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COIL (COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING) IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CULTURAL HUB

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Abstract: The international delivery of COIL projects has become an integral part of numerous academic institutions. This case study aims to examine the function of COIL projects in language teaching and discusses how these projects help students acquire the digital and intercultural competencies necessary for 21st-century life, enabling them to graduate with a truly global perspective.

Keywords: *(English) international collaboration, language acquisition, cultural diversity, intercultural competencies; (Uzbek) xalqaro hamkorlik, till o‘rganish, madaniy xilma-xillik, madaniyatlararo kompetensiyalar; (Russian)*

международное сотрудничество, овладение языком, культурное разнообразие, межкультурные компетенции.

Introduction

The collaborative online international learning (COIL) started playing a major role in the educational approach to language

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teaching. The term COIL was initially coined by the State University of New York (SUNY), in 2006 [1]. However, the COIL center was established in 2004 and is part of SUNY’s Office of Global Affairs [2]. As SUNY COIL mentions on its website “A well-planned COIL Collaboration enhances your existing course, helps students develop curiosity about the world and a deeper understanding of their own and other cultures, bolsters 21st-century skills, and provides new perspectives on course content”. It creates team-taught learning environments where faculty from different cultures work together to develop a shared syllabus or projects to emphasize experiential and collaborative student learning. In the United Arab Emirates context, specifically, the American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK), students were engaged in COIL projects with other students from US universities. Faculty from the two cultures worked together to develop shared collaborative projects. Such Projects of working on activities with students from different geographical and linguacultural backgrounds were designed to provide students with opportunities to attain cross-cultural competence and intercultural awareness while learning English. COIL projects can prepare students for transferable and employability skills, and those who participate in COIL projects are more open to studying abroad [3]. This suggests that COIL can positively impact student outcomes and provide valuable experiences for students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to study abroad.

The COIL Project Planning

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The COIL model aims to “integrate educational standards, educational structures of educational systems, teaching styles, and academic calendars of different countries, thereby contributing to the formation of cross-cultural professional competencies” [4]. The COIL planning stage starts with finding partners from the partnering university, in our case, they are from Wayne State University in Michigan, USA, and the American University of Ras Al Khaimah, UAE. After numerous meetings online, both faculty designed a collaborative project that would meet the learning aims of both parties. It is important to note that AURAK students were undergraduate students taking a Foundations of College English course (low-intermediate level of English) while WSU students were graduate students taking a course on Teaching Language as Culture (native speakers of English).

- AURAK: Practice English Language Skills (Speaking, Reading, Writing and Listening)
- WSU: Exposure to non-western ontologies & translation of Culturally Sustaining pedagogies and practices

Platforms used

Two applications were used by instructors and students to perform the project activities in addition to Zoom for synchronous meetings. We planned to meet at least twice synchronously and multiple times asynchronously since we had a huge time difference between countries (8 hours).

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1 - Flip (Flipgrid)

A free app from Microsoft called Flip was used where instructors were able to create safe groups for students to engage in the project work using short video, text, and audio messages. Since it is connected to the institutional log-ins, it was easy to control who is invited to  the Flip groups and what they can see. Students found Flip easy to use and very engaging in their learning experience, which allowed them to record their live talks (questions and responses).

2 - Padlet

Padlet was an excellent board where students could upload, organize, and present their work with each other. As we equally grouped the students (3 students from each university), it allowed them to not only upload their group presentations but also comment on each other's work, while allowing instructors to share their feedback as well. Initially, the Padlet was created to post our bios including a link to a video presentation representing each other's culture which helped to get to know each other.

The timeline and the content of COIL activities

The project was planned for five weeks, starting from week 3 of the academic calendar and ending at week 7. When we planned the timeline, we had to consider each country's holidays, academic calendar (examination dates), and differences in time zones. We

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also created assignment rubrics aligned with the learning outcomes, for instance, the presentation of AURAK students would focus on practicing English language skills and recognizing cultural influence on language learning, while WSU students’ assignment was to look at AURAK students’ work from teachers’ perspective (since they are teachers - doing their master education) and prepare presentations to help the learners navigate through the challenges they found in learning languages.

It is vital to have a team-building activity as an ice-breaker, which we did in our first synchronous meeting using breakout rooms on Zoom. The next essential part of the session was each instructor (of both Universities) conducted a lecture which was the foundation or theory on which later assignments were built. Each lecture was followed by a debrief and discussions. Then, at the final stage of the session main assignments were given with the due dates and rubrics. The second synchronous meeting was mainly for students' presentations. Once all groups presented their group work a question-and-answer time was assigned.

The final part of the project was equally important as students of both institutions shared their reflections on the whole project and their learning experiences using Microsoft Forms. The reflection questions were quite simple yet meaningful as we wanted to look at both positive outcomes and constructive suggestions so we could enhance the project for future partnerships.

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Findings and Recommendations

At the end of the project, we asked both university students to share their feedback via Microsoft Forms (anonymously) which contained mostly open-ended questions. 11 AURAK students and 18 WSU students responded to the survey. For the overall experience (1-5 stars) rating question, 75 % of students rated the COIL with 5 stars and 21% with 4 stars, while only 1% rated with a 3-star rating, which means 96% of our students really enjoyed the COIL project. The outcome is interestingly different for both parties to the question that asks their most enjoyed COIL activity. WSU students highlighted that they enormously enjoyed getting to know the new cultures of AURAK students and the challenges they face in learning languages, some mentioned the theoretical part of the lectures as eye-opening in understanding logic systems. However, AURAK students really benefited from getting to know American students, having informal meetings in the break-out rooms, and improving their English language skills. A few students really enjoyed learning new skills (using technology) and found the interactions insightful in getting to know American students' lives.

As data showed, almost a quarter of students (23%) were not happy with the timings of the Saturday class. Especially for students who are on weekends, Saturday evening meetings were not convenient, though this was not a problem for WSU students since it matched their class timings.

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For future recommendations, as the survey suggested, we need to find a way where both parties feel comfortable with their time. Therefore, this semester, we assigned only one synchronous meeting and incorporated more interactive tasks that can be done asynchronously using Flip and Padlet. The main targets of any COIL project should be to provide an internationalized curriculum, and meaningful virtual exchanges by connecting students with peers from around the world, and lastly to develop 21st-century skill sets which were the core parts of our COIL project too.

Conclusion

Following the implementation of our sociolinguistic project and evaluation of student performance throughout the course, it was evident that the COIL provided students with a teaching/learning model that facilitated their development in the areas of communication skills and cultural competency. Both the instructors and the students have the opportunity to learn from it. The development of such intercultural competency is essential for today's generation so that they can contribute and live in harmony in tomorrow's ever-increasing global society.

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