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Enhancing and expanding intercultural learning through collaborative online international learning

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Abstract

This study investigated first-year Japanese university students' perspectives of their intercultural learning from a collaborative online international learning (COIL) project with second-year university students in China. Drawing upon Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence, this pilot study used reflections and data from a questionnaire adapted from Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016) to monitor students' perspectives for intercultural attitudes (openness, curiosity, respect), intercultural knowledge (culture-specific information), and motivation to learn English after participating in an eight-week-long virtual cross-cultural exchange. Following this eight-week virtual cross-cultural exchange with second-year university students in China, self-assessment from participants in Japan ($n=39$) revealed intercultural attitudes of valuing others, withholding judgment, and curiosity. Additionally, the students described the importance and enjoyment of English. In addition to highlighting the Japanese participants' perspectives of this COIL project, this paper describes the impetus for setting up the program, the program itself, and implications for various stakeholders in higher education in Japan.

本研究では、日本の大学1年生が、中国の大学2年生との共同オンライン国際学習 (COIL) プロジェクトから得た異文化学習についての視点を調査した。Deardorff (2006) の異文化間能力のプロセスモデルを参考に、本パイロット研究では、Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016) をもとに作成した質問票の振り返りとデータを用いて、8週間のオンライン異文化交流に参加した後の、異文化的態度 (開放性、好奇心、敬意)、異文化的知識 (文化固有の情報)、英語学習の動機付けに関する学生の視点をモニターした。中国の大学2年生と8週間の仮想異文化交流を行った後、日本の参加者 ($n=39$) の自己評価では、「他者を大切にする」「固定観念にとらわれない」「好奇心を持つ」といった異文化意識が見られ、英語の重要性や楽しさについても述べられていた。本論文では、COILプロジェクトにおける日本の参加者の視点を紹介するとともに、プログラムを立ち上げたきっかけ、プログラム自体、そして日本の高等教育における様々な関係者への影響についても述べている。

Introduction

Recent government initiatives in Japan (e.g., Global 30 Project, Top Global University Japan, CAMPUS Asia) have aimed to internationalize higher education and foster global *jinzai* (global human resources). While interpretations of internationalization are diverse, private universities in Japan tend to interpret internationalization by providing increased opportunities for students to participate in international exchanges (Yonezawa, et al., 2009). The Council on Promotion of Human Resource Globalization Development (2012) describes global *jinzai* as encompassing 1) linguistic and communication skills, 2) skills of stepping forward, thinking well, and working in teams, and 3) intercultural competence. This definition was a simplified version of the original one provided by the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). Studying abroad and international exchanges for the public and private sectors have been popular methods for Japanese youth to foster connections and cooperation (Yonezawa, 2014). Deardorff (2004) described study abroad as one of the most effective means for increasing intercultural communicative competence. While the benefits of overseas exchanges are widely described in the literature, not all students desire or can participate in a study abroad program.

Virtual, cross-cultural exchanges offer equitable and affordable opportunities to internationalize the curriculum (Blake, 2013; Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2015; Schenker, 2013). In addition to students who are unable to study abroad, virtual cross-cultural exchanges can offer opportunities for intercultural experience to those unwilling to study abroad (Kinginger, 2009; O'Dowd, 2016). Collaborative online international learning (COIL) is a type of virtual exchange that has become one of the most popular virtual exchange networks in the world (O'Dowd, 2018). The SUNY COIL Center defines COIL as "globally networked learning and virtual exchange, a new teaching and learning paradigm that promotes the development of intercultural competence across shared multicultural learning environments" (SUNY COIL Center, 2015, pg. 4). In brief, COIL is a type of virtual exchange that connects two or more classes in different locations under the guidance of teachers or facilitators. Vahed and Rodriguez (2020) and Nava-Aguirre, et al. (2019) attribute part of COIL's recent popularity to its cost-effective and innovative approach to increase international learning opportunities.

Recent research (Belarga, 2018; Swartz, et al., 2020; Liu & Thomas, 2021) has reported heightened intercultural competence through virtual exchanges. Other recent research (Ceo-DiFrancesco & Bender-Slack, 2016; Nishio, et al., 2020), in addition to a heightened intercultural perspective, has reported COIL participants' heightened language motivation. While these reports are encouraging, COIL projects can take many different forms in terms of the structure, the project, and the participants. Therefore, more understanding is needed about the diverse experiences and perspectives of COIL participants. This study aims to build our understanding of COIL through the perspectives of Japanese university students who collaborated in a virtual exchange with Chinese university students.

The purpose of this study is to highlight what 39 first-year university students in Japan

in two EFL communication skills classes reported to have learned and developed from participating in an eight-week COIL project with 44 first-year university students in China. Intercultural competence has been increasingly studied by researchers in a variety of intercultural exchanges, notably study abroad. Research studies (Edwards, 2009; Ingulsrud, et al., 2002; Koyanagi, 2018; Ujitani, 2012, 2013, 2017; Yashima, 2010) on short-term study abroad programs have reported the development of intercultural competence of Japanese university students in their exchanges. However, relatively little is known about the intercultural development of Japanese university students participating in the increasing number of short-term exchanges in Asia. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, reports (JAOS, 2018; JAOS, 2020) from the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS) noted the increasing number of students from Japan studying in Asia, particularly the Philippines. In 2018, the Philippines overtook the United Kingdom as the number four most popular destination. The Philippines experienced a 20% increase in Japanese university students (JAOS, 2020). Like study abroad, there is a lack of research on intercultural development with Japanese students participating in COIL projects with students in Asia.

This paper adopts Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence as a lens to view the lifelong development of intercultural competence. Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural skills, and attitudes" (p.249). Deardorff's (2006) process model sees intercultural competence as a lifelong process. Thus, one always has the ability to continue to develop attitudes, knowledge, and skills to interact with others. To begin, the process of developing intercultural competence begins with the requisite attitudes of curiosity, openness, and respect. These attitudes form the jumping-off point from which one begins the process of developing intercultural competence. According to Deardorff's (2006) model, once one starts developing more openness, curiosity, and respect for others, they will begin to develop deeper intercultural knowledge. Here the intercultural speaker develops cultural self-awareness, deep cultural understanding, and sociolinguistic awareness. Absent in the knowledge section in the process model, but present in knowledge section Deardorff's (2006) pyramid model of intercultural competence, culture-specific knowledge can be developed after developing the critical intercultural attitudes. With these attitudes and knowledge, one can start the lifelong process of developing the skills necessary to interact appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations. As these attitudes and knowledge lead to more appropriate and effective communication skills, this paper aims to look at what intercultural attitudes and culture-specific knowledge Japanese participants report in their learning from their communication and collaboration with their peers in China.

In summation, despite the increase in articles and studies on virtual cross-cultural exchanges that have been promoted by the Japanese government, at the time of writing, the author was unable to locate studies on virtual exchanges between a classroom of students in Japan and a classroom of students in China. The purpose of the research is to gain a better understanding of students' learning and perceived intercultural development after participating in an eight-week COIL project. Additionally, this research aims to understand students' attitudes toward foreign language learning through collaborative online international learning.

Method

Context

This COIL project connected students at a private university in central Japan with students at a public university in northern China. The COIL module took place between September 2020 and November 2020. The two facilitators talked over email for three months to discuss their objectives and prepare the COIL module. The COIL module paired two EFL classes of first-year students at a private university in central Japan ($n=39$; females $n=25$, males $n=14$) with one EFL class of second-year students at a public university in China ($n=44$). In groups, the students discussed four different topics and then chose one topic to further research. Each group presented their research in a joint Zoom class at the end of the eight weeks.

The structure of this eight-week COIL module allowed for work to be done outside of class meetings through ZOOM. During the time of this module in the fall of 2020, both classes met online, both synchronously and asynchronously. The module involved four phases over eight weeks. Before the first week, both facilitators downloaded and installed WeChat, a messaging and calling app available in China and Japan. The 39 Japanese students and 44 Chinese students were assigned into 20 groups. In week 1, phase 1, the students participated in an icebreaker activity. The students recorded a short video of 90 seconds or less where they introduced themselves to their group members of four to five students. After they watched the videos, the students were asked to ask one or two questions to each group member based on the information in their video. Following this activity in Phase 2, each week's activity, the students discussed a different topic each week by recording a short video talk and then asked and answered questions about the information shared in the video. Then, the students filled out a weekly reflection on Google Forms. The students answered the following questions:

1. What was interesting about your interactions this week?
2. What did you learn from your interactions?
3. What would you like to know more about?

In Table 1, there are two topics listed in Phase 2 (Weeks 2–5). Due to time constraints, the students could choose either interpersonal relationships or careers to discuss. Next, in Phase 3, during Weeks 6–7, the group members selected a topic they discussed previously to research more in-depth. Each group created a survey based on that topic and administered it to 50 Japanese participants and 50 Chinese participants. Then, the group analyzed the results, made a PowerPoint presentation to present their research in a joint Zoom meeting on November 9. Following their presentations, the Japanese students completed a survey adapted from Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016) to understand the students' motivation to learn English and intercultural attitudes after participating in a COIL project with university students in China. At the end of the survey, the students wrote a reflection on their COIL experience.

Table 1

COIL Module Outline Over the Course of Eight Weeks

Phase	Week	Activities	Dates
Prep	0	Preparation – Install and check required software/ assign students into groups on WeChat (WeChat)	9/14–9/20
1	1	Icebreaker – students get to know each other, learn about each other’s local environment, students learn about Japan/China (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)	9/21–9/25
2	2	Discussion – Summer vacation (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)	9/28–10/4
2	3	Discussion – Food (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)	10/5–10/11
2	4	Discussion – holidays and traditions (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)	10/12–10/18
2	5	Discussion – interpersonal relationships/careers (WeChat) Reflection (Google Forms)	10/19–10/25
3	6–7	Project report – Conduct a survey on one of the four topics/ Create PowerPoint presentation Students give joint presentations on their research during a Zoom meeting during class for the university students in China. (PowerPoint, WeChat & Zoom)	10/26–11/9
4	8	Reflection (Google Forms)	11/9–11/15

The participants ($n=39$) in two classes were enrolled in compulsory English classes at a private university in central Japan. One class ($n=19$; males, $n=8$, females, $n=11$) were Humanities majors, while the other class ($n=20$; males, $n=6$, females, $n=14$) consisted of English majors. These first-year students were either 18 or 19 years old. The students did not necessarily share the same level of English. No formal English proficiency test was administered to the first-year Japanese students. However, one class consisted of English majors while the other class consisted of Humanities majors. In general, the class of English majors in Japan possessed an upper intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency, and the class of Humanities majors in Japan possessed an intermediate level of English. The following questions framed this initial pilot study.

1. What intercultural attitudes of curiosity, openness, and respect, if any, do Japanese university students report to have developed from participating in a COIL project with Chinese university students?
2. What cultural-specific knowledge (analyzing and explaining basic information about a group of people), if any, do Japanese university students report to have developed from participating in a COIL project with Chinese university students?
3. What learning, if any, do Japanese university students attribute to their COIL project experience?

A survey and open-ended questionnaire were given to the participants at the end of the eight-week COIL module to answer these questions.

Data collection

Data was collected from a posttest survey administered in Week 8 of this module. The survey (see Table 1 for the list of 12 statements) was adapted from Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016). The survey had two parts. The survey contained a set of 12 Likert-scale statements regarding language learning, language motivation, intercultural attitudes, and intercultural knowledge. The questionnaire asked three open-ended questions 1) What did you learn from this project? Why is that important? How will that help you in the future? The survey was made into a Google Form and sent electronically to the students via the class LMS. The students filled it out within a week of receiving the Google Form.

Data analysis

The quantitative data from the survey was analyzed using simple quantitative analysis. For the second part of the posttest questionnaire, thematic coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to analyze the open-ended questions. As initial themes were developed, more focused coding was used, as Charmaz (2014) suggests, to develop more salient themes across all the data. The categories noticed were as follows: 1) intercultural attitudes, 2) learning the importance and finding enjoyment in English communication, 3) Learning research and leadership skills.

Results

Posttests survey

Table 2 shows the statistical results of the posttest survey questions. All of the answers had mean answers higher than the neutral answers of 3. Statements one and two concern motivation towards learning English. Statements three, four, and five refer to English ability. Statements six, seven, eight, and nine refer to confidence and comfortability using English. Finally, statements 10, 11, and 12 reflect an intercultural attitude. The English majors rated each statement higher than the Humanities majors. In order of agreement, the statements reflecting an intercultural attitude were rated the highest by both groups. In terms of English, participants rated a motivation to learn English higher than comfortability and confidence to use English and ability to use English. Statements mentioning English ability improvement were rated the lowest of all the statements.

Table 2

COIL Module Posttest Survey

	EM^a	SD	HM^b	SD
1. I am more motivated to learn the language through participating in this course.	4.19	0.87	3.75	0.91
2. Due to this COIL experience, I am more motivated to further my English competency for use in my future work or career.	4.24	0.77	3.9	0.79
3. I feel that my language skills have improved.	3.71	0.78	3.6	0.75
4. I feel that I can speak with more fluency now than prior to my participation in this program.	3.43	0.93	3.15	0.88
5. My comprehension of spoken English has improved due to this program.	3.95	0.80	3.65	0.59
6. I feel confident speaking English after participating in this program.	3.55	0.94	3.2	0.83
7. I feel more comfortable speaking in class now than I did before I participated in this program.	3.62	0.97	3.45	0.89
8. I feel more comfortable speaking with a native speaker now than I did before I participated in this program.	3.95	0.87	3.7	0.92
9. I feel confident that I can conduct virtual meetings in English in a work environment.	3.76	0.89	3.15	0.88
10. This program has made me more aware of the needs, interests, and abilities of others.	4.38	0.67	4.05	0.51
11. This program has changed the way that I interact with others of a different cultural background from my own.	4.29	0.72	4.00	0.86
12. Due to this experience, I would like to study abroad.	4.29	1.01	3.45	1.39

Note. n=39=English majors (n=20). ^bHM=Humanities majors (n=19). This survey was adapted from Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016)

Posttest questionnaire

The findings highlight the attitudes and knowledge students attributed to the COIL experience. Coding of the participants' responses from their posttest survey led to the identification of the following overall themes: intercultural attitude, the importance of communication, and personal development. This section provides examples from participants' responses to the posttest questionnaire. Readers will notice some overlap in themes in the excerpts below. Not all responses fit neatly under one specific theme. The responses were coded under the theme they were best situated. Pseudonyms are given to protect the identity of the participants.

Intercultural attitudes

In the post-test questionnaire, the themes of intercultural attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect were noticed in participant comments. Comments showing openness, curiosity towards other cultures, and respect for others, were present throughout their reflections. For instance, Kenta mentioned how he was interested in cultural differences, how they became close, and how he wanted to meet them.

We were able to get to know each other's cultures, and by talking through English in different languages, we became closer to each other...I wanted to meet and talk with them...I have two other things to talk about. The first is the attitude of actively trying to communicate with foreigners. Through this project, my attitude toward English has changed. Next, I found it fun to use English, so I thought it would be good to get a job that uses English in the future. (Kenta, HM).

Participants, like Shion and Maya, showed respect when they mentioned the importance of seeing different perspectives and how being open to other perspectives and kindness will be necessary in the future. "The experience I gained here enriches my everyday thinking. (It) eliminated many prejudices and enabled multifaceted thinking...It may be difficult to completely eliminate prejudice, but I think this kind of thinking will be required in the future." (Shion, HM).

What I think is important to learn from COIL is to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Conversation is nothing without the other person, so it is important to think about what words you use and whether your words will hurt the other person when you say them... This kind of compassion and understanding of people will be useful in the future. (Maya, HM).

Another participant's comment describes his desire to know more about China and his willingness to communicate with others. This attitude led to more knowledge of China.

By making friends of different nationalities who are the same age as me, I learned more about China, and I found it fun to make more friends with different values. I was hesitant to talk to foreigners before, but now I am going to have the courage to talk to them. (Kotaro, HM).

Participants, like Shion, echoed Kotaro's desire to know more about China, but they also hoped for improved relations between the two countries. "I could learn a lot about China. I wanted to know more about China, and I wish we could have a better relationship with each other" (Shion, HM). Another participant, Masa, saw the wide-ranging effects of this COIL experience that extend beyond the personal level. "...this COIL experience with Chinese and Japanese members will lead to deepen the intercultural and mutual understanding; between different countries" (Masa, HM).

Other comments from the students mentioned their curiosity about different cultures and how they wanted to study abroad or visit China in the future. Another participant, Hana, illustrates the intercultural attitude of curiosity as follows:

COIL experience is important for me because I would never experience such a thing.

In this COIL group WeChat, we talked about many things in English. I was surprised that I could chat with foreigners. It was fun and exciting to have a chat with Chinese students and I liked their cultures and their personalities. Due to this experience, I would like to study abroad. I would like to visit another country especially, China or other Asian countries. I want to know more about their cultures. It was a great experience to have a presentation with Chinese students. (Hana, EM).

Finally, participants, like Midori and Kana, showed an interest and a desire to help others. They also mentioned the benefits and challenges of communication in English across cultures.

I think this experience might be helpful to me when I have to use English at company. Moreover, I might be able to help foreign people who come to Japan and are worried. If I experience some English studies, I will be confident which I speaking in English. By interacting with various people through English, I think I can broaden my horizons. (Midori, HM).

I learned similarities and differences between Japan and China. I think the important things are knowing culture differences and the way to do some assignment together. In the point of knowing culture differences, I especially interested in the way to think about job. It is great experience to share our idea of each countries. Then, I found it is difficult to prepare presentation together. The hardest point is that we have to speak English because they can't understand our language. I think it is very hard work for me. (Kana, EM).

Learning the importance and finding enjoyment in English communication

Like some of the previous comments, the topic of English communication appeared in most of the reflections. In addition to the enjoyment and difficulty of using English to communicate and collaborate, participants mentioned that they learned the importance of English as a tool for communication and collaboration. Participants noted the difficulties of using English to communicate with their partners in China. Despite these difficulties, the partners did mention some benefits they realized from the challenging experience.

I learned so many things from COIL experience. At first, English is really important and convenient language to communicate with other countries' people. If I don't understand English, I can't speak and be friend with them. Secondly, it's really hard to do a presentation with people whose language is different. If I do a presentation task with Japanese students, I can use Japanese and share our works very easily. However, we don't have any choice but to use English this time so I tried to use English that can make it easy to make people understand. That was really interesting for me. (Maya, EM).

In addition to the difficulty of using English to communicate and collaborate across cultures, students described improved communication ability. One student mentioned how she eventually improved the speed of her responses in English.

First, I could learn the difficulty of communicating with the two Chinese members because all of us had to use English though we speak another language as our mother tongue. Therefore, it took me a minute to send what I wanted to say. However, from this experience, I became sooner to reply a message in English. Another thing I learned is the importance of cooperating with each other. We needed to cooperate to make a better presentation slide and a PowerPoint, so we frequently contacted on WeChat. Thanks to our effort, we managed to introduce research we had conducted to Japanese and Chinese students. (Yuna, EM).

Many of the reflections from the participants described the difficulty of understanding the English that the Chinese students used. However, most of the students saw this challenge as a positive experience. The following comment from Nao describes how she was forced to ask more questions. As a result, she commented on increased knowledge about China and improved listening ability and vocabulary.

It was a very good opportunity to improve my listening ability. When there were words that I couldn't understand no matter how many times, I asked. I could find out more about China by researching about its history and the region in which they lived. Moreover, I was able to increase my vocabulary words and grammar because the Chinese members sent it to WeChat with vocabulary words and grammar I don't usually use. (Nao, EM).

Finally, in addition to an awareness of varieties of English, some students described how this experience motivated them to improve their English ability. Participants like Kenta, mentioned their motivation to use English in the future. "Through this project, my attitude toward English has changed. Next, I found it fun to use English, so I thought it would be good to get a job that uses English in the future" (Kenta, HM). Additionally, other participants mentioned their heightened motivation to improve their English now.

I was able to know how foreign people use English and speak in English every day. I haven't had a chance to speak in English in this way with foreign people, so I only knew English which Japanese use and speak in. In fact, I thought I have to study English harder through this experience. It was a very good stimulus. (Midori, HM).

I want to study English further. I am glad that I was able to talk with people who have different native language through English. Due to the COVID-19, we could not go to school, and I did not have a chance to talk with people from different countries, but it was great opportunity to interact by COIL project. I was very happy to communicate with the students in the same group. It was a wonderful memory to give a presentation by cooperating with each other. My members gave a lot of opinions. I want to keep in touch with them. (Risa, EM).

Learning research and leadership skills

Finally, participants described the positive experience they had collaborating with their Chinese peers. They described other developments beyond communication and intercultural attitudes. Some of the participants described the research and virtual learning

skills they improved. In addition to Nao's previous comment about improved listening and vocabulary, Nao described improvement in terms of collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting the data.

Working together with the Chinese members on the assignment has improved my communication and presentation skills. Our group were able to produce high-quality output based on the process of information collection, information analysis, concept, and expression. I felt that the process of advancing the assignment would lead to future work. I think that creating the theme, conducting questionnaires, and summarizing the results led to an improvement in problem-solving capabilities. Moreover, through the statistical analysis of the survey, I think I have gained a lot of power to organize using Excel and PowerPoint. (Nao, EM).

Not all participants mentioned an entirely positive experience. Yet, participants like Yuji were able to describe some of the research and technological skills they learned through this project.

I don't think I learned much useful stuff from this project. In fact, I had already experienced working with a foreigner on a project when I was in high school. In person, of course. That's why I felt it was a little unsatisfactory that the project was done online this time. However, what I got as an experience was not entirely lacking. First, I learned the skills of applying PowerPoint. Secondly, I was able to think through the appropriate choice of words when giving the questionnaire to my Chinese friends. The experience of creating a bar chart in PowerPoint will serve me well for the rest of my life. In that respect, I feel that the hard work was worth it. (Yuji, EM).

While another student described his learning in terms of being able to be himself. At the beginning of the year, this student felt that other students relied upon him too much because his English was at a higher proficiency than his peers. This resulted in him taking a more passive role in our classes. However, after seeing his Chinese group members take on a leadership role in their group, he gained the confidence to be himself in class.

I found I do not have to lead every group work. Since April, I have tried to manage people to finish work because no one say, "Yes," when I asked him or her to be that role. But, thanks to my Chinese group members, I could notice that not everyone is so lazy. They lead this COIL project. Although I was little inactive. I found I need to come back to myself to what I wanted to be. The motivating behavior of Chinese members gave me courage. (Yuya, HM).

In conclusion, the participants rated their interest in other cultures and motivation to learn English higher than their confidence and ability to use English. The participants' posttest reflections described their intercultural attitudes of curiosity, openness, and respect. The second research question sought to understand what cultural-specific knowledge the participants attribute to this COIL experience. Comments on cultural-specific knowledge, explaining and analyzing basic information about a specific group of people, were hinted at or relatively vague. Additionally, the third research question sought to understand what learning that COIL participants attribute to their COIL experience. The participants

expressed that they learned or felt a certain degree of improvement in their communication ability. Furthermore, the participants described learning the value of English in terms of communication and collaborating. Finally, participants mentioned other developments in research and leadership.

Discussion

The participants in this investigation described their intercultural development, communicative development, and personal development. In the participants' reflections, these areas of development were prevalent. In terms of intercultural development, the participants described attitudes of curiosity, openness, and respect. Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence posits these attitudes as the jumping-off point to start the lifelong process of developing intercultural competence. These attitudes can lead to a deeper knowledge of cultures and, thus, the skills to interact appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations. Participants mentioned that they learned about China or wanted to learn more about China. The lack of culture-specific knowledge in the participants' reflections is not surprising due to the limited duration of this program. Deardorff (2004) describes that intercultural attitudes are the most realistic expectation to be developed from short-term study abroad programs. This eight-week program is about the same length as many short-term overseas programs. The participants' comments on intercultural attitudes developed can help explain the high ratings of statements referring to intercultural attitudes from Ceo-DiFrancesco and Bender-Slack (2016).

Participants also reported learning the difficulties and challenges of using English to communicate and collaborate with their group members in China. Despite these challenges, the participants kept a positive attitude toward English. This is evident from comments describing how fun it was to use English to collaborate. Additionally, the participants described their learning of the importance of English along with their motivation to improve their English. For many of the students, this was their first time to use English outside of the classroom with non-Japanese speakers. The results from the survey from Ceo-DiFrancesco & Bender-Slack (2016) can help explain these comments about the difficulty of intercultural communication and the importance of English from the posttest questionnaire. In the survey, statements referring to English development were rated the lowest, yet the motivation for improving English was rated slightly lower behind their intercultural attitudes.

Besides intercultural development and learning the importance of English, participants mentioned their personal development through this COIL project. Comments regarding other developments came in the form mainly of learning how to use technology to conduct, analyze, and present their research. Participants used social networking sites, survey-making websites, collaborating software, PowerPoint, and Excel in this project. Additionally, one participant mentioned how he was inspired and motivated by his Chinese group members' leadership. Thus, he reported gaining confidence to be himself in class. Careerwise (n.d.) describes motivation and independence in their list of aspects of successful online learners.

The reports from the participants in this study in terms of intercultural attitudes, enjoyment of English, learning about the importance of English, and virtual learning skills

are encouraging. However, like any self-reports, the responses from participants may fall victim to social desirability bias. Vande Berg, et al., (2012) describe the importance of exercising a healthy degree of scepticism in self-reports in study abroad participants. The same degree of scepticism should be exercised here. Future studies should consider anonymous pre and post-test surveys and reflections as one way to reduce participants providing what they might feel to be the more appropriate answer.

Implications

There are several implications of this research involving university students who participated in collaborative online international learning. First, COIL projects offer the potential for participants to develop intercultural attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect. Furthermore, COIL participants may develop a heightened appreciation of the role of English in intercultural communication and thus be more motivated to improve their English. Next, participants can develop their virtual learning skills and confidence to use English in online collaborative situations. Finally, for higher education institutions in Japan, COIL projects like this one can offer opportunities for all students to interact in intercultural situations. Participants in this project also showed interest in studying abroad in the future. COIL projects with first-year university students may increase their interest in participating in short-term or long-term study abroad programs in their second and third years at university. For administrators looking at developing the so-called global *jinzai* or promoting internationalization on their campuses, COIL projects can help work towards those goals, especially when study abroad programs or overseas exchanges are cancelled or put on hold due to a global pandemic like with COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study aimed to understand what 39 first-year Japanese university students reported learning from participating in a collaborative online international learning project with university students in China. The Japanese university students described development in intercultural attitudes consistent with intercultural attitudes of curiosity, openness, and respect. These attitudes form the jumping-off point of intercultural competence development in Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence. Moreover, Japanese university students mentioned they learned the importance of English for communication and collaboration. Finally, the students described an enjoyment and motivation for English and improved leadership and virtual learning skills.

In light of the current COVID-19 restrictions on overseas exchanges and study programs and economic and time barriers that limit participation in study abroad programs, COIL projects offer opportunities for all students to develop intercultural competence, communicative competence, and virtual learning skills. These skills encompass the description of global *jinzai* from both the position of METI and MEXT. According to the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development (2012), global *jinzai* linguistic skills, positive and flexible attitudes, and intercultural understanding will be necessary for Japan's workforce to be active on the global stage. Projects like COIL may help set up students to interact more effectively and appropriately in local and global communities

through developing their intercultural competence, foreign language competency, and virtual learning skills. While facilitating COIL projects can be challenging and cannot duplicate face-to-face collaboration, the outcomes can produce long-lasting impacts on participating students and facilitators.

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