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Fostering intercultural understanding: COIL as a supportive tool for Norwegian L2 learners during study abroad

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Study abroad (SA) generally promotes language and cultural learning, but its effectiveness varies depending on interactional and contextual factors (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Kinginger, 2017). This pilot study investigates how Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) can be used to support students learning Norwegian as a second language (N2) during SA at a Norwegian university. Data from a questionnaire and interviews with three N2 students who participated in an online project with Norwegian peers was analyzed qualitatively. Findings suggested perceived development in Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) though experiences differed depending on interaction quality. The study suggests that carefully designed COIL activities may support intercultural learning during SA.

Keywords: COIL, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Norwegian L2, supporting tools for study abroad

Introduction

In today's globalizing world, 6.9 million students study abroad (SA), a number that has tripled since 2000 (UNESCO, 2025). In Norway, the number of international exchange students has recently increased rapidly (Isaksen, 2025). While SA offers valuable opportunities for authentic learning of language and culture, students often face challenges with academic and social integration due to language and cultural barriers, which can reduce opportunities for social interaction and language practice (Borràs & Llanes, 2019; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Kinginger, 2017; Mitchell, 2023).

Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), defined as the ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), is central in foreign language education today. Based on Byram (1997), previous studies have divided ICC into three interconnected domains: cognitive, affective, and skills (Bennett, 2008; O'Dowd, 2006; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020). The

cognitive domain goes beyond factual knowledge to involve interpretive and reflective understanding of cultural meanings and perspectives, while the affective domain focuses on learners' attitudes towards other cultures, including curiosity, openness, respect, empathy, and motivation. The skills domain concerns practical intercultural communication skills.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) enables students from different cultures to interact digitally. COIL has been shown to help develop both language skills and ICC (Hackett et al., 2023). While COIL was earlier considered as a replacement for SA, recent research explores COIL's potential to support SA as preparation (Nowlan, 2024). However, its role as support during SA remains underexplored. This pilot study therefore investigates how COIL can be used to support students studying Norwegian as a second language (N2) at a university in Norway, focusing on its perceived impact on students' ICC development.

Methods

This study involved three N2 students, pseudonymized as Mike, John, and Bill, who were enrolled in a one-year Norwegian language program at a university in Norway. They came from diverse non-European backgrounds and ranged from A2 to B2 in Norwegian proficiency. All volunteered to participate in the COIL project. They were paired with Norwegian students at a distant campus for a three-week collaborative project on United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) via Zoom. All pairs completed the project, submitted the final product and delivered a digital oral presentation in front of peers via Zoom.

Data was collected from a post-COIL questionnaire and semi-structured interviews that explored the N2 students' answers to the questionnaire. The online questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, focusing on the students' experiences with the project, including intercultural learning, communication and collaboration with partners, and Norwegian language development (see Appendix for sample items). The interviews, conducted in English by the author, lasted 20 minutes each. Students were informed about the study's purpose, and written consent was obtained prior to participation. A qualitative approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of the students' nuanced experiences and perceptions of COIL and its perceived impacts on their ICC development. Thematic analysis was adopted because it is a flexible analytic framework that facilitates identification of shared meanings and patterns across the N2 students' experiences.

The data was coded manually using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2022). After familiarizing myself with the interview transcripts through repeated reading, I created initial codes through critical interpretation of the data. In the second coding round, the initial codes were reinterpreted in relation to O'Dowd's (2006) ICC framework and organized into meanings associated with the three ICC domains. Codes were then compared for patterns of shared meanings and grouped into themes within and across these domains. Themes were then re-examined and refined through comparison across the dataset to ensure a meaningful representation of the N2 students' experiences.

Results

After analysis, three main themes were identified: affective engagement, intercultural understanding, and strategic communication. The findings are presented below under each theme, illustrated with examples from the interview data.

Regarding affective engagement, participants reported emotional responses in their interactions but experienced them differently. In the questionnaire, both Mike and John reported that they had a successful collaboration with their partners and that their curiosity about Norwegian culture increased significantly. In the interview, they further described positive interpersonal experiences with their partners. John experienced interactions as comfortable and enjoyable, stating, “He was good at discussing with me... He has a very good humor to work with...I feel very comfortable working with him.” Similarly, Mike described interactions with his partner as open and comfortable, saying, “We always listened our opinions...It was very comfortable...we were like buddies.” When explaining his increased curiosity about Norwegian, he compared his earlier assumptions about the Norwegian work ethic with his experience working with his partner, saying, “In Norway, people very comfortable...but Ola gives a lot of respect to the project...he was a hard worker for this project, and he respect a lot, to me.” In contrast, Bill described his interaction with his partner expressing dissatisfaction. He expressed frustration with his partner’s low engagement in the project, saying “When someone is not giving the same energy as you, it’s not good. I wasn’t satisfied.” Nevertheless, he reported increased motivation to learn Norwegian and willingness to communicate in Norwegian, inspired rather by his N2-peer’s Norwegian presentation.

Regarding intercultural understanding, both Mike and John answered “increased” and “significantly increased” to the questionnaire question about their understanding of their own and Norwegian culture. The interview data illustrates that through interaction with the Norwegian partners, they reflected on their own and their partners’ communication styles. For instance, John noticed how he communicates compared to Norwegians, stating, “When I talk, I use a lot of my hands, and I know that... people [from my country] like to talk a lot. I occupy 10 minutes and I would say more! And others say ‘John, stop!’ ‘Oh my God! I’m sorry! I got to stop!’ (laughter)” In contrast, Bill’s response to this questionnaire item was that he only slightly increased his understanding and knowledge about own and Norwegian culture. In the interview, he stated that he gained much of his knowledge through his own research for the project rather than from interaction with his partner. For example, he learned new information about Norway while researching the SDGs, stating, “I didn’t know that... Norway gives a lot of money also to my country.”

Regarding strategic communication, N2 students used Norwegian differently and to varying degrees in their interactions. Although Mike and Bill, who had low Norwegian proficiency, used English as the main communication language, both incorporated some Norwegian into their interactions. Mike asked his partner to help him with the pronunciation of Norwegian words. Bill used Norwegian in a potentially tense social situation. To answer his partner’s apologies for weak communication, he wrote, “It’s no problem, *jeg forstår* (I understand).” John, who is proficient in colloquial Norwegian, described adopting a more formal Norwegian register during

communication with his partner, saying, “I didn’t use *skal vi ta en prat* (shall we have a chat)? because it’s less official... I want to do...more official.”

Discussion

The N2 students’ experiences may indicate that they developed across the three ICC domains, but the nature and degree of the development varied across participants.

Regarding the affective domain, Mike and John’s experiences reflect a strong personal engagement characterized by respect, trust, and openness, while Bill was frustrated due to the uneven engagement from his partner. This could indicate that emotional engagement may be influenced by the quality of the interactional relationship. It has been argued that meaningful relationships facilitate ICC development because openness to other cultural views within a relationship of equality enhances curiosity and engagement (O’Dowd, 2006). John and Mike’s descriptions of collaboration and mutual listening can be interpreted as reflecting such relationships of equality. In addition to increasing curiosity about Norwegian culture, openness in their relationships may have led Mike to question his assumptions about Norwegian work ethics. Through his partner’s engagement and dedication to the project, Mike’s initial assumptions about Norwegian work ethics as more relaxed and less demanding than his own culture were challenged, leading to a more nuanced perspective and possible stereotype correction. In contrast, Bill’s experience of more limited interactional relationships with his partner did not appear to foster similar curiosity. Nevertheless, Bill reported increased motivation and willingness to communicate in Norwegian, inspired by his fellow N2 student’s presentation. As motivation, reflection, and emotional engagement are considered facilitating factors of affective development (Byram, 1997), this suggests that classroom dynamics may support affective engagement even when collaborative interaction is less successful.

Regarding the cognitive domain, Mike and John’s experiences suggest that their cultural learning took place through interactions with their partners. Through dialogue and feedback, they understood their own communication style and how they were perceived by others and were able to compare these with the Norwegian style, gaining insight into interaction norms in Norway. This may suggest development within the cognitive domain, as cultural understanding involves interpreting perspectives, meanings, and communicative practices across cultures (O’Dowd, 2006). In contrast, Bill’s cultural learning primarily appears to be knowledge-based through research. He reported gains in factual knowledge, but the findings do not explicitly show that he deeply reflected on his own or Norwegian cultural perspectives or practices in his cultural learning. Mike and John thus appeared to have more reflective cultural understanding through interactions with their partners.

The three participants’ experiences indicate that they adopted different strategies to compensate for their Norwegian proficiency and maintain interaction flow with their partners. The skills domain refers to the practical abilities learners need to successfully communicate and collaborate across cultures, which include not only linguistic skills but also other skills including interactional, relational, and intercultural mediation abilities (Byram, 1997; O’Dowd & Dooley, 2020). Bill’s intentional use of Norwegian phrases in response to his partner’s apology suggests that he was aware of



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the communicative context and strategically chose an appropriate Norwegian phrase to avoid potential tension and maintain interactional harmony, which could indicate development of relational skills. Mike's request for pronunciation help could also illustrate intercultural communication skills. As negotiation of meaning is a central feature of intercultural communication (O'Dowd 2006), Mike's request can be interpreted as a form of negotiation of meaning in a broader sense as it may help prevent communication misunderstandings and ensure mutual understanding. John's adjustment of formal tone indicates that he was aware of register differences and could evaluate the communicative context and use Norwegian appropriately in communication. This is likely to demonstrate abilities associated with the ICC skills domain.

Conclusion

This pilot study examined N2 students' COIL experiences at a Norwegian university. The findings may suggest that COIL supported their development across the three ICC domains, although the nature and extent of development varied across individuals. Mike and John's experiences indicate emerging reflective cultural understanding and developing intercultural attitudes through emotionally engaged interaction. In contrast, Bill's experience reflects primarily task-based cultural learning, without clear indications of reflective understanding or development of attitudes. As relational engagements are considered central to ICC development (Byram, 1997), these differences suggest that interpersonal relationships may play an important role in ICC development. Nevertheless, Bill's increased motivation highlights the complexity of factors influencing successful COIL experiences, which are shaped by various interacting conditions (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Additionally, interactional strategies that the three students used to compensate for their Norwegian language limitations indicate potential growth in the skills domain.

Within its small-scale limits, this study therefore suggests COIL's potential as a pedagogical tool to support intercultural learning during SA. To support development in the cognitive and affective domains, the findings indicate that COIL activities should be designed to actively promote reflective cultural understanding and relationship building as well as to scaffold strategic communication skills across cultures. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples to explore how participants build equality relationships and to examine the long-term effects of COIL on personal relationships developed during the COIL.

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Appendix

Examples of the ppost-COIL questionnaire items

- After participating in the project, do you feel that you have increased your understanding and knowledge of your own culture?

- ▶ After participating in the project, do you feel that you have increased your understanding and knowledge of Norwegian culture?
- ▶ After participating in the project, do you now feel better equipped to compare your own culture with Norwegian culture?
- ▶ After participating in the project, do you think it is easier to communicate with people from Norwegian culture?
- ▶ After participating in the project, are you more curious about Norwegian culture?
- ▶ How effective was the collaboration in the project?
- ▶ Was it easy for you to communicate with your partner during the project?

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