

## **Investigating Student Development of Intercultural Communication Competence through Collaborative Online International Learning**

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### **Abstract**

*This dissertation is a qualitative case study detailing the intercultural communication competence (ICC) development of seven Chinese foreign language learners who participated in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) activities at a regional U.S. university with a group of native Chinese speakers. Multiple qualitative data sources - including semi-structured interviews, observations, questionnaires, and reflection journals - were collected over two years. Drawing on sociocultural and transformative learning theories, this study disclosed four findings that practitioners and researchers can build upon to promote language development and intercultural learning in foreign language coursework through virtual exchange.*

**Keywords:** Chinese as a foreign language, collaborative online international learning, intercultural communication competence, virtual learning

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### **Introduction**

The global workforce acknowledges the need for professionals with intercultural competence (ICC), as ICC can alleviate cultural barriers, misinterpretations, biases, and miscommunications (e.g., UNESCO, 2007; Spring, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative that policymakers and educators in higher education embrace innovative pedagogical strategies to develop ICC and globally-oriented perspectives among current and future university graduates (Damari et al., 2017; Hora et al., 2019). Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a form of virtual exchange that facilitates intercultural exchange for participants in two or more countries. COIL was especially well suited to educational environments in 2020,

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as many study abroad programs were paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this study was to better understand Chinese as Foreign Language (CFL) learners' intercultural communication competence (ICC) development in their coursework and their experiences in COIL projects. Two research questions were addressed:

1. What are the barriers to the implementation of COIL?
2. Drawing on transformative learning theory and sociocultural theory, in which ways might CFL learners develop ICC in foreign language coursework?

### **Literature Review**

Current scholarship indicates virtual exchange can connect students across geographic distance and increase participants' intercultural competency (Dorroll et al., 2019). Moreover, COIL is a cost-effective approach to enhancing students' ICC in higher education (Griffith et al., 2016). However, most empirical scholarship on COIL focuses on English as the *lingua franca* (Diao, 2014) and investigates ICC development in English as a Second Language coursework using English-language-dominated social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube (e.g., Collins & Callaghan, 2022; Dorroll et al., 2019). With some exceptions (Jin, 2017; Luo & Yang, 2016; Luo & Gui, 2019), few studies have been conducted on ICC development in other languages. This classroom-level case study addresses these identified research gaps by shedding light on ICC development through COIL from the perspectives of Chinese as Foreign Language learners.

### **Theoretical Construct**

#### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning (TLT) is "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow 1996, p. 162). The purpose of TLT is to reflect on one's existing meaning scheme to "transform" to a new frame of perspective. According to TLT, an individual's development of new perspectives, as well as the construction of schemes, can be achieved through critical reflection, rational discourse, and by centering one's experience through real-world experiences.

#### **Sociocultural Theory**

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) contends that an individual's cognitive development is the result of interpersonal communications and interactions in various social contexts that influence how people respond and react to each other (Vygotsky, 1978). Language communication is one of the most influential cultural experiences through which a person mediates their connection to the world, to other members, and to themselves (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). As a result, SCT provides a framework for understanding a foreign language learner's connection to the world (through provided scenarios), to other members (the interaction with their American peers and Chinese partners), and to themselves (self-reflection).

### **Research Methods**

#### **Case Study**

This study used a qualitative case study approach detailing the ICC development of seven Chinese foreign language learners who participated in COIL activities for two academic years at a regional U.S. university (Red Mountain University) with a group of native Chinese speakers. This interpretive classroom-level case study approach was used to examine individual and shared social meanings pertaining to ICC development. Congruent with this study's theoretical framework and qualitative case study design, the researcher approached the research questions from the perspective that both language and intercultural development are socially constructed through collaboration and social interaction (Mezirow, 1996).

## Data Collection and Participants

Multiple qualitative data sources were triangulated to establish data credibility, including semi-structured interviews, observations, questionnaires, and reflection journals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All seven participants were selected through convenience sampling, as they were students in the researcher's two Chinese language courses. In this study, convenience sampling facilitated rich qualitative data collection. Students were asked to participate in two individual interviews with the researcher through zoom at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester after they completed their COIL activities and their coursework.

## Positionality and Trustworthiness

Due to my positionality as an instructor of Chinese, I assured participants that their evaluations would not be dependent on participation in the study, and I utilized several techniques to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I documented my preconceptions, beliefs, values, and assumptions in a reflective journal and wrote about how these issues may have impacted participant responses. I documented participants' responses in the language of their choosing. Additionally, I had prolonged engagement with participants, cultivating a welcoming in-class environment for students to express their ideas freely. To ensure confirmability, I engaged in member checking by inviting participants to review interview transcripts, better understand participant responses, and confirm the accuracy of data analysis.

## Data Analysis

Three coding methods — open-coding, axial-coding, and focused coding — were sequentially employed to recognize emerging themes (Saldaña, 2011). The principle of constant comparison of preexisting theories was employed in data analysis where connections between themes were identified and findings were developed (Fram, 2013). Additionally, I employed multiple theoretical perspectives to ensure a rich and robust understanding of the data (Creswell, 1998).

## Findings

Four findings were identified through data collection and analysis.

1. *Barriers to the implementation of COIL.* This first finding relates to the study's initial research question. Existing scholarship indicates that one of the greatest indicators of global inequalities concerns access to digital technologies (e.g., Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2021). In this study, this "digital divide" was most apparent within the United States (rather than between the U.S. and China), as Red Mountain University is located in a rural mountain environment where internet connectivity is relatively scarce. Four factors - accessibility, familiarity, convenience, and affordability - impacted participants' decisions concerning which communication platforms they utilized. Socioeconomic, demographic, and individual factors related to personality traits (e.g., openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness), as well as students' digital skills, also contributed to participants' occasional reluctance to engage with COIL partners.

2. *Increased understanding of cultural differences and similarities, as well as increased awareness of cultural heterogeneity.* The remaining three findings relate to the second research question concerning the potential efficacy of COIL. Participants felt they were immersed in Chinese culture through the COIL project, as it offered them first-hand information and authentic materials shared by COIL partners, often through screen-sharing videos and images that were impossible to access from the other participant's country. One participant summarized his realization about regional cultural differences in China by saying, "As collective as they are, [they are] as diverse at the same time." As stated by another participant, "I like video chatting just because I'm able to pick up on body language, which sometimes says more than words." This ability to engage in non-verbal communication was perceived by participants as a key benefit of COIL, and it reflected how sociocultural interaction had a positive impact on students' cultural development (Gee, 2015).

3. *Increased tolerance and open-mindedness to foreign concepts and cultural norms.* COIL promoted cultural empathy, respect, and understanding among students when they expressed diverse viewpoints and interacted with people from diverse backgrounds. It offered opportunities for students to reflect on their own culture, implicit stereotypes, and ethnocentric bias. For example, one participant stated that “I used to believe that it was weird to take pictures with random foreigners; however, now that I understand the culture and the reason why people do so, I no longer think it is weird and would not get offended or annoyed by it.” Moreover, COIL allowed students to have open dialogues to freely exchange ideas. As one participant explained, “What I learned is trying to put myself in [my partner’s] shoes... It doesn’t mean I would do the same thing.”

4. *Improvement of participants’ communication skills.* Participants stated that COIL helped them learn new words and idioms while improving their overall proficiency with the Chinese language due to consistent interactions with native Chinese speakers. Furthermore, participants stated that they were more confident and comfortable in communicating with native speakers of Chinese. Participants were also appreciative of their COIL partners’ helpfulness, enthusiasm, and high degree of preparedness. Hence, they indicated a willingness to similarly serve as cultural ambassadors on behalf of the United States.

## **Significance and Implications**

### **Implications for Theory**

The findings from this study demonstrated that participants engaged in the critical reflection necessary for self-transformation and a mature understanding of cultural differences and similarities (Mezirow, 1996). Moreover, it affirmed the importance of interpersonal communication in the development of language and cultural understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). This study also revealed inequities in technological access. Hence, a theoretical framework which critically examines inequalities might be appropriate to address equity concerns regarding COIL and communication between CFL participants and their language partners.

### **Implications for Practice**

The implications for practice include the identification of activities that promote ICC development, such as critical reflection, rational discourse, and the use of online communication tools such as social media. Barriers to effective ICC implementation include digital access, different personalities and communication styles, and disparities in beginning cultural knowledge and foreign language proficiency.

Participation in an online international exchange project like COIL takes someone who might exist within a “space of places,” limited in their international perspective, and places them within a “space of flows,” as theorized by Castells (2009), where they can have continuous international and intercultural exchange. This opportunity is especially important for institutions with limited financial, human, or intellectual resources, such as regional public institutions like Red Mountain University. Nonetheless, such HEIs may need to invest in broadband service and replace outdated devices. In many cases, they may also need to provide students with digital access to necessary devices and tools.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study lead to the following conclusions. First, a carefully designed and successfully implemented COIL project enables learners to interact with native speakers, obtain an immersive cultural experience, and develop intercultural communication competence, even when they are unable to travel to a foreign country. Second, the study findings relating to COIL and intercultural development can help regional HEIs create new cost effective, accessible, and sustainable global learning opportunities. This is not to suggest that COIL is a replacement for study abroad, which confirms the finding of Liu et al. (2022); instead, the virtual cross-cultural interactions offered by COIL could be a pathway

to a more equitable transnational experience. Third, this study's findings demonstrate that COIL can be a tool to not only improve students' language skills, but also to help them develop a greater appreciation for cultural differences.

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