

# Challenges and Opportunities of COIL for Foreign Language Education

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*This study explores the potentiality of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) based on Action research. The COIL was conducted in Academic English classes at a Japanese university and a Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) class at an American university in April, 2022. Theoretical frameworks include Transactional Distance, Interaction, Social Networking Approach, and Social Emotional Learning. The utilization of COIL has increased substantially among language teachers, and there are many reports on their practices. However, studies of the outcomes of COIL based on educational theories are scarce. This qualitative study was guided by Action research theory with the observation of Japanese (n=35) and American (n=6) students in the process of the COIL project and used the students' and the teachers' reflections. The results revealed psychological issues and instructional design issues. However, there is a huge potential for preparing active personnel for a globalized online society.*

*Keywords: COIL, Transactional distance, Interaction, Social Emotional Learning, Action Research*

## Introduction

### COIL

Though Online education has been practiced for a long time, it has evolved almost overnight with the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, this method was typically applied by those who specialized in ICT. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a practice of distance education that can transcend time and space. This methodology promotes learners' online collaboration in a global community. Before the pandemic, The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology proposed the grant "Support for Forming Collaborative Programs with US Universities through Collaborative Online International Learning" (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 2022). The funded projects are unique in the sense that they have a broader framework than an online international class, with such programs as international exchange and internships. The COIL project by Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), International Christian University (ICU), Aoyama Gakuin University, and the University of California, Irvine, is a successful example of COIL projects (Anzai, 2022). COIL has gained recent attention among language teachers since most of them can now handle online teaching domestically. In this study, COIL is defined as an instructional design that includes four elements: Collaboration, Online, International, and Learning, so that a COIL type of instruction can be promoted widely to individual teachers, and not only to those who belong to the well-equipped universities with the grants. The goal of this study is to guide teachers in the proper use of COIL.

### ZOOM for COIL

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional classrooms changed to online classes (MEXT 2020, 2021). There are two types of online communication: asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous online communication includes communication between one-on-one or group discussion at different times. Such examples include emails and Social Networking Service (SNS). Synchronous communication means that communication happens at the exact moment between the participants, wherever they are. One of the platforms to facilitate synchronous communication is ZOOM. Moreover, ZOOM incorporates breakout sessions so that interaction between the participants could be more active than the earlier version without the function. The design quality and usability of ZOOM influenced our decision to choose it over different platforms, since the instructors could facilitate authentic language learning based on Constructivism (Vygotsky,1978). Hacker, Brocke, and Handali (2020) mentioned that the Web Conferencing System emerged as a social technology that led to a virtual togetherness by facilitating access to everyday activities and contacts

for those that were locked away because of COVID-19-mitigation efforts. Moreover, user-friendly breakout rooms could encourage learners for collaborative learning in small groups, which may lead to more active collaboration in the main room than without breakout rooms. In Constructivism view, "learning is a social activity involving collaboration, negotiation, and participation in authentic practices of communities" (Wilson, 2018, p.61).

### **Transactional Distance**

Moore (1993), who studied and worked with Wedemeyer, and considered a father of American distance education, proposed the of Transactional Distance. It refers to the psychological distance between learners and a teacher, and suggests that, although separation by space and time is the most prominent characteristic of distance education, transactional distance is the fundamental guiding principle. The theory is comprised of three distinct constructs: dialog, structure, and learner autonomy (Moore, 1993). His definition of dialog is important to our current study since the dialog contributes to knowledge construction.

### **Interaction**

Moore (1989) identified three kinds of interactions in teaching and learning: learner-learner interaction, learner-teacher interaction, and learner-content interaction. Interaction is a key element in online communication, as it influences the motivation and the outcomes of the students' learning. Anzai (2009) suggested that by integrating Web technologies, learners can now join, interact, and collaborate in an online international community. Frey & Alman (2003) suggested that learner-learner interactions are one of the vital components of successful online learning experiences. Through the interaction, new knowledge is constructed.

### **Social Networking Approach**

The movement of foreign language education is at a turning point, and it has entered a new stage and is transitioning away from the communicative language approach. Learning a foreign language is not merely about mastering linguistic skills in the classroom. Students best acquire foreign language skills in an authentic context, as context facilitates more in-depth knowledge and cognitive skills resulting in better language accuracy. For example, in an authentic context, students can obtain collaborative problem-solving skills with peers and native speakers. Social Networking Approach (Tohsaku et al., 2021) is a recently developed approach for teaching and learning foreign languages.

This approach is a widely accepted global view of language education for 21 century (Shimizu, 2017). We need students to have good problem-solving and critical thinking skills. It is important to have communication skills to interact with each other collaboratively. In the globally connected world, there is expectation that we will be able to work with people who have diverse cultural backgrounds (Tohsaku et al., 2021). This increases the need for cross-cultural knowledge and understanding.

### **Social Emotional Learning**

Social Emotional Learning, SEL, has the power to create positive experiences (Sprenger, 2020). SEL skills are used to complement existing curricula and contribute to enhancing social and emotional adjustment, and higher academic achievement (Zins et al., 2004). There are several definitions of SEL. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) first introduced the term "social and emotional learning" to the education world (Hoerr, T.R. 2019). The integration of social emotional learning into online distance learning platforms has been more critical to the success of future learners in society than previous times (Katzman & Stanton, 2020). We defined social emotional learning as an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which people acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, and show empathy for others. SEL also establishes and maintains supportive relationships and makes responsible decisions. Performance in SEL consists of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and problem-solving skills. Table 1 is based on Sprenger's SEL, and we modified the key concepts as seen in Table 1. The social emotional learning theory would contribute to understanding the outcome of the current research (Wang et al., 2012).

Table 1  
Performances in SEL modified Sprenger (2020)

	Self-awareness
1	I could identify, describe, and understand emotions.
2	I could identify the cause of these emotions.
3	I could seek help from others if needed
4	I was able to make accurate self-judgements.
5	I had a sense of internal motivation.
6	I had a sense of satisfaction when goals were attained.
7	I knew my own ability to accomplish a goal.
	Self-management
1	I was able to handle stress, control impulses, and continue efforts in overcoming obstacles.
2	I could set and monitor progress toward personal and academic goals.
3	I could express emotions appropriately.
4	I could learn and adopt strategies that help reestablish a state of balance to manage feelings overwhelmed.
	Social awareness
1	I could understand and respect others' perspectives in social interaction.
2	I could recognize and appreciate individual and group similarities and differences.
3	I could develop healthy interpersonal relationships.
4	I was able to identify situations in which social support could serve as a resource for managing problems.
	Relationship skills
1	I was able to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships.
2	I was able to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflict.
3	I could seek help when needed.
4	I could work well in groups.
5	I could relate to others from different cultures and backgrounds.
	Responsible decision making
1	I was able to make decisions based on consideration of ethical standards.
2	I was able to make decisions based on appropriate social norms.
3	I was able to make decisions in a respectful way.
4	I was able to make decisions with the consideration of the well-being of one's school and community.

## Background of the current Action Research

### Action Research

Action Research consists of "action" and "research," which explains the core of this research method. Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) claimed that Action Research is trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching, and learning. As a result, teachers and researchers can improve the teaching practice and articulate and justify the educational rationale of what is happening. In this study, the AE instructor and the JFL instructor made observations as researchers. Nunan (1990) identified six steps in Action Research. Step 1 is Problem Identification, Step 2 is Preliminary Investigation, Step 3 is Hypothesis, Step 4 is Plan Intervention, Step 5 is Outcome, and Step 6 is Reporting. This study follows Nunan's six steps.

### AE Context in Japan of Action Research

The COIL was conducted in the first semester of 2022 in Tokyo, Japan. There were thirty-five university students, and they have been studying Academic English and Media. The course intends to help students understand Media in education and develop their English communication skills by offering them opportunities to participate in language

and communication activities. They are expected to enhance listening skills, speaking skills, reading skills, writing skills, and auxiliary skills. The students learned Academic English in the computer lab in the past years.

## **JFL Context in the USA of Action Research**

The COIL was conducted as a project in the second semester of the third-year Japanese language course in 2022 in Tennessee, USA. The purpose of the course is to learn the intermediate to advanced level of contemporary Japanese language and culture. There were six American and international students. The course focuses on developing proficiency in reading, writing, listening, speaking skills, and Japanese culture.

## **Action Research by Nunan**

### **STEP 1. Identifying the problem**

Japanese students generally lack authentic communication using English in the natural context. They also lack the authentic experience of how Web technologies are used for global communication, though the purpose of the classes is to study various kinds of media such as print and audio-visual media.

American students do not have the opportunity to be involved in authentic two-way communication and exchange cultural information about Japan. They have almost no chance to communicate with Japanese students of the same age on campus.

### **STEP 2. Preliminary Investigation**

It was difficult to have an actual preliminary investigation because COIL was scheduled in April. April was the only time that the two instructors could arrange their COIL in the first half of 2022 due to the difference in their academic calendars. Japanese schools start in April, whereas American schools are almost at the end of the second semester. Thus, the two instructors used their previous COIL experiences as a preliminary investigation, and they also had frequent online meetings to finalize the instructional design.

### **STEP 3. Hypothesis: Research questions**

Based on the instructors' previous COIL experiences and meetings over ZOOM, the research questions were developed as follows:

1. How can we solve the problem that the students lack authentic language and communication with the COIL project?
2. What are the outcomes of the COIL project?

### **STEP 4. Plan Intervention**

#### **4.1. Teaching practice: 60 min. COIL**

At the beginning of the COIL session, two instructors made introductions to the COIL project. Then, American students introduced themselves to all Japanese students in Japanese on ZOOM. Each student introduced himself for two minutes by showing a video that the student had already recorded before the class. They introduced their dorms and campus, their college life, and their hobbies. One of the students introduced the international residence hall. Following the American side, the Japanese side made breakout sessions. They had a group of about five students and one American student. Each group made English presentations about Tokyo and Japanese students' university life and had questions and answers. At the end of the session, they came back to the main room of the ZOOM and wrapped up the COIL session.

#### **4.2. Syllabus**

The instructors needed to adjust their syllabi due to the differences in their academic calendars. Japanese spring semester starts at the beginning of April and ends in mid-August, whereas the American Spring semester starts in January and ends at the end of April. The overlapped period of the classes is a few weeks in April, so they decided to carry out the COIL on April 22, 2022, which was the best timing under these circumstances.

#### **4.3. Imbalance of the number of the students**

There was a significant imbalance in the number of students enrolled in Japan and the USA. Japanese AE classes were one required class and one elective class, so there were thirty-five students in total. However, there were six students in the American class. Four students were living in the International House of the University, and one of them took Advanced Japanese in 2021. The other student is a senior who took advanced Japanese in 2020.

#### **4.4. Management of time difference**

The time difference was another issue that the instructors solved. There were 14 hours differences between the two locations. The two Japanese classes were originally scheduled between 9:00 and 10:30, and 11:00 and 12:30, which were between 19:00 and 20:30, and 21:00 to 22:30 in the USA. So, the American class volunteered to shift their class to the evening in the USA, which is in the morning in Japan. The time difference is a key challenge that the instructors should overcome to realize COIL.

#### **4.5. Studying environment**

The instructors developed a learning environment that would make an effective COIL experience for students. The Japanese classes changed from face-to-face to an online class so that the participants could connect to Zoom individually to avoid microphone feedback in a classroom setting. American students joined the ZOOM from their rooms in the residence hall to meet Japanese students for the project. Since the date and time for the class had changed, a classroom could not be reserved. Thus, the instructors should be flexible enough to design their instruction according to the conditions of the learning environment.

#### **4.6. Preparation for COIL to the students**

Japanese students needed preparation for the COIL project and their instructor needed to ensure they could handle the platform smoothly. In addition, the instructor should guide the students' group work within one week to complete the PowerPoint and make English presentations in front of the American students. The time was short but sufficient to satisfy the preparation just in time. American students had experienced ZOOM with Japanese students before, so they did not need much preparation. American students had assignments to record a video for two minutes to introduce their college life. Five students introduced their campus life, and a volunteer student showed her TikTok performance.



*Figure 1. Synchronous COIL using ZOOM*

### **STEP 5. Outcome**

#### **5.1. AE classes in Japan**

In Japan, English education starts in junior high schools, which means that they have at least seven years of English language learning. Despite the length of the education they received, most of the Japanese students stated in the class that this COIL project was the first experience that they used English directly to communicate with foreign people. So, COIL as an instructional strategy, was a significant first step toward global interactive communication. They felt anxious at first in the main room session but enjoyed the small-group discussion in the breakout rooms. One of the students, for example, said that the breakout rooms are an excellent tool for introverted students who might lack the confidence to express themselves in a larger class setting. They also said that they could feel more friendly to the

American students in the small groups since they could see American students' facial expressions and could understand their interest in their presentations. Facial expressions such as nodding or smiling are important cues to facilitate communication (Anzai, Shimizu, Kitazawa & Akahori, 2021). Thus, small group discussions in COIL worked well to get over the distance and facilitate more interaction among both sides of the students.

### **5.2. JFL class in the USA**

American students learn Japanese language and culture mainly from textbooks and online materials. They studied Japanese as elective courses. Few students took Japanese in high school. The current COIL project using ZOOM provided an authentic opportunity to communicate with Japanese students synchronously. Impromptu conversation with Japanese native speakers was a thrilling and a little nervous experience for them. The students experienced more realistic communication, and it motivated them to learn more Japanese language and culture. There were some unexpected issues that happened during the presentation in a breakout room; one of the groups did not finish their presentation because of technical issues and time restrictions. They solved the problems. One of the American students said that he could not hear the presentation well when a noise disturbed the presentation. He said he should have announced his problem. Although American students tend to be relaxed and are not shy to talk in front of people, one of the students told the instructor that he was very nervous during the interaction. Overall, the students stated they enjoyed authentic communication.

### **5.3. Social networking approach and social emotional learning**

Tohsaku et al. (2021) claimed that educators need to help students to prepare for the 21st century world in which we face "volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous." One of the factors for this is the development of technology. We need students who have good problem-solving and critical thinking skills. In our COIL project, students in both Japan and America were flexible with the adjustments for changes to make the project complete.

AE students in Japan described their experience as a fascinating learning experience. They recognized their emotional state objectively: for example, their nervousness. They had to cope with their presentations and questions and answers through self-management. They recognized other participants' presence and social awareness. They reflected that they used verbal and non-verbal cues to communicate and learned they needed to improve their relationship skills. They also learned problem-solving skills through developing and delivering presentations. Thus, AE instructor observed that the COIL gave the students a first-hand opportunity for SEL.

Six students in America described their experience with the COIL project positively. Some students said they wanted to have more time for interaction and deep discussion in a small group. They commented that students in the Japanese university spoke English really well. One student was happy to hear that his Japanese language skill was well received by native speakers. He realized he had to improve his listening skills after the project. Another student commented that he wanted Japanese students to ask more difficult questions. In the JFL instructor's observation on ZOOM, American students seemed to have self-awareness and self-management skills. Five students seemed to control their emotional status, showed good relational skills, and achieved their goals. One student did not participate in this project and did not complete the assignments. He told his instructor that he was overwhelmed by assignments for his major.

## **STEP 6. Reporting**

Nanun (2006) claimed that "the key difference between reflective practice and research is that the results of the process, the outcomes or products, must be published. What he meant by "publish" is to make it publicly available to others for critical scrutiny. In this regard, the presentation at ICoME was a significant opportunity to report the action research (Anzai & Shimizu, 2022). Moreover, as Nanun states, another cycle of COIL should be followed with the second hypothesis and second-round action and observation. Thus, it would be desirable to conduct another COIL to develop a better understanding of COIL and its instructional design.

## **Discussion and Conclusion of the Action Research**

This study had two questions. The first question was to identify how we can solve the problem that the students lack authentic language and communication with COIL. The second question was to assess the COIL project outcomes.

Regarding the first question, the action research revealed that COIL projects would solve the problem of lack of authentic communication with the following teaching strategies.

1. Web conferencing tool, such as ZOOM, facilitates synchronous communication. Zoom provided the students with an interactive language environment in a global community.
2. The video feature included in web conferencing systems facilitates the ability for students to read non-verbal behaviors. Smiling and nodding are some of the examples of non-verbal behaviors.
3. The breakout session feature allows students to divide into small groups. Thus, they can interact with
  - a. other students with less anxiety than in the larger overall group meeting space.
4. The topics of the students' presentations are relevant to the audience. Japanese students wanted to know the lifestyle of American students, while American students wanted to know about Japanese culture. American students commented that the communication by way of ZOOM enabled them to learn more about the diverse lifestyles of Japanese college students. They appreciated the ability to communicate directly with native speakers, without going to Japan.

In sum, it is confirmed that we can give our students authentic language and communication opportunities with a web conferencing system such as ZOOM.

Regarding the second question, the instructors in Japan and the USA observed the following outcomes.

1. The students could learn about the subject matter. The theme of the AE class in Japan was Media, so the students could learn about and experience the new media, ZOOM, in an online international environment.
2. COIL was an experience that English is used as a Lingua Franca in an authentic language environment. Since most of the Japanese students were freshmen, it was their first experience communicating with foreign students directly in English, even though it was online. It was also a significant experience for American students to have real communication. They usually learn Japanese language and culture mainly from textbooks and online materials. The current COIL project using ZOOM provided an authentic opportunity to communicate with Japanese students synchronously. This experience motivated them to learn more Japanese language and culture. Students want to stay engaged in the activities if they are motivated (Shroff et al., 2007.)
3. The students recognized the importance of non-verbal behavior such as nodding, smiling, attentive feedback, tone of voice, eye contact, etc. During the presentations, they read prepared manuscripts. However, during the questions and the answers, they needed to respond spontaneously to make positive non-verbal behavior, although online communication is not totally the same as in-person communication.
4. They felt emotionally close to the students at the partner schools when they spoke in their mother tongues.
5. This is probably because they could understand each other's anxiety when they communicate in a foreign language. They seemed to be willing to help the students when they did not come up with the right words. This was an example of their social emotional learning.
5. They enhanced their media literacy. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.) The students became comfortable using ZOOM for cross-cultural communication, such as sharing a screen to make presentations in breakout rooms or making mp4 files out of PowerPoint.
6. They showed that they enhanced motivation for the foreign language learning. Both Japanese and American students mentioned that they recognized the strength and weaknesses of communication in the foreign language and they want to develop their language proficiency.

The findings of this action research can be generalized in Fig.1. By conducting COIL, the students can learn about the subject matter, language and culture, social emotional learning, and media literacy. They, in turn, influence the students' motivation for learning. The figure would also be useful for instructors to design COIL. The instructors need to consider those four elements to design COIL. They, for example, need to consider what area of the subject they want to focus on, what aspect of language and culture they want to highlight, what kind of social emotional learning they want their students to experience, and what kind of media literacy they want their students to acquire. In spite of these outcomes, however, this study has a limitation as action research, so rigid empirical research definitely needs to follow to confirm these relationships for future research.



Figure 1. A model of Learning with COIL

In sum, COIL provided authentic language and cultural experience in the natural context to both the students in Japan and the USA. As Moore claimed (1993), the distance was transactional between and among online learners. They felt close to each other during the COIL, and they enjoyed online interactions and collaboration in the online international community. They also recognized the importance of interactions: learner-learner, learner-teacher, and learner-content interaction. To create more meaningful interactions, teachers and students need to establish a psychologically safe and friendly learning environment (Bonk and Khoo, 2014). Eye contact and vocal tone are good examples that should be addressed for a comfortable COIL. Interaction and socialization promote learners' intrinsic motivation and engagement in a course (Shoroff, Voge, Coomers, & Lee, 2007). They also have effects on students' motivation and satisfaction (Swan, 2001).

Teachers need to design COIL that can foster students' interactions. Moreover, the COIL was also Social Emotional Learning for the students to prepare for the 21st-century globalized world. To successfully implement COIL, teachers need to be flexible and adaptable to unexpected technological and other issues which do not happen in the conventional classroom. For example, some may start talking without unmuting a microphone, or they may feel anxiety to control the technologies. Problems may arise at any time, but COIL brings students real international communication that they cannot experience in the regular classroom.

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