

Collapsing Borders, Bridging Minds through Window to the Borderless World 2.0 Project: Strengthening Global Competence via an Online Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Aptly reflecting the theme “Crossing Borders, Connecting Minds,” this international online project successfully brought together over 200 students from two academic institutions to promote collaboration, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding. Conducted over 10 weeks, the project involved students presenting on various topics highlighting their respective countries’ historical, social, and cultural contexts, effectively linking geographical and cultural divides. Interactive quiz sessions at the end of each presentation encouraged friendly competition, sustained active engagement, and reinforced participants’ learning experiences. Upon project completion, participant feedback collected through structured questionnaires was overwhelmingly positive. Students appreciated the opportunity to engage internationally, citing increased intercultural competence and greater awareness of global perspectives as the main benefits. Many suggested that similar future initiatives would further improve their global outlook and collaborative skills. This project strongly aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education, specifically targeting SDG 4.7, which underscores education for sustainable development and global citizenship. The project promotes intercultural competence, mutual understanding, and global citizenship through structured international collaboration, ensuring learners develop the knowledge and skills needed to appreciate cultural diversity and global interconnectedness. Ultimately, this initiative exemplifies how structured online international collaboration can meaningfully connect students beyond borders, aligning closely with present-day educational goals of developing global citizens who are culturally conversant, socially aware, and enthusiastically engaged in meaningful cross-cultural discourse.

Keywords: internationalisation; online collaboration; intercultural competence; global engagement; active learning

INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of higher education has increasingly embraced virtual modalities, with Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and other forms of virtual exchange gaining prominence (O’Dowd, 2021). These initiatives enable students to engage with peers across borders, fostering intercultural competence and global awareness without the need for physical mobility (Hackett et al., 2023). Particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, such models have become essential tools for maintaining international engagement in higher education (Weaver et al., 2024). By leveraging digital platforms, institutions can offer scalable, inclusive, and interactive global learning experiences that would otherwise be constrained by geographic and financial limitations.

Virtual exchanges are not merely logistical solutions; they are pedagogically rich environments that support the development of key twenty-first-century skills (O’Dowd, 2021; Hackett et al., 2023). Research demonstrates

that participation in online intercultural collaborations enhances students' communication, teamwork, and critical-thinking abilities while also promoting intercultural sensitivity. Incorporating interactive elements such as student-led presentations and quizzes further deepens engagement. Empirical work shows that learner motivation increases when activities provide meaningful interaction and active involvement (Sailer et al., 2021). Gamified elements like quizzes can sustain interest and improve knowledge retention, particularly in peer-led or blended online environments (Wang & Tahir, 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

Despite the growing implementation of virtual international learning programmes, more research is needed to understand how students perceive their effectiveness and impact. Gathering feedback through structured questionnaires provides valuable insights into strengths and areas for improvement. This study contributes to the field by documenting a 10-week online collaboration involving over 200 students from two institutions. Through presentations, quizzes, and reflective surveys, the project aimed to evaluate academic and cultural outcomes as well as the overall student experience in a large-scale virtual exchange setting.

Objectives

This paper reports the findings of an international online collaboration project between two higher education institutions: Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kedah Branch (Malaysia) and KJ Somaiya College (India).

Product Description

The 10-week project involved weekly sessions in which students from both institutions delivered presentations on cultural, historical, or social topics related to their respective countries. Each session included a quiz designed to reinforce understanding and sustain engagement through a competitive element. Sessions were conducted virtually via Google Meet every Thursday. At the end of the project, students completed a questionnaire reflecting on their engagement, perceived learning outcomes, and suggestions for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 104 students responded to the feedback questionnaire, adapted from Nik Fauzi et al. (2022) on ESL online learning experiences. The instrument comprised four sections: demographics, perceptions of virtual collaborative English-speaking activities, engagement and motivation, and technical aspects. Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) measured students' perceptions.

COIL Collaborative Online International Learning

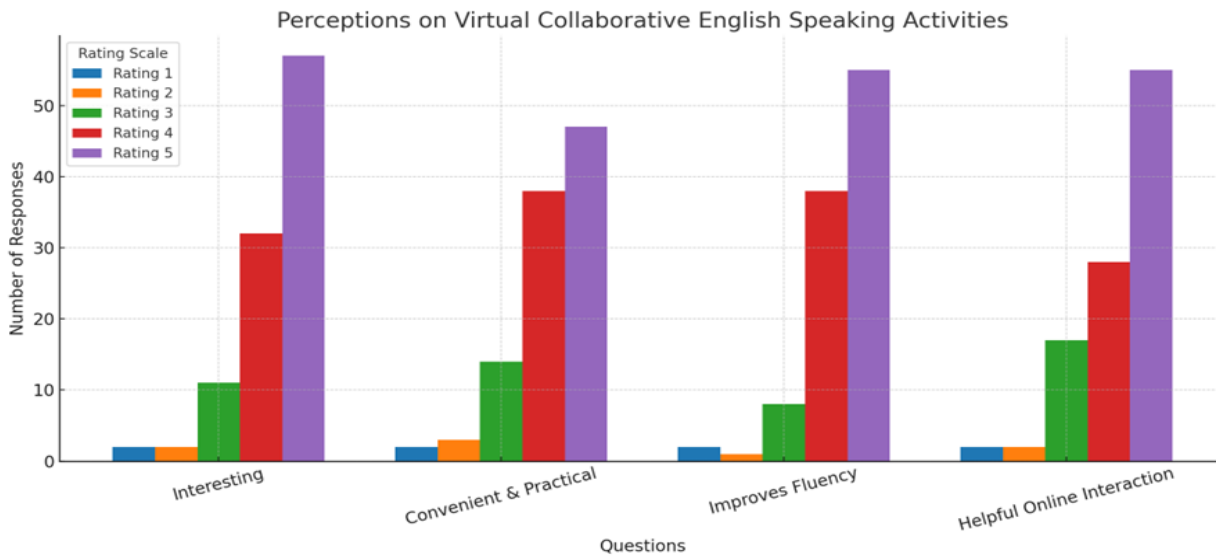
COIL provides an innovative pedagogical approach that connects students and educators worldwide in collaborative learning experiences (O'Dowd, 2018; Hackett et al., 2023). As an alternative to physical mobility, it enables global competency development within local classrooms. By engaging in sustained cross-cultural discussions and projects, students gain disciplinary knowledge alongside interpersonal skills such as empathy, adaptability, and intercultural communication (Hilliker & Loranc, 2022; Mestre-Segarra & Ruiz-Garrido, 2022). COIL projects also promote self-directed learning, analytical thinking, and digital literacy, positioning learners for success in a globally interconnected world.

Gamification elements in ESL and online classes

Gamification has emerged as a key approach to enhance motivation and engagement in online and ESL contexts. Interactive quizzes, leaderboards, and collaborative challenges foster active participation and reinforce language learning (Huang & Hew, 2018; Wang & Tahir, 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2020). Such activities promote repeated practice, authentic communication, and intercultural interaction. Within COIL, gamification facilitates negotiation of meaning, perspective-taking, and collaborative problem-solving (Hackett et al., 2023; O'Dowd, 2021), aligning with broader goals of global citizenship education that emphasise intercultural awareness, empathy, and shared responsibility (Goren & Yemini, 2017; Morais & Ogden, 2011).

FINDINGS

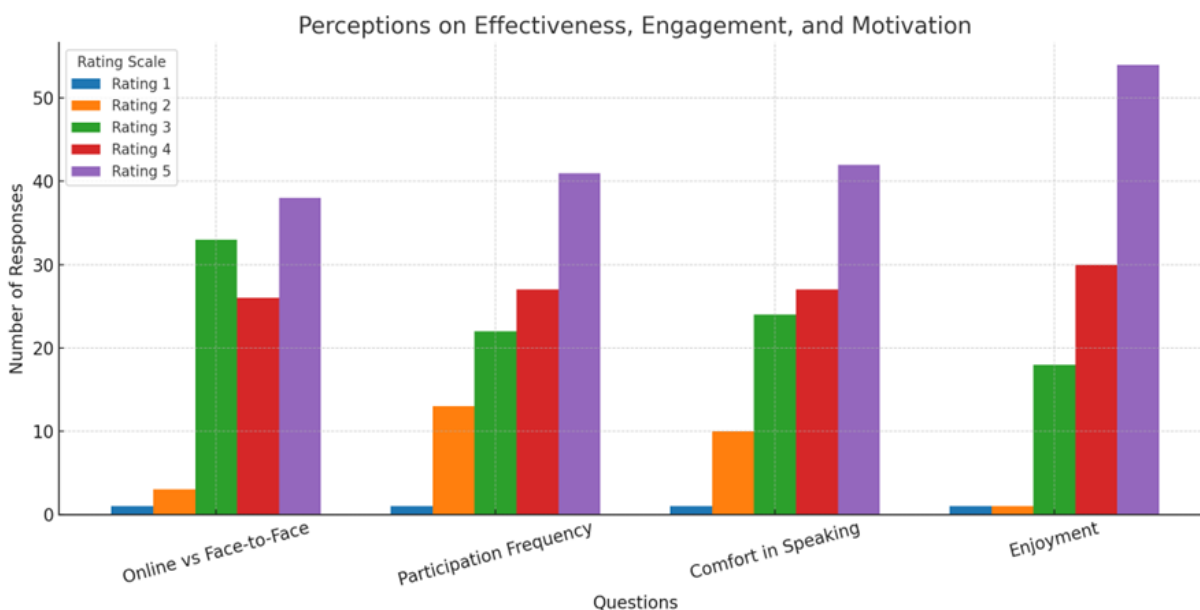
Figure 1 Perceptions on virtual collaborative English speaking activities



The results show that students held highly positive perceptions of virtual collaborative English-speaking activities, with most responses at ratings 4 and 5. The strongest responses were for “Interesting” and “Improves fluency,” indicating that learners found the activities both engaging and effective for language development. “Convenient and practical” was also rated highly, reflecting appreciation for accessibility. While “Helpful online interaction” received favourable ratings overall, it had slightly more neutral responses, suggesting occasional challenges with communication or technical issues. Overall, the findings indicate strong acceptance and satisfaction, particularly in terms of engagement and fluency improvement.

Effectiveness, engagement and motivation

Figure 2 Perceptions on effectiveness, engagement and motivation

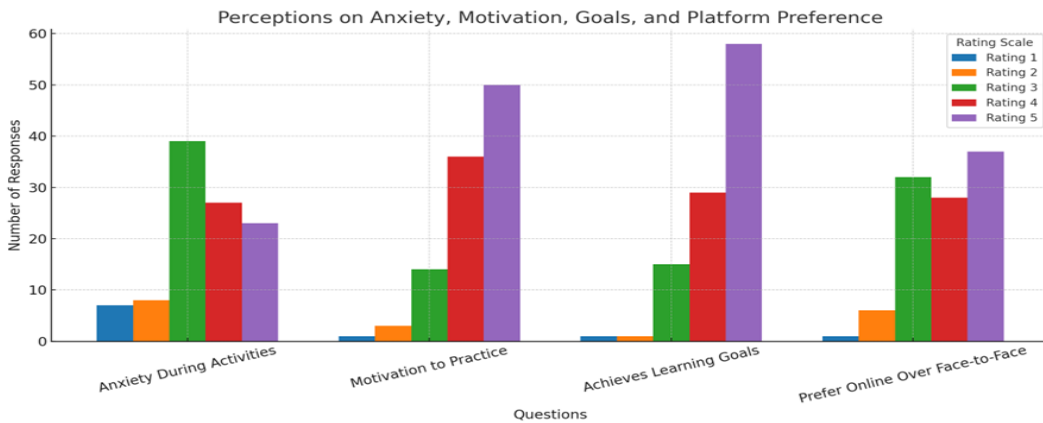


Students expressed positive perceptions of online collaborative speaking activities, especially in terms of enjoyment and comfort when speaking, which received the highest ratings. While participation frequency was generally favourable, responses were more varied, suggesting that some students engaged less consistently. Views on online versus face-to-face learning were also mixed, reflecting uncertainty about whether online tasks

can fully match in-person interaction. Overall, enjoyment and confidence were strong, though participation and platform preference were less consistent.

Anxiety, motivation, goals and platform preference

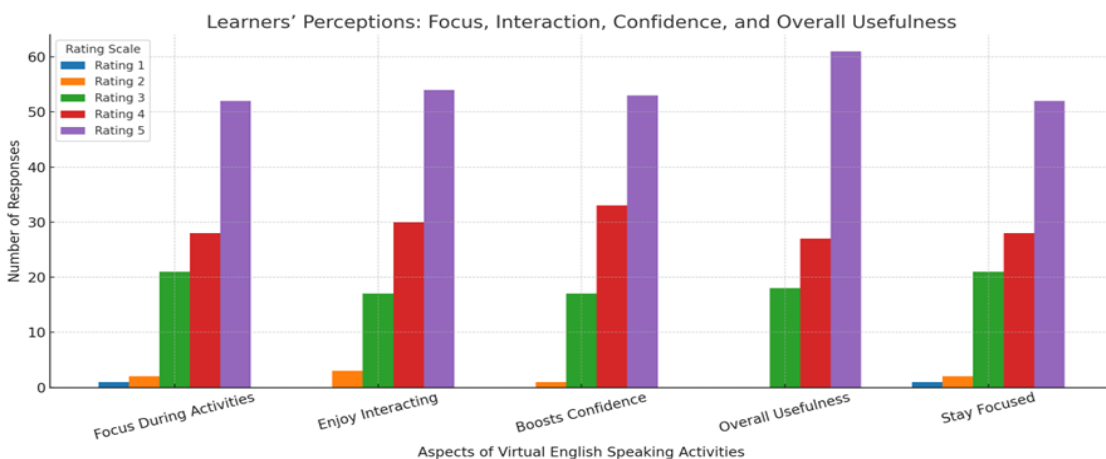
Figure 3 Perceptions on anxiety, motivation, goals and platform preference



The graph shows that students reported moderate levels of anxiety during activities. In contrast, motivation to practise was rated highly, with most students selecting ratings 4 and 5. Perceptions of achieving learning goals were overwhelmingly positive, as most students strongly agreed that their goals were met. Finally, while opinions on preferring online over face-to-face learning were more mixed, the majority still leaned toward higher ratings, indicating a general preference for online learning.

Focus, interaction, confidence and usefulness

Figure 4 Perceptions on focus, interaction, confidence and overall usefulness



Learners reported highly positive perceptions across all aspects. Most respondents gave the highest ratings, especially for overall usefulness, confidence building, and enjoyment of interaction. While focus-related items also received strong agreement, they showed slightly more neutral responses compared to other categories.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights the growing importance of international online collaboration in enhancing intercultural competence and learner engagement. By integrating student-led presentations with gamified elements such as quizzes, the project provided a dynamic, culturally rich learning experience for over 200 students across two institutions. The overwhelmingly positive feedback aligns with previous findings that virtual exchange fosters motivation, deeper understanding, and global awareness (Deardorff, 2006; O'Dowd, 2018).

A comparative consideration with physical mobility programmes, however, shows nuanced differences. While online collaborations offer inclusivity, scalability, and lower cost, they may not replicate the depth of immersion afforded by physical exchanges, where non-verbal communication and lived cultural experiences enrich learning (Weaver et al., 2024). Nevertheless, COIL bridges accessibility gaps by reaching students who may never have opportunities for international travel, positioning it as a complementary—not substitute—strategy within broader internationalisation agendas.

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of virtual exchanges on students' academic and intercultural development. Longitudinal studies could determine whether benefits persist and influence future choices. Comparative analyses between COIL and physical mobility could also identify hybrid models that combine the inclusivity of online collaboration with the immersive depth of physical exchange. Additionally, exploring the role of gamification across cultural contexts and incorporating qualitative insights would deepen understanding of students' intercultural learning journeys.

In addition to these areas, future research should also expand data collection methods beyond structured questionnaires by incorporating qualitative reflections through interviews, focus groups, or reflective journals. Such approaches would allow researchers to capture students' lived experiences, personal narratives, and deeper intercultural insights that may not surface in quantitative surveys alone. This qualitative dimension can provide a richer understanding of how learners perceive and navigate virtual intercultural collaborations, offering valuable evidence for designing more effective and empathetic COIL projects.

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