



Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

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The proliferation of digital intercultural collaboration studies, which has been accelerated since COVID-19, has predominantly focused on student outcomes. This has left a significant gap in understanding the parallel development of educator intercultural competence (IC) through sustained pedagogical engagement. This longitudinal study addresses this gap by employing Deardorff's model of IC (2006, 2009) and Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991) to examine the development of IC among Japanese undergraduate students participating in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects from 2021 to 2025. The research employs a qualitative approach, combining thematic analysis of student post-COIL reflective reports with autoethnographic methodology, to document both student learning trajectories and facilitator pedagogical development. Findings reveal the bidirectional nature of IC development, demonstrating that both students and their instructor undergo parallel transformative learning processes. Japanese students exhibited accelerated development in perspective-taking and global citizenship awareness, particularly benefiting from the asynchronous digital format, which provided extended reflection time and reduced communication anxiety in English. The autoethnographic component uniquely illuminates how sustained engagement with diverse cultural contexts challenged traditional intercultural pedagogical assumptions, revealing the recursive nature of intercultural learning where educator development directly influenced student outcomes. This research contributes novel insights into the symbiotic relationship between educator and student intercultural development, providing empirical evidence for the effectiveness of sustained autoethnographic reflection in enhancing intercultural pedagogical practice and student learning outcomes.

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Introduction

Higher education institutions worldwide now recognize that preparing graduates for professional success requires more than disciplinary expertise; it demands the development of global competencies that enable effective functioning across cultural boundaries in today's interconnected world (Deardorff, 2006). This recognition has particular urgency in Japan, where governmental policy explicitly prioritizes cultivating "global human resources" (*global jinzai*) capable of meeting industry demands in an increasingly internationalized economy (Yoshida, 2017).

Nevertheless, despite these policy ambitions, approximately 3% of Japanese university students engaged in study abroad experiences during 2022 (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2024). In the context that the vast majority of students never leave their home campus, extending international learning opportunities through internationalization at a distance (Mittelman et al., 2025), including Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Virtual Exchange (VE), has emerged as one promising response that supports internationalization objectives without requiring physical student mobility (Helm, 2020).

Recent studies suggest that thoughtfully designed COIL experiences can meaningfully advance intercultural competence (IC) development through two key mechanisms: creating authentic contexts for substantive intercultural interaction (Huang, 2022) and embedding deliberate pedagogical scaffolding that supports learning from these interactions (Aski et al., 2023). While acknowledging that digital collaboration cannot fully replicate the immersive nature of physical study abroad, research indicates that curriculum-integrated COIL offers substantial value for developing both intercultural awareness and understanding of global sustainability challenges, particularly for the majority of students whose circumstances preclude international mobility (Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

Although the recent scholarship in higher education has documented student development through COIL, it often overlooks the equally important question of how educators themselves grow through intercultural engagement (Basantes-Andrade et al., 2025; Hackett et al., 2023). A handful of researchers have begun exploring how faculty development unfolds alongside student learning, with some advocating for digital and intercultural competencies to be woven more deliberately into professional development programs (Han & Senyshyn, 2024). Others argue that collaborative inquiry approaches, such as lesson study, co-teaching, and virtual professional development undertaken with international colleagues, offer promising pathways for educator growth (Hackett et al., 2023). Despite these emerging conversations, the existing evidence base remains limited in both scope and longitudinal depth.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a longitudinal investigation of COIL partnerships implemented in three Japanese universities, one national and two private, from 2021 to 2025. The research is guided by two central questions: first, how does participation in COIL projects contribute to the development of IC among Japanese undergraduate students' competencies, which are closely aligned with the governmental concept of global jinzai? Second, how does the author's own intercultural pedagogical understanding evolve through designing, organizing, and facilitating these COIL projects across diverse international partnerships? By addressing these interconnected research questions, the study attempts to provide insights into the potential of COIL to develop global competencies in domestic higher education for both students and instructors.

Literature Review

Although COIL has been defined differently across institutions, a commonly referenced definition describes it as an educational approach that enables international learning experiences through digital technologies, without requiring physical travel abroad (De Castro et al., 2019). Initiated by the State University of New York (SUNY) in the early 2000s, COIL is recognized as an innovative and cost-effective way to

promote global citizenship education. In the Japanese context, COIL has been officially implemented since the mid-2010s, with the Japanese government's Reinventing Japan project promoting COIL beginning in 2018. Currently, approximately 60 Japanese universities actively employ the COIL framework, with numbers growing steadily since the pandemic (Institute for Innovative Global Education (IIGE), 2024).

COIL and students

COIL is widely recognized for enhancing students' IC, although its effectiveness depends on thoughtful design and overcoming several practical challenges. Several studies have explored the role of COIL in immersing students in real-world, cross-cultural projects that foster critical thinking, empathy, and problem-solving skills. In particular, students report increased awareness of cultural differences, improved communication, and greater openness and tolerance (Hackett et al., 2023). Furthermore, research indicates that by collaborating with international peers, students develop the ability to recognize and challenge their own biases and assumptions, thereby acquiring skills to navigate diverse perspectives and counteract stereotyping and discrimination (Kennedy et al., 2025; Marsee & Hoyos, 2025). Additionally, COIL often centers on complex, global issues such as public health and social justice, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration and a deeper understanding of global challenges (Guo et al., 2025; Kennedy et al., 2025).

However, despite these benefits, COIL comes with its own share of challenges. For instance, differences in participation norms and academic cultures can lead to misunderstandings and uneven engagement among students (Kubi & Annan, 2020; Ramírez, 2020). Similarly, unequal access to technology, digital literacy gaps, and technical issues such as connectivity problems can hinder collaboration. Moreover, communication in a second language adds another layer of difficulty, often creating barriers that affect the depth and quality of interactions (Marsee & Hoyos, 2025). Additionally, varied levels of motivation and participation can affect group outcomes; clear guidelines and active teacher facilitation are essential (Ockerman et al., 2023).

Finally, integrating COIL into existing curricula requires careful planning to ensure relevance and balance with other course objectives (Jara-Pazmino et al., 2023; Kubi & Annan, 2020).

COIL and instructors

While COIL has been increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for developing IC among students, instructors' experiences have received considerably less attention. Nevertheless, a growing body of evidence highlights the professional and intercultural benefits for faculty, with further research needed on instructor leadership and personal development (Basantes-Andrade et al., 2025).

Recent research has begun exploring how COIL immerses instructors in cross-cultural collaboration, requiring them to work closely with international colleagues to design and deliver joint courses. This process challenges instructors to step outside their comfort zones and engage with different educational systems, ultimately helping them develop a deeper understanding of global issues. As a result, instructors report increased cultural awareness, empathy, and the ability to facilitate intercultural dialogue in their classrooms (Anderson, 2022; Swartz et al., 2020). Moreover, COIL encourages instructors to adopt new teaching strategies, integrate technology, and co-create curricula with international partners. At the same time, faculty learn to navigate logistical challenges, such as time zones and technological barriers, and design equitable and engaging learning experiences for diverse student groups (Han & Senyshyn, 2024; Swartz et al., 2020). These experiences often lead to more student-centered, reflective, and inclusive teaching practices (Han & Senyshyn, 2024; Swartz et al., 2020).

Beyond individual professional development, participation in COIL projects can enhance instructors' professional profiles, leading to opportunities for co-authoring research, presenting at conferences, and establishing long-term partnerships in international teamwork, project management, and curriculum development. This can open doors to further collaborations and leadership opportunities (Swartz, 2021).

Consequently, some instructors report increased job satisfaction, creativity, and motivation as a result of their COIL involvement, demonstrating COIL's possible role in developing critical interculturality among instructors. This emphasizes the un/re-learning of the self in relation to others, thereby creating new dimensions of relational self (Jang & Rakhshandehroo, 2025). Despite this growing body of COIL research, the educator perspective remains largely unexplored, with very few studies examining how facilitators themselves develop IC and pedagogical expertise through sustained COIL engagement.

COIL in Japan

While the global literature on COIL highlights its benefits and challenges, most research has been conducted in Western, English-speaking contexts, which may not reflect the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Japanese students and instructors. These challenges can include language anxiety, differing communication styles, and educational expectations (Miller & Ali, 2025). Moreover, the lack of localized studies means that important cultural nuances such as Japanese students' tendencies toward formality, indirect communication, and group harmony are often overlooked in the broader literature (Hayashi, 2022; Otonon, 2022).

Nevertheless, a growing body of research focusing on COIL in Japan has reported on the ways COIL can enable faculty to move beyond English-centric, Western-biased models, allowing for diverse international partnerships. This flexibility supports a more accessible and pluralistic approach to internationalization. Japanese national funding initiatives and support structures, such as the Institute for Innovative Global Education (IIGE, 2024), aid Japanese universities in finding partners, offering teacher workshops, and facilitating the adoption of COIL. However, faculty buy-in and ongoing support are critical for sustainability (Radjai & Hammond, 2024).

Beyond these structural considerations, qualitative studies employing daily reflections, interviews, and open-ended surveys with Japanese

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

students have shown an increase in self-awareness in COIL programs. Research in the Japanese context reveals that students exhibit characteristics such as openness, curiosity, and respect (Miller & Ali, 2025). For instance, Japanese students participating in COIL with Malaysian, Chinese, and Finnish peers have exhibited enhanced confidence in English, greater appreciation for cultural diversity, and improved ability to navigate intercultural interactions (Hayashi, 2022; Otonon, 2022; Shaari, 2025).

Japanese students' experiences with COIL are particularly documented regarding English language development and anxiety reduction. Many students often begin COIL experiences with anxiety about their English proficiency. Through sustained virtual exchanges, however, they develop personalized communication strategies, become more comfortable with informal and multilingual language use, and gain motivation to continue language study (Remmerswaal et al., 2025). These positive outcomes emerge particularly when COIL settings incorporate multilingual approaches and provide students with a variety of communicative resources such as gestures, visual aids, and code-switching to bridge language gaps and maintain meaningful intercultural exchanges (Pouromid, 2019).

Building on these student-centered findings, qualitative research in Japan also highlights the crucial role of institutional factors in the successful implementation of COIL. Studies emphasize the need for institutional support, flexible program design, and faculty engagement in overcoming challenges such as time zone differences, technological barriers, and varying expectations for cultural exchange (Miller & Ali, 2025; Radjai & Hammond, 2024). This body of research has led to a growing call for frameworks that center on cultural knowledge and exchange, such as the Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, which adapts existing pedagogical models to better account for cultural learning in COIL (Bae & Chong, 2024). To fully understand how COIL contributes to IC development in Japan, more in-depth, qualitative studies are needed. These studies should continue to explore the lived experiences of students, challenges, and growth, and inform the

design of culturally sensitive COIL programs that address the unique needs of Japanese learners within diverse international partnerships.

Theoretical Framework: IC as a Transformative Space

Numerous IC models exist, yet they fundamentally converge on the understanding that IC develops through the acquisition of knowledge about diverse cultures and engagement with differences. Deardorff's 2006 and 2009 process models of IC, illustrated in Figure 1, demonstrate this developmental trajectory.

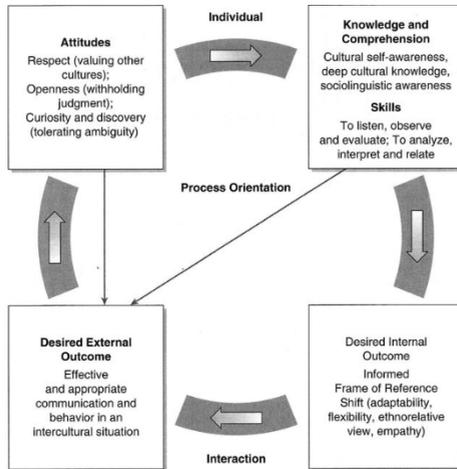


Figure 1. Process Model of IC (Adapted from Deardorff 2006, 2009).

The model emphasizes that individuals develop IC through interaction with others, with particular attention to attitudes, knowledge, internal frames of reference, and behavior. The development of IC can be understood as a dynamic, recurrent process that depends heavily on intensive, meaningful intercultural contacts that enable individuals to reconsider their worldviews. As Deardorff (2009, p. 269) articulated, this process involves shared humanity and the transformative potential of intercultural communication through learning by doing and reflecting:

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

As we continually search for ways to get along together as human beings sharing this one planet, the need to transcend boundaries, to bridge and transform our differences, to be in relationship with one another, to join in the oneness of our humanity while accepting our differences ... In the end, intercultural competence is about our relationships with each other and, ultimately, our very survival as the human race, as we work together to address the global challenges that confront us.

Building on Deardorff's framework, Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning provides complementary insights into how individuals critically reflect on and modify their frames of reference. This theory centers on the premise that learning becomes transformative when it leads to fundamental shifts in perspective. This process typically involves experiencing a disorienting dilemma that challenges existing beliefs, prompting self-examination and critical reflection on assumptions. It also involves participating in dialogue to explore new perspectives, integrating new viewpoints into one's worldview, and ultimately developing more inclusive and autonomous thinking.

Within the Japanese higher education context, this transformative process often begins with such a crisis or dilemma. It culminates in fundamental changes in how students perceive themselves and their relationships with others. Rather than viewing IC as a fixed endpoint, engaging with Mezirow's research scholarship encourages educators to address its limitations by incorporating emotional and affective dimensions into pedagogical approaches (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). This consideration is particularly relevant in the context of Japanese culture, which emphasizes relational harmony and emotional attunement.

Methods

This study employs autoethnography, as it provides reflective opportunities for me, the COIL instructor, to use personal narratives to critically examine my own experiences, beliefs, and practices within broader cultural and educational contexts. Engaging in autoethnography can lead to meaningful changes in teaching practice, as I identify and challenge habitual patterns, biases, and institutional norms (Norris & Sawyer, 2016). Simultaneously, a rigorous thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to critically examine the reflective reports submitted by students at the end of their COIL projects. Analytically, Deardorff's (2006, 2009) IC framework guided the coding process by identifying specific dimensions of intercultural competence development—including attitudes (respect, openness), knowledge (cultural self-awareness, deep cultural understanding), skills (listening, observing, interpreting), and desired outcomes (effective and appropriate behavior in intercultural situations). Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory then provided a deeper interpretive layer, helping to explain how these intercultural competence developments occurred through processes of critical reflection, disorienting dilemmas, and perspective transformation. In other words, Deardorff's framework helped identify the aspects of intercultural competence that were developing. At the same time, Mezirow's theory illuminated how these transformations occurred through the critical examination of assumptions and the process of meaning-making. With this understanding, I examined how I explore, challenge, and co-construct the meaning of myself and COIL teaching practices through reflective notes and how this has informed my pedagogical development and students' experiences.

Data collection and analysis

My autoethnographic journey began in April 2021 with my first COIL teaching experience and continued on a monthly basis until October 2025. I documented both student learning trajectories and instructor pedagogical development across six international partnerships in three Japanese universities, comprising one national and two private

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

institutions, with partners from various countries, including the United States, Germany, Indonesia, Ukraine, Belgium, Portugal, Brazil, Türkiye, and Mexico. I wrote reflective Google document notes as I explored each COIL partnership, documenting my observations, challenges, decision-making processes, and evolving understanding of intercultural facilitation. At the end of each COIL project, which lasted for about two to three months, I asked my students to write an open-ended reflective report about their experience. Each student wrote one reflective report post-COIL. In total, 302 students volunteered to share their COIL reflective reports, which were collected after obtaining ethical approval from my institution and ensuring that students were informed about the study and that their responses would be kept anonymous.

To analyze the data, I immersed myself in both student reflections and my autoethnographic notes, identifying recurring words and phrases that were subsequently developed into primary codes and sub-codes. These included categories such as language and cultural practices, teaching and learning strategies, intercultural communication challenges, students' emotional responses to cross-cultural engagement, technological adaptations, identity negotiation, and collaborative dynamics. The coding process was iterative and reflexive, with themes emerging organically from the data. Using NVivo 12, I organized and refined these codes into broader thematic categories. This iterative process involved clustering related codes, reviewing relationships between them, and refining themes to ensure they represented the data.

Researcher positionality

As this study is grounded in autoethnography, it is fundamental to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher and educator. I grew up as a cisgender woman in a traditional, Muslim, Shia family in Shiraz, Iran. At 12, I began questioning my religious beliefs, ultimately deciding not to believe in any religion. My family eventually accepted this decision. My journey into cultural diversity began at 18, when I moved to Tehran, the capital of Iran, to study at the University of Tehran. I lived in a shared

university dormitory, exposing me to Iran's ethnic minority cultures and languages. This experience opened my eyes to the country's rich diversity. I immigrated to Japan at 22 with my family, completed my MA and Ph.D. in Japanese universities, became a naturalized Japanese citizen, and have lived in Japan since then.

My interactions with COIL partners and my students have deepened my self-awareness and understanding of Others. This study supported my efforts to foster global outlooks and enhance my research, teaching, and self-understanding through reflective practices. My identity as both an insider within Japanese educational culture and an outsider due to my non-Asian (visible difference) enables me to uniquely observe and analyze the nuances of COIL implementation in Japanese higher education. Throughout this research, I maintained reflexivity by continuously questioning my own biases, assumptions, and power dynamics as an instructor facilitating cross-cultural exchanges. I also recognize that my dual positioning, as both researcher and COIL instructor, brings certain advantages and limitations. While my intimate involvement in the COIL projects provides deep insight into the pedagogical processes and student experiences, it also means that my interpretations are inevitably filtered through my personal lens. To address this, I engaged in ongoing critical reflection, documented my evolving thinking throughout the research process, and remained attentive to moments when my cultural background or professional role might influence my analysis.

Findings

Through thematic analysis of 302 undergraduate student reflective reports and my autoethnographic notes, four major themes emerged that illuminate both student IC development and my pedagogical evolution as a COIL instructor. My autoethnographic analysis reveals my journey from a novice COIL instructor conducting small-scale, asynchronous projects to an experienced facilitator integrating COIL across all my courses. This transformation occurred through deliberate engagement with professional development opportunities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online resources became widely accessible,

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

and through sustained relationships with COIL partners who became close friends despite never meeting in person. These themes reveal the interplay between cultural background, pedagogical design, transformative learning, and my own intercultural development in the Japanese context.

From novice to experienced COIL instructor

My COIL journey began in April 2021 with a mini-COIL project, deliberately choosing to start small and partner with a more experienced COIL instructor who could lead the project while I learned the process. This first partnership occurred during the transition from fully online to hybrid teaching as the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions began easing in Japan. I actively sought COIL partners and participated in different COIL matching fairs and professional development opportunities, which became abundantly available online during the pandemic. The additional time at home during the pandemic allowed me to invest heavily in my COIL education. I primarily targeted the Fall semester for COIL, as its duration aligns with the academic calendar in other parts of the world, particularly between October and December. Students' satisfaction, surprisingly, remained around 85% to 90%, highlighting a consistent level of satisfaction throughout the years, even for the first mini-COIL.

My first COIL partner was a Japanese instructor who had immigrated to the United States to teach Japanese language courses. I found her through COIL networking events, and our shared teaching philosophy and Japan experience served as a connecting point to initiate our conversation. As she was more experienced, I followed her lead, and we designed a bilingual project that allowed students to use both Japanese and English, which, according to students' reports, reduced language anxiety for both groups (The target language for American students was Japanese, and for my students, it was English). Despite the 14-hour time difference requiring fully asynchronous interaction, mismatched group sizes with my Japanese class being considerably larger, and a compressed four-week timeline, the student feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with

more than 80 percent reporting complete satisfaction with the experience.

Table 1. My COIL Implementation Journey (2021-2025)

Year	Project Scale	Partners/ Countries	Duration	Key Features
2021 (Fall)	Mini-COIL	1 partner (US)	4 weeks	Asynchronous; bilingual (Japanese English); icebreaker videos via Flip; group presentations via Book Creator
2022 (Fall)	Integrated COIL	1 partner (US)	8 weeks	Asynchronous; cultural exchange activities, group projects and final presentation via Flip, Google Docs, & YouTube videos
2023 (Fall)	Integrated COIL	COIL across multiple countries (US, Türkiye, Mexico)	8-9 weeks	Varied project-based formats: Asynchronous, synchronous via Flip, Google Docs, & YouTube videos
2024 (Fall)	Multiple COIL	COIL in all courses (#6) across multiple countries (US, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Brazil)	8-9 weeks	Varied project-based formats: Asynchronous, synchronous via Padlet, Instagram, WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Docs, etc.
2025 (Spring & Fall)	Multiple COIL	COIL across multiple countries (US, Germany, Indonesia, Philippines, Ukraine, & other Japanese universities)	Spring 8-9 weeks Fall ongoing 8-9 weeks	Varied project-based formats: Asynchronous, synchronous via Padlet, Instagram, WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Docs, etc. (Final presentation in the Spring Semester: in person in Japan)

This initial success was transformative for me. I had just started a new position at the time, and the course was a newly developed one that I had created all by myself. The reflective notes from 2021 indicate that:

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

Initially, I was worried about everything going wrong, but at the same time, I was feeling excited and happy to see how my students' experience would turn out. But seeing my students so engaged, hearing them talk excitedly about their COIL partners, reading their reflections about discovering similarities despite language barriers... I knew I had to do this again, bigger!

The positive feedback encouraged me to expand the COIL. For my second COIL project in Fall 2021, I used the COIL Connect website (<https://coilconnect.org/>) to find a COIL partner, this time more independently. This partnership enabled slightly more complex and longer collaborative activities.

The unexpected gift of COIL partnerships: friendship

One of the most surprising outcomes of my COIL journey has been the deep friendships I have developed with COIL partners, despite never having met them in person. This has been the same for many of my students, as their reflective reports indicate. As I planned each COIL project, I would begin meeting with partners at least two months prior to the project's start, then continue with weekly meetings throughout the collaboration. These regular conversations, initially focused on logistics, learning outcomes, and activity design, evolved into deeper exchanges about our teaching philosophies, cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and educational values.

I began to notice a pattern: my COIL partners and I shared fundamental values, including open-mindedness, curiosity about different contexts, a commitment to student-centered teaching, and a willingness to learn, despite coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and educational systems. These relationships sustained me through challenging periods and enriched my understanding of global higher education. In my reflective notes from 2022, I wrote:

I've realized that COIL is not just about student learning! It's about creating a community of educators who genuinely care for one another and are committed to transforming education. This year's COIL partner has become one of my closest professional colleagues and personal friends. Even though I've never met her, I can share my deepest, most vulnerable experiences with her and know that she's there for me. She'd understand me better than anyone and could mentor me. I hope I can be the same kind of friend for her.

This relational dimension of COIL has been crucial to my sustained engagement despite substantial time demands. However, my reflective notes also reveal growing awareness of the complexities inherent in international collaboration. When I began implementing multi-country projects with instructors from diverse backgrounds, I noticed that participating in COIL for many years does not necessarily mean that partners will automatically share the same values or approaches.

There was a particularly challenging moment when I observed two senior COIL colleagues from different institutions arguing with each other over the design of activities and assessment approaches. This moment crystallized for me that even among experienced, well-intentioned COIL educators, fundamental differences in teaching philosophy, institutional cultures, and educational values can create tension. However, rather than viewing these differences as obstacles, I came to understand them as opportunities for my own intercultural learning and pedagogical growth, and tried to see how I could act as a mediator alongside other colleagues in the project. Working through disagreements with partners, balancing structured and flexible timelines, and reconciling different expectations for student autonomy deepened my understanding of how cultural and institutional contexts shape teaching practices. These challenging conversations with partners paralleled the intercultural learning I hoped students would experience, reminding me that other educators and I need the same, if not more, openness, curiosity, and flexibility we expect from students.

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

By 2025, I had developed more realistic expectations for COIL partnerships, understanding that successful collaboration does not require philosophical alignment, but rather mutual respect, a willingness to compromise, and a commitment to student learning. Some of my most productive partnerships have been with educators whose approaches differ significantly from mine, precisely because those differences push me to question my assumptions and consider alternative pedagogical possibilities. This theme primarily reflects the development of attitudes within Deardorff's framework, in particular respect, openness, and curiosity, alongside the skill of relating across cultural differences. Both students and I experienced relationship-building that fostered internal outcomes of empathy and flexibility.

Navigating language anxiety

Across all my COIL partnerships, Japanese students consistently began with significant anxiety about their English proficiency. My design decision in the first COIL was to partner with a Japanese instructor teaching in the US, allowing for bilingual communication, which proved transformative. Students could use Japanese when needed while practicing English, reducing pressure and allowing them to focus on relationship-building rather than linguistic perfection. They were also pleased that they were not the only students using a second language to communicate. As my COIL practice evolved, I observed that students developed multilingual communication strategies. I made an effort to include non-English speaking countries in our COIL projects to increase opportunities for them to communicate with English speakers from diverse backgrounds. The asynchronous part of the exchange was also evaluated as effective by my students, as they could watch the videos with subtitles and had more time to prepare or ask follow-up questions. For instance, student #14 wrote: *"I was scared to speak English, but when we used Flip videos, I could record and watch my partner's video as many times as I wanted"*.

Students also reported a higher motivation level when they can communicate with "real" same-aged students. For example, student #27

wrote: “...Before COIL, I studied English for TOEIC. Now I study because I want to talk to my COIL friends... It's lots of fun!” The students also developed knowledge of cultural contexts and practices by starting to pay more attention to non-verbal communication and using Duolingo or similar apps to learn simple greetings in the first languages of their COIL partners. They also noticed that not all students participating from a country share a first language. For instance, in the US group, we had Spanish speakers, international students from India, and Portuguese speakers, among others. In my reflective notes, I documented a similar critical realization:

I used to think I should focus on verbal communication for COIL. But watching my students flourish as they worked on the museum exhibition task [final COIL virtual presentation] and seeing them draw a picture to explain their cultural background so beautifully, reminded me that multimodality is there... and we should make use of it. Their artwork was phenomenal!

This theme demonstrates students' development across multiple dimensions of IC: initially addressing attitudes (reducing anxiety, building openness), then developing skills (multilingual communication strategies, observing non-verbal cues, adapting communication modes), and ultimately achieving internal outcomes (increased confidence, adaptability in intercultural situations). As their COIL instructor, I now deliberately design activities that validate multilingual and multimodal approaches to communication. This design choice emerged directly from observing student struggles and successes across earlier partnerships.

Challenging cultural assumptions

Students' reflective reports revealed that COIL partnerships created disorienting dilemmas that fundamentally transformed their perspectives on culture, communication, and global citizenship. I believe that with every single COIL experience, I also immerse myself in a transformative experience. For instance, students reported encountering perspectives

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

that challenged their existing beliefs about their “Japaneseness” and generalizations about different cultures, engaged in critical self-examination about the sources of their assumptions, explored new perspectives through sustained dialogue, and integrated new viewpoints into more inclusive worldviews. I noticed that through my COIL experiences, students tend to start by thinking that there should be a lot of differences between them and their COIL partners’ opinions, then become surprised and amazed to notice there are similarities too, and towards the end, start to reflect on the similarities and reflect on themselves and Others.

One student’s reflection (#76) powerfully captured this transformation:

I think the experience that we could interview and be interviewed by [COIL partner] students was great. I could realize that there are no big differences between Japanese and [COIL partner] students in how they think about learning languages... Through this interview and presentation, I could review Japan objectively.

This student, like many others, reflected on the meaning of “Japaneseness” and the diversity within Japan, including mixed-race children, Ainu, Burakumin, and others, and explored different views and experiences of microaggression through the interview and group presentation assignments. The students engaged in a discussion with their COIL partners and learned that these microaggressions also exist in the COIL partner country. This reflection demonstrates the students’ achievement of cultural self-awareness and the ability to shift perspective from ethnocentric to ethnorelative views.

This theme most clearly demonstrates Mezirow’s transformative learning process working in tandem with Deardorff’s framework. Students experienced disorienting dilemmas that challenged existing cultural knowledge and attitudes, engaged in critical reflection that deepened cultural self-awareness, and ultimately achieved the desired

external outcome of effective and appropriate behavior in intercultural situations.

Navigating communication style

A recurring pattern across different partnerships, especially at the beginning of each group work, involved Japanese students navigating tensions between their cultural communication tendencies, particularly values around group harmony (*wa*), indirect communication, and consensus decision-making, and international partners' varying expectations around directness, individual contribution recognition, and decision-making process. For instance, one student (#156) wrote: "*In our WhatsApp group, the COIL partners made decisions without waiting for everyone to agree. We didn't have much time, but...I felt my opinion didn't matter.*"

I learned to proactively address possible tensions pre-COIL by sharing "true stories" with discussion questions and holding a few pre-COIL sessions to discuss ideas with classmates for my students. Having said that, I reminded students that miscommunication is expected as a part of the exchange, and I give them autonomy to explore and learn by experience. They can always ask for help from their group members, and I encourage them to actively participate in the group discussions through the group's social media channels, such as WhatsApp or Instagram. One student (#204) reflected:

At first, I thought my [COIL] partners were rude because they disagreed with me. But after we talked about communication styles, I understood they were just being honest. I learned to say 'I appreciate your idea, and I also think...' instead of just staying silent. They learned to wait longer for responses before assuming I agreed."

This student's reflection demonstrates successful development across several dimensions: shifting attitudes from judgment to openness, gaining knowledge of different communication styles, developing the

skill of adapting language to bridge cultural differences, and achieving the desired external outcome of effective intercultural communication.

My own intercultural learning occurred alongside students. As someone from an Iranian background living in Japan, I initially unconsciously privileged more direct communication styles, viewing Japanese indirectness as a barrier to overcome. Through observing student struggles and successes, I came to appreciate different kinds of communication styles and the value of consensus-building. This shift in my own perspective enabled me to better support students in developing intercultural flexibility rather than simply adapting to Western norms.

This final theme illustrates the progression from initial cultural knowledge (awareness of different communication norms) through skill development (adapting communication strategies, interpreting indirect messages, relating across differences) to achieving both internal outcomes (flexibility, empathy) and desired external outcomes (effective and appropriate communication in intercultural contexts).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study revealed that COIL facilitation involves continuous learning for educators alongside student development, and that COIL, as a methodology, is feasible through instructors' attempts without university support. My journey, from a novice instructor conducting a four-week mini-COIL to an experienced facilitator integrating COIL across all courses and across different countries, was shaped by student feedback, COIL partner friendships, and ongoing reflection on my own cultural assumptions and pedagogical practices.

The student outcomes included reduced language anxiety, challenging cultural assumptions, navigating communication tensions, and developing intercultural flexibility (Deardorff, 2006, 2009). They occurred not through exposure alone but through intentional pedagogical design informed by my evolving understanding. Similarly, my willingness to sustain COIL practice despite substantial time demands

depended on the deep professional and personal relationships with COIL partners and the visible transformation in students' IC, as well as my own growth.

This study documented that Japanese students develop confidence and competence through multilingual, multimodal communication strategies, extending previous research by Remmerswaal et al. (2025). Importantly, these findings, in line with the existing literature (e.g., Pouromid, 2019), challenge English-centric models of COIL, which assume that language development occurs primarily through immersion in English-only communication. Japanese students experienced what Mezirow (1991) describes as the transformative learning process: encountering perspectives that challenge existing beliefs, engaging in critical self-examination, exploring new perspectives through dialogue, and integrating new viewpoints into more inclusive worldviews. This finding is particularly significant in the Japanese context, where students' tendencies toward indirect communication and group harmony (Hayashi, 2022; Otonon, 2022) might initially seem to conflict with the open critique and perspective-taking required for transformative learning. However, the data reveal that when COIL partnerships provide structured support and validation, Japanese students and their COIL partners can engage productively with disorienting dilemmas and experience profound perspective transformation. The variety of cultural assumptions challenged, ranging from perceptions of "Japaneseness" to communication styles to decision-making processes, demonstrates that transformative learning in COIL is not limited to any single cultural domain but rather represents a fundamental reorientation toward cultural difference itself (Deardorff, 2006, 2009).

Moreover, my autoethnographic reflection highlights the importance of educator development in tandem with student development (Miller & Ali, 2025; Radjai & Hammond, 2024). The progression from unconscious cultural identity to cultural self-awareness and intercultural flexibility reflects Deardorff's (2006, 2009) dynamic, recurrent model of intercultural development. Students engage in intensive, meaningful intercultural contacts that challenge them to reconsider their worldviews, moving through cycles of knowledge acquisition, attitude development,

Transformative Learning Through Digital Intercultural Collaboration: A Case Study of COIL Experiences in Japan

and skill building. My autoethnographic journey parallels this student development. Initially, I approached COIL teaching with the goal of supporting students' global jinzai development. Through reflecting on my own transnational identity experiences and observing students' progress, I developed more culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches that validate Japanese cultural practices while expanding my own and students' communicative repertoires. This finding underscores the significance of ongoing educator development in COIL contexts, as well as the value of reflective autoethnography in instructor professional development.

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. As an autoethnographic study, findings reflect my particular positionality as an Iranian-born, naturalized Japanese educator facilitating COIL partnerships. Educators with diverse cultural backgrounds and pedagogical approaches may observe different patterns. The partnerships examined involved specific countries and universities; findings might differ with different partnership configurations. Comparative research examining COIL partnerships with diverse institutional and national contexts would illuminate which findings generalize across contexts and which are specific to particular alliances. Finally, this study focused primarily on student and educator development; future research might examine how COIL partnerships affect international partners' IC development and what bi-directional learning processes occur in successful collaborations.

This study's findings shed light on the need for continued research exploring COIL in diverse cultural and educational contexts, particularly longitudinal qualitative investigations that document both student and educator development. Such research can inform the design of culturally responsive COIL programs that support internationalization objectives while honoring diverse cultural values and communication practices, ultimately contributing to the development of more inclusive, equitable global higher education.

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