

A Conceptual Framework for a Malaysia–Japan Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Project: Promoting Intercultural Learning Through Glocalized Issues and Virtual Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

As higher education institutions increasingly seek innovative approaches to internationalisation at home, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has emerged as a promising pedagogical model for facilitating intercultural engagement without physical mobility. This conceptual paper proposes a Malaysia–Japan COIL framework designed to enhance intercultural competence, communication skills using English as a lingua franca, global awareness, and collaborative problem-solving among university students. The proposed project connects students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia, and Sophia University in Japan through a four-week virtual exchange centred on the exploration of glocalized issues affecting both societies. Students collaborate online to investigate contemporary social challenges, analyse causes and implications, develop potential solutions, and create infographic-based presentations. Drawing upon Intercultural Communicative Competence Theory, Social Constructivism, and Experiential Learning Theory, the paper presents a pedagogical framework illustrating how structured international collaboration can foster meaningful intercultural dialogue and authentic language use. The proposed model contributes to current discussions on virtual exchange, global citizenship education, and technology-enhanced internationalisation by offering an accessible and scalable approach to intercultural learning in higher education.

Keywords: Collaborative Online International Learning, COIL, intercultural competence, internationalisation at home, virtual exchange, communication in English as a lingua franca (EFL), global citizenship

INTRODUCTION

The rapid globalisation of higher education has intensified the need for graduates who possess intercultural competence, global awareness, and effective communication skills. Traditionally, universities have relied on student mobility programmes such as study abroad initiatives to provide international learning experiences. However, participation in physical mobility programmes remains limited due to financial, geographical, and institutional constraints. Consequently, higher education institutions are increasingly exploring alternative approaches that can democratise access to international learning opportunities. One emerging approach is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which connects students and educators from different countries through technology-mediated collaborative projects (Hackett et al., 2024). COIL enables students to engage in meaningful intercultural interactions while remaining within their home institutions, thereby supporting the concept of internationalisation at home. Through structured virtual collaboration, students develop intercultural understanding, communication skills, and global perspectives that are essential for participation in increasingly interconnected societies. Within language education, COIL offers particular advantages because it provides authentic communicative contexts where students use English as a lingua franca to interact with international peers. Rather than practising language through simulated classroom activities, students engage in real-world intercultural communication involving negotiation of meaning, collaborative problem-solving, and knowledge sharing.

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for a Malaysia–Japan COIL project involving university students from UiTM and Sophia University in Japan. The proposed initiative focuses on the investigation of glocalized issues, enabling students to explore how global challenges manifest differently within local contexts while collaboratively developing potential solutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COIL has gained increasing attention as a strategy for fostering internationalisation at home and global learning. Unlike conventional online learning environments, COIL emphasises intercultural engagement through collaborative project-based learning between students from different cultural backgrounds (Hackett et al., 2024). Recent studies have demonstrated that COIL contributes to the development of intercultural competence, cultural intelligence, global citizenship, and collaborative learning skills. Virtual exchange environments enable students to challenge assumptions, engage with diverse perspectives, and develop greater appreciation of cultural complexity (Chan, 2025). Furthermore, COIL aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, as well as culture's role in achieving sustainable development, through collaborative efforts toward a common goal.

Intercultural competence has become a central learning outcome in contemporary higher education. According to intercultural learning scholars, effective intercultural communication requires knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness. Research indicates that virtual exchanges provide meaningful opportunities for intercultural competence development because students engage directly with peers from different cultural contexts. Through sustained interactions, learners develop empathy, cultural sensitivity, perspective-taking abilities, and intercultural communication skills (Hackett et al., 2023).

English frequently serves as the medium of communication in international virtual exchange programmes. Consequently, COIL creates authentic opportunities for students to develop communicative competence through meaningful interactions rather than isolated language exercises. Students participating in virtual exchange programmes often report improvements in communication confidence, negotiation strategies, collaborative communication, and pragmatic language use. Such experiences support contemporary approaches to language learning that emphasise communication, interaction, and sociocultural engagement.

The concept of glocalization recognises the interconnectedness of global and local realities. Issues such as environmental sustainability, social inequality, digital citizenship, mental health, ageing populations, and technological transformation affect societies worldwide while manifesting differently across local contexts. Using glocalised issues as the focal point of COIL projects encourages students to compare experiences across cultures, critically examine societal challenges, and collaboratively develop context-sensitive solutions. Such discussions facilitate both intercultural learning and global citizenship development.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The proposed Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) framework is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Theory, Social Constructivism, and Experiential Learning Theory. Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding how students develop intercultural awareness, communication skills, collaborative competencies, and global perspectives through structured virtual exchange. The integration of these theoretical perspectives is particularly relevant in COIL environments, where learning occurs through authentic interactions with international peers, collaborative problem-solving, and reflective engagement with diverse cultural viewpoints (O'Dowd, 2023; Hackett et al., 2023).

3.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence Theory

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) serves as the primary theoretical foundation for the proposed COIL project. Originally conceptualised by Byram (2021), ICC refers to an individual's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The framework extends beyond linguistic proficiency by incorporating intercultural knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpretation and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. In an increasingly globalised educational landscape, intercultural

competence has become an essential graduate attribute, enabling learners to engage productively in culturally diverse environments.

Within the proposed Malaysia–Japan COIL project, ICC is developed through direct interaction between students from different cultural contexts. As students collaborate on shared tasks and discuss contemporary globalized issues, they are exposed to diverse perspectives, values, and communication styles. Such interactions encourage students to move beyond stereotypical understandings of culture and develop greater openness, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. Through discussions about issues affecting both Malaysian and Japanese societies, students gain insights into how cultural, historical, and social factors shape perspectives and responses to global challenges.

Research has consistently demonstrated that virtual exchange programmes contribute significantly to intercultural competence development. Hackett et al. (2023) found that students participating in COIL programmes reported increased intercultural awareness, cultural intelligence, and confidence in communicating across cultural boundaries. Similarly, Anderson and Or (2023) observed that COIL experiences foster cultural humility through sustained engagement with international peers. By integrating intercultural dialogue into collaborative learning activities, the proposed framework aims to create meaningful opportunities for students to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for effective intercultural communication.

3.2 Social Constructivism

The second theoretical foundation underpinning the proposed framework is Social Constructivist Theory, primarily associated with the work of Vygotsky (1978). Social constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction, dialogue, and collaborative engagement with others. Learning is viewed as a socially mediated process in which individuals develop understanding through participation in meaningful activities and interactions within their social environment.

The principles of social constructivism align closely with the pedagogical design of COIL. Rather than passively receiving information, students actively construct knowledge through collaboration with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Throughout the proposed project, Malaysian and Japanese students work together to identify globalized issues, analyse their causes, discuss possible solutions, and create shared outputs. These collaborative activities encourage learners to negotiate meaning, challenge assumptions, and co-construct knowledge through intercultural dialogue.

The collaborative nature of COIL also reflects Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), whereby learners achieve higher levels of understanding through interaction with more knowledgeable peers or through collective problem-solving. Students bring unique cultural experiences, disciplinary knowledge, and perspectives to group discussions, enriching the learning experience for all participants. Through this process, learners develop not only content knowledge but also communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills.

Recent studies have highlighted the relevance of social constructivist principles in virtual exchange environments. O'Dowd (2023) argues that meaningful intercultural learning occurs when students engage in collaborative tasks that require active participation and shared responsibility. Likewise, Wimpenny et al. (2022) emphasise that virtual exchange programmes create communities of inquiry where learners collaboratively explore complex global issues and develop intercultural understanding through dialogue. The proposed COIL framework therefore positions collaborative learning as a central mechanism for intercultural and intellectual growth as well as language development.

3.3 Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential Learning Theory, developed by Kolb (2015), forms the third theoretical pillar of the proposed framework. According to Kolb, learning is a cyclical process involving four interconnected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Learning occurs when individuals engage in experiences, reflect upon those experiences, develop conceptual understandings, and apply new knowledge in practice.

The proposed COIL project embodies all four stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The concrete experience occurs when students participate in intercultural interactions and collaborative discussions with their international peers. Reflective observation is facilitated through individual and group reflections, allowing students to examine their experiences, challenges, and learning processes. Abstract conceptualisation takes place as students analyse globalized issues, compare cultural perspectives, and develop theoretical understandings of the topics being discussed.

Experiential learning is particularly relevant to intercultural education because intercultural competence cannot be developed solely through theoretical instruction. Students must actively engage with cultural differences, navigate communication challenges, and reflect on their experiences in order to develop meaningful intercultural understanding. Research suggests that experiential approaches in virtual exchange programmes enhance students' engagement, motivation, and ability to transfer learning to new contexts (Leask, 2023; O'Dowd, 2023). By incorporating experiential learning principles, the proposed framework seeks to transform intercultural encounters into opportunities for deep and lasting learning.

PROPOSED COIL FRAMEWORK

The proposed COIL framework is designed as a structured five-phase model that guides students through progressive stages of intercultural engagement, collaborative learning, and reflective practice. The framework aims to facilitate meaningful interactions between Malaysian and Japanese students while promoting the development of intercultural competence, English communication skills, global awareness, and digital collaboration competencies.

Phase 1: Intercultural Orientation

The first phase focuses on preparing students for successful participation in the virtual exchange programme. During this stage, students are introduced to the objectives of the COIL project, the digital platforms that will be used throughout the collaboration, communication protocols, and expectations regarding participation. Orientation activities also provide students with foundational knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of their international partners, helping to reduce uncertainty and foster readiness for intercultural engagement.

This preparatory phase is critical because many students may have limited prior experience interacting with individuals from different cultural contexts. Research indicates that structured orientation sessions can improve students' confidence, reduce intercultural anxiety, and facilitate more meaningful interactions during virtual exchanges (Hackett et al., 2024). By establishing clear expectations and providing cultural preparation, the orientation phase creates a supportive foundation for subsequent collaborative activities.

Phase 2: Relationship Building

Following orientation, students engage in relationship-building activities designed to establish trust and rapport within multicultural groups. Activities may include self-introductions, cultural sharing sessions, ice-breaking exercises, and informal discussions about daily life, academic experiences, and personal interests.

Relationship building is a crucial component of successful COIL programmes because effective collaboration depends on mutual trust, respect, and open communication. Through these initial interactions, students begin to recognise both similarities and differences between themselves and their international peers. Such exchanges contribute to the development of interpersonal connections that facilitate deeper intercultural dialogue throughout the project. Previous studies have shown that early opportunities for informal interaction enhance student engagement and contribute positively to intercultural learning outcomes (Anderson & Or, 2023).

Phase 3: Exploration of Globalized Issues

In the third phase, students collaboratively identify and investigate contemporary globalized issues that affect both Malaysia and Japan. Potential topics include environmental sustainability, digital well-being, mental health, youth employment, ageing populations, and social inequality. The concept of globalization encourages students to examine how global challenges are experienced differently within local contexts, thereby promoting critical

reflection on cultural and societal influences.

By exploring glocalized issues, students are encouraged to move beyond surface-level cultural comparisons and engage in deeper analysis of complex social challenges. This process promotes global awareness and critical thinking while highlighting the interconnected nature of contemporary societies. Furthermore, discussing real-world issues provides authentic contexts for English communication and intercultural exchange.

Phase 4: Collaborative Problem-Solving

The fourth phase represents the core learning experience of the COIL project. Students work collaboratively to analyse the causes and implications of their selected issues, compare perspectives from Malaysia and Japan, and develop practical recommendations or solutions. Through online meetings, shared digital workspaces, and collaborative research activities, students negotiate meaning, exchange ideas, and construct knowledge collectively.

This phase reflects both social constructivist and experiential learning principles by positioning students as active participants in the learning process. Collaborative problem-solving not only enhances subject knowledge but also develops essential twenty-first-century skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and adaptability. According to Wimpenny et al. (2022), collaborative engagement with authentic global challenges enables students to develop a stronger sense of global responsibility and intercultural understanding.

ANTICIPATED EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The proposed COIL framework is expected to generate several interconnected educational outcomes that align with the goals of internationalisation at home, global citizenship education, and communicative language learning.

First, students are expected to develop enhanced intercultural competence through sustained interaction with peers from different cultural backgrounds. By engaging in collaborative discussions and problem-solving activities, students will gain greater awareness of cultural diversity, improve their ability to communicate across cultures, and develop more inclusive perspectives towards global issues (Byram, 2021; Hackett et al., 2023).

Second, the project is anticipated to strengthen English communication skills. As English serves as the primary medium of interaction throughout the programme, students will have opportunities to practise authentic communication in meaningful contexts. These interactions are expected to enhance communication confidence, negotiation skills, presentation abilities, and intercultural communicative competence.

Third, participation in the COIL programme is expected to foster global citizenship by encouraging students to critically engage with contemporary global challenges and their local manifestations. Through the exploration of glocalized issues, students will develop a deeper understanding of global interconnectedness and their roles as responsible global citizens (UNESCO, 2024).

Finally, the project is expected to enhance students' digital collaboration competencies. Effective participation in virtual exchange requires learners to utilise digital communication platforms, coordinate group activities, share information, and collaborate across geographical boundaries. These experiences contribute to the development of digital literacy and collaborative skills that are increasingly valued in contemporary academic and professional contexts (Garrison, 2022).

Collectively, these outcomes position the proposed COIL framework as a holistic educational model that supports intercultural learning, language development, global engagement, and digital competence development within higher education settings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The proposed framework contributes to current discussions on internationalisation at home by offering an accessible and scalable model for global learning. The project demonstrates how virtual exchange can

complement traditional mobility programmes while increasing access to intercultural experiences for a broader range of students. For language educators, the framework provides an authentic environment for communicative language learning. For universities, it offers a practical strategy for advancing internationalisation objectives despite resource constraints.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) represents a transformative approach to internationalisation, intercultural education, and language learning in higher education. This conceptual paper proposes a Malaysia–Japan COIL framework centred on glocalised issues and collaborative problem-solving. By integrating intercultural dialogue, authentic communication, and experiential learning, the framework has the potential to enhance students’ intercultural competence, English communication skills, global awareness, and digital collaboration abilities. Future research may empirically evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed model and explore its adaptation across diverse educational contexts.

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