaborate on why.

3. Results

For the first survey, 17 of the 19 registered students opted to participate and provide responses. For the second survey, 16 students opted to participate and provide responses but one of them indicated that they had only participated in the Q1 exchange and had been absent for the Q3 exchanges. Therefore, this participant's responses were excluded from the analysis of the second survey, leaving 15 participants. In this section I examine responses to each question from the first survey and compare them with those on the second survey.

For the first question, regarding the students' general impressions of the exchanges, the majority of the responses were positive, but generally more so regarding the Q3 exchanges. While ten of the 17 respondents to the first survey included language describing the exchange as good, fun and/or enjoyable, three of these ten also indicated they had been nervous and two noted that the exchange was difficult. The remaining seven respondents described the exchanges in negative terms, and the specific difficulties noted involved making the initial contact, understanding and responding to their interlocutor, and dealing with the time difference. In contrast, 13 of the 15 respondents to the second survey gave responses that were exclusively or primarily positive and which described them as fun, good, valuable, and great. Of these 13, one said that it was fun and a good experience, but they also complained that the preparation was hard and time consuming. The remaining two of the 15 had mixed responses, one indicating that it was difficult to understand English but that they had a pleasant conversation and one other noting that it was difficult, particularly being understood, but that it was fun.

The second question elicited explicitly anything they disliked about the exchanges. On the first survey, six respondents indicated they had had nothing they disliked, four noted problems with the conversation, four noted problems

with establishing contact with their partners, and three mentioned issues with the time difference. On the second survey, the most common dislike was that they felt unhappy with the timing of the exchanges. Of these, eight were not happy with the late timing, and one - who also was one of the two who gave a mixed response to the first question - was not happy that their exchange included 30 minutes of English conversation instead of 20 minutes. Only four of the second survey respondents said they had had nothing they disliked, while two mentioned connection problems with Skype, and one indicated some unhappiness with not having heard what to prepare.

The third question also elicited what might be considered negatives, though this time phrased as challenges or difficulties faced. On the first survey, the most common difficulty noted was dealing with the time difference, mentioned by seven respondents. Again, four respondents mentioned difficulties with the conversation and understanding, while three noted some difficulties with using email to contact their partner. Four responded that they had had no difficulties. On the second survey as well, four responded that they had had no difficulties. On the other hand, eight respondents mentioned difficulties with understanding the conversation. Only one mentioned the time of night here, though they expanded on their similar response to the second question, and indicated it was easier than Q1 had been. Two respondents mentioned being nervous or flustered, and one simply wrote “Skype registration” as their response.

The fourth question asked whether they felt the exchanges helped them improve their English or not, and for details. On the first survey, 14 of the 17 respondents said it was helpful while two were ambiguous and one said clearly that it was not. The most common way it was seen as helpful was the chance to use “real” or “native” English, mentioned by 5 students. Four noted it prompting a “try” attitude while two noted learning to use email. On the second survey, all 15 students indicated the exchanges were helpful. Seven noted their ability improved somehow and six noted it being a positive experience, while one each noted it improved their motivation and they learned about the culture.

The fifth question asked specifically about the impact on their motivation to learn English. The responses to both surveys were closely aligned, with one ambiguous response in each and two on each survey clearly indicating that the exchanges didn’t inspire them to want to study more. The remaining 14 respondents on the first survey and 12 on the second survey all said that it did

motivate them. According to both sets of responses, what typically made them motivated to study more was wanting to be able to understand their partners better, express themselves more clearly, and converse more smoothly.

The sixth question asked for suggestions of how to do future exchanges while the seventh, which appeared only on the second survey, asked them which of the two styles they preferred and why, and here I address responses to both items. On the first survey, five respondents said it was okay as is or needed no changes. Of the remaining 12, four suggested something involving doing it synchronously, four wanted it to be easier to contact their partner, and four mentioned other specifics related to the assignment, such as having more time to complete it or doing it as audio only (“without a face”). On the second survey, the number who responded that it was okay as is or needed no changes increased to eight. Three suggested accommodating Japan time for at least one of the exchanges, and two wanted it done more often. One suggested having predetermined conversation topics, while another simply responded “telephone”. However, this was not one of the ones who mentioned connectivity difficulties, so perhaps it is the same person who suggested audio-only exchanges after the first exchange. In addition, all 15 of the students who participated in both styles and answered the second survey indicated a preference for the second style. The main reasons given were that it was easier (9 responses) since it had a set schedule and the technology decided upon, and that the second style included Japanese exchange as well (3 responses).

4. Conclusions

Firstly, before noting my conclusions, I acknowledge that these results may be of limited generalizability due to the very specific context and the small sample size of these convenience samples. This study also did not explore measurable results of virtual exchanges in the areas of intercultural competence or language ability, but rather focused only on the learner’s own reflections regarding the exchanges. Despite those limitations, there are several conclusions to be drawn from these initial experiences of virtual exchanges and the survey results that may be informative for other instructors implementing similar exchanges.

One of the challenges in both models of exchanges described was scheduling. Firstly, as an instructor planning exchanges, I found it can be difficult to schedule a period in the course calendar in which to have exchanges. I found it particularly

difficult during the USA partners' Spring Semester, in which we typically have only two weeks of overlap which occurs right at the beginning of the Japanese academic year. Secondly, as seen in the survey responses, since Japan Standard Time and the time zone where the partners were located in the USA have 13 or 14 hours in time difference, it made it difficult to find a time of day to meet that was suitable for all participants, whether that was for full-class sessions or pairs or groups of students setting their own meeting times. There seems to be no solution to either of these scheduling challenges other than finding partners with more overlap in academic calendars and in closer time zones. On the other hand, the second issue in particular may actually help prepare students for future work involving meetings across multiple time zones.

In these exchanges, I found that having the instructor set a time for all members to meet synchronously did at least ease some burden on the students, was well-received by them, and that is what I and exchange partners have done in subsequent exchanges. It seems that having a common technology that everyone uses eliminates the need for students to negotiate that in advance with partners and perhaps for one of them to use a completely unfamiliar technology. Also, the adoption of Zoom virtual meeting technology for delivery of classes in both my university and the partner university due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the year following this research appears to have led to a greater comfort level for students in using it and interacting in a virtual space. I also found that full-class synchronous sessions have allowed for the instructors to better set the tone for sessions, manage the time, and troubleshoot when problems have arisen.

With respect to value of the sessions and related implications for future practice, the survey results indicated that the majority of students found the sessions enjoyable, useful as learning and practice exercises, and motivating towards future language study. In subsequent exchanges, I have observed that having advance preparation and practice sessions geared specifically towards the exchanges all helped to ease anxiety among learners and improve outcomes of the sessions. In addition, having a goal of communicating with non-Japanese peers seemed to motivate students to be more focused during classroom activities when they perceived them as useful preparation for this activity. Therefore, I have concluded that these Basic COIL virtual exchanges are a valuable activity to include in language courses and am continuing to include them in these courses.

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Appendix A. Quarter 1 Assignment Handout

2019 Quarter 1 Business English Oral Communication International Interview

In the beginning of this quarter, you must have a short conversation with a student from [Partner University]. Your teacher will give you the name and contact information. The conversation will include an interview which is for credit for your Oral Communication class. Your partner at [Partner University] is a volunteer who also studies Japanese there.

Firstly, contact your partner and arrange a time to “meet” online as soon as possible. You need to finish no later than Sunday, April 14th. (Keep in mind that Japan is about a half-day ahead of [Partner University] in time.) You may meet using any technology as long as you are able to have a real-time conversation and record it. For example, Skype, Google Hangouts, Facebook Messenger, and Facetime all allow for recording conversations with or without video. Whatever platform you use, make sure you know how to use it and record it before you make your official interview.

Secondly, “meet” your partner and take 3 to 5 minutes just to chat. Introduce yourself, talk a little about each other. Be polite and friendly. Try to learn a little about each other informally. Feel free to mix languages, and try to keep your language simple and clear.

Thirdly, do your interview. Don’t forget to record it! You will ask a few questions in English. Listen to the answers in English from the [Partner University] students and you should ask for clarification or more information if needed.

Your English interview:

- You must ask at least 5 open-ended questions. Do not include asking about their name, age, or where they are from as you should do this in the opening chat time.
- If you don’t understand a response, ask for clarification in English. Remember that you can request someone to repeat, to speak more slowly, to explain in other words, or add more information.

Finally, share your recording with Thomas for feedback and grading.

Keep in mind that this is a class assignment. If you and your partner both wish and agree to continue contact after this assignment, that is perfectly fine. However, neither of you is obligated to keep in contact and should respect the wishes if one

of you has a reason not to continue communicating after the assignment. If you have any concerns or questions about this point at any time, please talk with your instructor about it.

Appendix B. Quarter 3 Assignment Handout

2019 Quarter 3 Business English Oral Communication International Interview

During the fall quarters, you must have short conversations with one or more students from [Partner University]. Your partner(s) will be [Partner University] students who have recently started studying Japanese, and they will be in class in the USA at the time you meet online using Skype. This is a required, graded assignment.

PREPARATION

Please do the following steps to get ready.

1. Please plan to be available at these times:

Friday, October 4 from 10: 30 p.m. or 11: 30 p.m.

Friday, October 25 from 10: 30 p.m. or 11: 30 p.m.

Do not schedule conflicting part-time job or other plans, please.

2. Please make sure you have a device on which you can use Skype. If you do not have Skype, you can download it using your Nanzan AXIA account. Please contact the *joho* center as soon as possible if you don't know how to do this. Then, practice making and recording a call on Skype. You can do this with one of your classmates.

3. During the first week of classes, I will ask you to send [name]-sensei at [Partner University] a message via Skype chat (NOT a call). I will give you her contact information at that time, then she will give you further directions about calling during her class time.

ACTIVITIES

During the first session (Oct. 4), you will have a conversation in which your partner will introduce themselves and ask you very basic questions in Japanese. You should answer in Japanese, but try to use very clear language. Next, you will ask

your partner the same kinds of questions in English and discuss their answers. Also, you should review the topics and language from Units 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 and ask your partners about these kinds of things.

During the second session (Oct. 25), you will again answer some questions from your partners in Japanese. Then you will ask your partners questions from Unit 5.3 and Unit 6.3 and note down their answers.

Remember, when you “meet” your partner you should be polite and friendly, and try to keep your language simple and clear. Don’t forget to record your English conversation using Skype. Thomas will tell you how to share your recording with him.

If you and your partner both wish and agree to continue contact after this assignment, that is perfectly fine. However, neither of you has to keep in contact and should not try to contact the other if they have said they don’t want to continue communicating after the assignment. If you have any concerns or questions about this point at any time, please talk with your instructor about it.

Appendix C. Japanese versions of the survey questions.

1. この学期中に〔交換相手大学名〕の学生と行ったバーチャル・エクスチェンジについて、いかがでしたか？詳しく説明してください。
2. この学期中に〔交換相手大学名〕の学生と行ったバーチャル・エクスチェンジについて、何か嫌いでしたか。詳しく説明してください。
3. この学期中に〔交換相手大学名〕の学生と行ったバーチャル・エクスチェンジについて、何か大変や難しい事がありましたか。これらの課題を克服するために何をしましたか？詳しく説明してください。
4. この学期中に〔交換相手大学名〕の学生と行ったバーチャル・エクスチェンジについて、自分の英語力をより上達させるのに役立った事はありましたか？それはどのように役立ちましたか？
5. この学期中に〔交換相手大学名〕の学生と行ったバーチャル・エクスチェンジをしたから、「英語をもっと勉強したい」と思いましたか。そ思いたら、その理由を詳しく説明してください。
6. また、バーチャル・エクスチェンジが行われれば、どんなやり方とかが良いと思いますか。詳しく説明してください。
7. Q1のバーチャル・エクスチェンジやQ3のバーチャル・エクスチェンジ、どちらのやり方が良いと思いますか。その理由を詳しく説明してください。