CHAPTER 6: COLLABORATIVE ONLINE UNIVERSITY LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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1. Introduction

Advancements in information and communication technology along with the Covid-19 pandemic have significantly boosted the spread of educational practices that enable students to explore various international dimensions of their chosen courses in a meaningful way and develop essential competencies for the future, including intercultural skills. One of the trends in the 21st century is COIL, which stands for Collaborative Online International Learning. This approach to virtual exchange (VE) owes its appearance to Jon Rubin who has been practicing it since 2002 (Rubin & Guth, 2022). Haug and Jacobs (2023) define virtual exchange as "sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people" practice involving "activities in which constructive communication and interaction take place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators" (pp. 144-145). In 2006 a center for this new format of online exchange was established at the State University of New York (https://coil.suny.edu/). Hans de Wit (2013) outlines four main features of COIL: "it is a collaborative exercise of teachers and students; it makes use of online technology and interaction; it has potential international dimensions; and it is integrated into the learning process" (para. 9).

This shared-syllabus teaching approach falls under the social-constructivist educational theory of collaborative learning and is used to enhance internationalization at home (IaH) as it has "a strong focus on the internationalization of the curriculum and of teaching and learning" and is "the non-commercial, cooperative, international dimension of higher education" (de Wit, 2013, para. 4, 5). Beelen and Jones (2015) refer to internalization at home as "...the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (p. 69). This definition emphasizes "international and intercultural learning from diversity, both from diverse cultures in the local student and wider population as well as from working with students from other

nations" (Beelen, 2023, p. 103). Rubin and Guth (2022) define the key attributes of COIL virtual exchange: it is integrated into academic courses or modules that last between five and eight weeks; it is co-developed and co-taught by two professors from two different cultures and/or locations; it centers around collaborative project work involving diverse student cohorts. Additionally, it can link courses across a wide range of disciplines and promotes equity and active participation from all enrolled students. Digitalization has an important role to play in COIL "through interactive synchronous and asynchronous international teaching and learning, as well as support services such as mentoring and counselling" (de Wit et al., 2023, p. 56). Depending so much on information and communication technologies "COIL is not a technology or a technology platform but rather a new teaching and learning paradigm that develops cross-cultural awareness across shared multicultural learning environments" (Rubin, 2017, pp. 33-34).

As the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be slowly diminishing, Europe is now facing a new significant crisis with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This conflict, in addition to causing immense suffering for the people, is profoundly impacting the higher education sector in Ukraine. The war is prompting a substantial brain drain, affecting both 'local and international students and academics' who are fleeing the region (de Wit et al., 2023, p. 51). The implications extend beyond immediate humanitarian concerns, disrupting academic pursuits, research initiatives, and educational collaborations on a broad scale. Virtual exchange initiatives like COIL and other online formats of collective learning can help mitigate the challenges posed by the war on the higher education sector allowing students not only to continue their education without being physically present at their home institutions but also to experience diverse perspectives and approaches as well as fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

2. COIL Methodology

Collaborative Online International Learning brings together students and professors from different countries to engage in joint projects and discussions as an integral part of their academic coursework (https://coil.suny.edu). Typically, COIL projects last between five and eight weeks and are divided into four phases: Introduction, Engagement, Collaboration, and Conclusion (COIL Connect). Classes may be entirely online or, more commonly, delivered in a hybrid format that includes traditional in-person sessions at both institutions, with collaborative student work conducted online. The format is called "a COIL-enhanced module" (Rubin, 2017, p. 34).

The Introduction phase, lasting 1-2 weeks, may involve a student needs analysis, an introduction to digital tools and plans, ice-breaking activities, and the sharing of links, templates, and guidelines. The week-long Engagement phase focuses on grouping participants, modeling exchanges across groups, networking activities, reading, annotating, brainstorming, and comparison and analysis exercises. The Collaboration phase, lasting two or three weeks, incorporates structured group activities, problem-solving, and joint project work. During the Conclusion phase (1-2 weeks), students co-present or share their projects, reflect on their collaboration, and receive feedback on their joint work (COIL Connect).

The first COIL cooperation is always between professors whose students are going to participate in the collaborative work on the project. They have to meet to negotiate and design the program logic model. The latter provides a visual representation of how a project's purpose is expected to be achieved. It links outcomes with activities, materials and resources. The Basic Logic Model (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, p.1) can be used to develop COIL projects.

Figure 1. The basic logic model

Collaboration of COIL teaching partners in the design and execution of the project work is essential as:

> COIL is based upon developing team-taught learning environments where teachers from two cultures work together to develop a shared syllabus, emphasizing experiential and collaborative student learning. The courses give new contextual meaning to the ideas and texts they explore, while providing students new venues in which to develop their cross-cultural awareness. (Rubin, 2017, p. 34).

Haub and Jacobs (2023) find it vital "to connect COIL to learning outcomes" (p. 145) and the long-term impact of collaboration on the student, otherwise collaboration itself can become the focus of virtual exchange. In COIL, learning outcomes must be internationalized or interculturalized, shifting the focus from disciplinary content towards the students and the transferable skills they develop while collaborating on the project. Prioritizing cross-field skills will make it easier to manage interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary learning outcomes (Haub & Jacobs, 2023). Rubin (2017) posits that one of the main tasks is to prepare "students for transferable and employability skills … and COIL projects enable us to better prepare students for their global careers" (p. 35).

Once learning outcomes have been established, COIL teaching partners can work on other

elements of their project logic model, including inputs, activities, and outputs. For inputs, it is essential to consider what resources and materials you need to provide to your students to enable their participation and successful completion of the project. Since the primary mode of communication is through online tools, it is crucial to select the appropriate tools for each specific purpose. Technology should not be used as an end in itself, but as a means to enhance the quality of the project. While choosing digital tools it is advisable to consider factors such as user-friendliness and functionality. Selecting tools that are intuitive and easy to use and that offer the specific features needed for the project, such as collaborative document editing, video conferencing, or project management capabilities can support and enhance the quality of the COIL project.

The selection of materials and technology is crucial and varies based on the planned activities for collaborative learning. COIL teaching partners design tailored ice-breakers, networking opportunities, and teamwork activities to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The project's outputs are collaboratively negotiated, specifying the deliverables of the collaboration, which may include presentations, posters, lists of recommendations, online portfolios or other agreed-upon products. This process ensures that all participants contribute meaningfully and that the final outputs align with the project's objectives.

Another critical element of the project design is incorporating reflection into the learning process (Haub & Jacobs, 2023, p. 52). During the project logic model development stage, COIL teaching partners determine the types of reflection and tools to use to enhance learning from the collaborative experience. Various models can structure reflection on experience, such as the "What? So What? Now What?" framework or more free-form methods. Reflection techniques might include journaling, critical incident analysis, discovery charts, and more (FIU). Integrating these reflective practices is crucial, as they allow participants to deeply analyze their experiences and insights. Ensuring that reflection is a part of the assessment process emphasizes its importance and encourages meaningful engagement with the activities.

Pre- and post-COIL surveys are invaluable tools for both students and educators. The 'pre' surveys prompt students to self-assess their initial levels of cultural competence and establish a baseline for their starting point. The 'post' surveys enable students to reflect on their learning experiences, evaluate the outcomes, and determine their gains in cultural competency as well as other soft skills. These surveys provide critical feedback for teachers, helping them to assess whether the COIL initiative successfully met its intended learning outcomes. Multiple aspects

of collaborative learning can be evaluated through these surveys, including the achievement of learning objectives, group work on the project, the depth and quality of intercultural experiences, and the effectiveness of facilitation. Utilizing these surveys ensures a comprehensive assessment of both student development and the overall impact of the COIL program.

Assessing student work in COIL should be integrated into the planning stage of the collaboration. Allocating time and space for self and peer assessments encourages students to reflect on their contributions, evaluate each other's work, and foster a sense of accountability. Implementing these student-centered assessments necessitates specific criteria, detailed rubrics, and clear guidelines for providing peer feedback. Summative assessments are employed to evaluate the overall learning outcomes, emphasizing both individual and collaborative achievements. These assessments can be cumulative, encompassing various aspects such as collaboration, communication skills, cultural competency, and content quality. Evaluation of student progress and the effectiveness of the COIL program requires thorough and well-structured assessment strategies.

3. COUL Projects in EFL Teacher Training

COIL virtual exchange methodology was used on the Ukrainian level to develop two COUL (Collaborative Online University Learning) projects which were implemented by four professors from three universities in Ukraine in the groups of pre-service TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) student teachers whose English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodology Course follows the same Core Curriculum for ELT Methodology at Bachelor's Level (2020).

The first COUL project was developed involving two cohorts of fourth year students from Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University and Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University doing Module 6 Professional Development, Unit 6.2 Planning for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Sessions on CPD are delivered after 6-week teaching practice and involve students reflecting on their teaching experience. COUL-enriched classes were conducted in a hybrid format including face-to-face sessions at both universities, an interactive online session involving both cohorts of COULearners and individual and collaborative online synchronous and asynchronous student work.

The project logic model was elaborated a month prior to its implementation giving COUL teaching partners enough time to adjust their teaching and scaffolding strategies in accordance

with project requirements. During the Introduction phase project outline, aims and learning outcomes, duration, assessment specifications, criteria and rubric were agreed upon by the instructors to be shared with student teachers during the first synchronous online session. Project participants were also provided with project presentation guidelines meant to direct and support them along the COUL journey.

Having considered the educational needs of students and following the Core Curriculum the teaching team elaborated a series of session plans by building a consensus on activities, teaching strategies and models of interaction to be chosen.

Table 1. COUL project 1 logic model

Resources/ Inputs	● project outline, learning outcomes, assessment specifications, criteria and rubrics ● technology (Padlet, Zoom, Google slides, Jamboard, LearningApps) ● face-to-face sessions ● TEFL self-assessment tools ● tools and resources for CPD ● presentation guidelines ● reflection guidelines
Activities	● Week 1. Ice-breaker: Prior to their first online meeting participants present themselves through their vision of teaching English. They choose a metaphor that best explains their beliefs, values and attitudes. Pictures of their chosen metaphors along with their interpretations are shared on Padlet for other students to contemplate and give feedback. ● Week 2. Students participate in an interactive online workshop sharing insights on professional development based on their teaching experience. ● Week 3. Students are suggested two self-assessment tools to identify areas (teaching competences) which need improvement and development. Lists of three areas for professional development are shared on Padlet. Students are allocated in teams according to the areas they have identified for professional development. ● Week 4. Teams work on their collaborative professional development plans and presentations. ● Week 5. Teams share their CPD presentations on the curation wall for peer revision and feedback. ● Week 6. Students and teachers reflect on their COUL experience in an agreed format. COUL project work is assessed.
Outputs	● ELT metaphors ● self-assessment reports ● collaborative CPD plan presentations ● individual reflections

Outcomes	• improved reflection skills • improved CPD goal setting skills • improved communication and teamwork skills • improved problem-solving skills • improved presentation skills • improved digital literacy skills
Impact	• professional empathy and understanding • soft skills for success in interconnected and diverse world • sustainable improvement through communities of practice • enhanced teaching quality

Student engagement started in Week 1 by sharing their understanding of the essence of "teaching English as a foreign language" on the project Padlet board. Using metaphors as an ice-breaker activity created a special rapport of sharing and appreciation, emotional involvement and interaction. Students associated "teaching English" with sculpting, traveling, planting seeds, opening doors, conducting an orchestra and even with opening a treasure chest. The activity played a self-presentation role by means of visual and verbal imagery, which motivated COULearners to react. Being encouraged to leave comments, students wrote, "I see eye to eye with you!", "I think this idea is very interesting and accurate!" etc. The activity prepared students for building individual and collective knowledge in teams.

From Week 2 on both cohorts of students started participating in interactive online and face-to-face sessions, first of which was organized as a synchronous Zoom workshop. The students were engaged in a range of activities, like negotiating meanings of key CPD concepts on the basis of suggested materials, acquainting themselves with such interactive digital tools as Jamboard and LearningApps, sharing internship impressions, reflecting on their emotional state etc. At the end of the session, students were informed of the Inputs, Resources, Outputs and Outcomes of the project. The rest of Module content was presented at face-to-face sessions.

To individualize learning, participants were suggested to independently investigate their strengths and weaknesses in EFL teaching by utilizing a tool of their choice: European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages or the European Profiling Grid Self-Assessment Tool - both provided on the shared Padlet board. The same venue was to be used to inform instructors of 3 development areas (individual weaknesses) that students had discovered. Accordingly, 16 partly homogeneous intercohort groups of 2-3 were formed in which at least 1 area was characteristic of everyone.

In contrast to Rubin's 4-phase COIL structure (COIL Connect), grouping was conducted in

Week 3 as the Engagement phase was extended. Still, academic activities connected to the project started in both universities already in Week 2.

During the Collaboration phase (Weeks 4-5) the cross-institutional teams engaged themselves in project work activities meant to contribute to their professional development focusing on individual shortcomings typical for participants of every group. At this stage, students communicated and compared experiences, shared resources and weighed ideas to select the most effective trajectories of professional growth; chose collaboration and presentation strategies, made use of imagery and digital tools, refined their presentations, practiced speeches, and made friends. That is why it was definitely the most creative and interactive stage at which teachers-to-be were given opportunities to develop: goal setting, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, presentation and digital literacy skills - the main project outcomes.

The Conclusion phase (Week 6) included collaborative CPD plan presentations and individual reflections published on the Padlet board. Their analysis enabled the instructors to estimate the effect that the COUL project had on students' professional development and to conclude what key takeaways they had. At Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University and Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University students were suggested to use a 3-step "What? So what? Now what?" framework. The first (What?) question elicited a range of highly enthusiastic judgments. Students shared emotions, "From the very beginning, my participation in the project was marked by a sense of excitement and discovery;" immediate benefits, "Cooperation on this project allowed us to exchange experience and knowledge in the field of English language teaching methods and other interesting fields relevant to our profession;" prospects, "I loved this experience and look forward to its positive impact in my future efforts;" gratitude, "I'm really thankful for such a chance to cooperate with students from another university, especially when they have the same problems as yours." Many participants mentioned collaboration strategies or interaction algorithms that they chose to solve the problem.

The second (So what?) question generated numerous insights and interpretations of the experiences gained by the COULearners, e.g.:

"Our project made us curious about several thought-provoking questions, which led us to do a lot of research and reading."

"We all had different ideas and feelings. Sometimes it was hard, but we learned a lot. Listening and being flexible were important. We realized how valuable it is to understand each other's

perspectives."

"The most valuable learning moment was realizing the power of collaboration in overcoming individual limitations and fostering growth."

"The whole experience was very eye-opening for every participant involved. It showed us how powerful it can be when we work together with people from different backgrounds and viewpoints."

While answering the third (Now what?) question, participants tended to single out the most important assets they had formed and to comment on the lessons they had learnt in the COUL project. Ranging such experiences from the most to the least frequent in reflections, the first positions were confidently taken by: teamwork, problem-solving and collaboration skill development. These were followed by: upgrading communication skills, forming professionally significant qualities (open-mindedness, digital literacy, adaptability and learning to learn), and a possibility to exchange resources and insights.

The second COUL project involved two groups of second year students from Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University and Berdyansk State Pedagogical University studying ELT Methodology Course Module 4 Preparing to teach 2, Unit 3.2 Language Skills – Teaching Speaking at Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University and Module 4 Teaching language skills Unit 2 Teaching Speaking at Berdyansk State Pedagogical University. As the participants of the project were Ukrainian universities, no international collaboration was expected.

The first COUL step was between the professors of both universities whose students were to participate in the collaborative work on the project. They created a guiding coalition and a common vision of the project, set common aims and outcomes, negotiated and designed the COUL Unit Outline while planning the project which made it "doable", flexible, and simple.

Table 2. COUL project 2 unit outline

Week	Assignment: analysis, comparison or reflection	% of the COUL mark	COUL element overview/ description	Tool
Week 1	Zoom meeting: Session 1 of Unit Teaching speaking: Unit introduction. Speaking as a skill. Professors introduce	15	On XX.XX.20XX at XX professors from both universities introduce Unit Teaching speaking and the COUL experience through a synchronous Zoom meeting.	Padlet Zoom Voki/ D-ID, Google forms

Week	Activity	Points	Description	Tool
	COULaboration Ice-breaker: Students introduce themselves through Voki/ D-ID etc on Padlet in order to know each other		They must share the Padlet. Each student posts an introductory video on Padlet (deadline XX.XX.20XX) and during the following week they must comment on at least one of the videos posted by students from the other university. At the same time, they must answer the questionnaire posted on Padlet on expectations of the Unit and COULaboration (deadline XX.XX.20XX).	
Week 2-3	Sharing resources	10	Students add the resources shared in their methodology classes on Padlet.	Padlet
	Organizing teams		Students will be allocated in teams.	Padlet
	Group collaboration: students create a shared Google slide presentation in teams. They present it in the final Session on Teaching Speaking		Student teams meet regularly during the Module Teaching Speaking in the agreed way (Zoom conference, telegram, etc.).	Google slides
	Collaborative session	5	Professors conduct an interactive session aiming at Digital tools to teach speaking.	Zoom
Week 4	Sharing Collaborative Group Google slide presentation	50 + 10	Students continue working with the same team from the previous activity. Once the presentation is finished, they must share it on Padlet and present their findings in the last session. The final day to post them is the last but one session on Teaching speaking. During the following weekend, each one of the students must look at a minimum of 3 presentations and comment about them on Padlet (deadline	Google slides, Padlet

			XX.XX.20XX).	
Week 5	Padlet reflection: students and professors reflect on the COUL experience.	10	Students and professors post their reflection on the COUL experience on Padlet and do the survey (deadline XX.XX.20XX).	Padlet, Google forms

The integral part of the planning stage was assessment development. Assessment specifications and criteria were announced and discussed with the students in the first synchronous online session. The assessments were cumulative, encompassing collaboration, sharing resources, activities, digital literacy, and the team's project presentation quality. According to the agreed assessment specifications in groups of 3-6 students were to select 4 activities or a sequence of at least four activities targeted at spoken production (e.g. storytelling, story completion) or spoken interaction (e.g. role play, simulation, discussion) from a lesson or lessons they observed or taught during their school experience or university experience; present their activities in a Google Slide presentation, etc. in class; deal with any comments and questions. Each group member played a part in both preparation and presentation. They had 10 minutes for their presentation and discussion.

Implementing the COIL Connect with some adjustments due to the teaching context and participants' location the four phrases were followed. Besides, being a collaborative online Ukrainian university learning, the emphasis was shifted from cross-cultural communication to the transferable skill development and disciplinary content while collaborating on the project. Classes were delivered in a hybrid format that included traditional in-person sessions at Nizhyn Mykola Gogol University and online sessions at Berdyansk State Pedagogical University, with collaborative student work conducted online synchronously and asynchronously.

During the Introduction phase, students engaged in a variety of activities designed to familiarize them with the project and their peers. They completed a needs analysis questionnaire to establish a baseline for their skills and expectations. Using digital tools such as Voki or D-ID, students created introductory videos which they then posted on a shared Padlet board. This activity not only served as an icebreaker but also introduced students to the digital platforms they would be using throughout the project. Students were encouraged to comment on each other's videos, particularly those from partner universities, fostering initial connections across institutions. Additionally, the two groups participated in synchronous sessions that included ice-breakers and interactive activities designed to develop both prepared and spontaneous

speaking skills. These activities provided an opportunity for professors and students to get to know each other better, develop team-building skills, and understand how to work together effectively in the given online format. This comprehensive introduction phase helped create a collaborative atmosphere and set the foundation for the project's success.

The Engagement phase focused on team formation and resource sharing. Students were allocated into cross-institutional teams, promoting collaboration beyond their immediate peer groups. They were tasked with sharing resources related to their ELT Methodology classes on the shared Padlet board, creating a collective repository of teaching materials and ideas. Going beyond the provided materials, students conducted their research and drew upon their practical experience gained during their teaching practicum at schools. They shared their favorite effective activities for developing speaking skills, as well as online tools that could be applied in both online and offline classrooms. This approach not only enriched the collective knowledge base but also allowed students to contribute meaningful, tried-and-tested resources based on their real-world teaching experiences. The sharing of these practical, student-vetted activities and tools added significant value to the project, making the resources more relevant and immediately applicable for the participants.

The Collaboration phase formed the core of the COUL project. Students were organized into mixed random groups, bringing together diverse perspectives and experiences. Teams worked together to create shared Google Slide presentations, necessitating regular online meetings via platforms such as Zoom, Telegram, etc. This phase also included an interactive session on digital tools for teaching speaking, providing students with practical knowledge they could incorporate into their projects. Students explored a variety of cutting-edge tools including collaborative boards like Zoom's whiteboard feature, vocabulary games using Genially, storytelling exercises with Google Docs, and innovative AI-generated art platforms such as Lexica, Bing Image Creator, Playground.AI, Ideogram, Night Cafe, and Leonardo.AI for creating engaging speaking prompts.

Moreover, each cross-institutional team was to develop the idea for their team's project presentation from scratch, considering its overall development and structure. They were tasked with formulating tips and advice that would be effective in an EFL classroom, as well as creating activities appropriate to their chosen grade level and student proficiency. This required careful consideration of pedagogical principles and adaptation to specific learning contexts. The teams were supposed to develop their own collaborative strategies, deciding how to divide

tasks, communicate effectively, and meet deadlines. Their final presentations needed to showcase practical activities and incorporate these digital tools, demonstrating their ability to blend traditional teaching methods with modern technology. The collaborative nature of this phase encouraged the development of teamwork skills, digital literacy, and creative problem-solving in the context of language teaching, while also fostering adaptability and decision-making skills crucial for future educators.

In the Conclusion phase, teams presented their final projects, showcasing the culmination of their collaborative efforts. These presentations were conducted synchronously via Zoom, allowing for real-time interaction and immediate feedback. Each team had the opportunity to demonstrate their innovative approaches to teaching speaking, incorporating the digital tools they had explored throughout the project. The presentations not only highlighted the students' creativity and technical skills but also their ability to adapt pedagogical strategies for online environments.

Peer learning was further reinforced as students were required to provide constructive feedback on at least three presentations from other groups. This peer review process was structured using a rubric that encouraged critical analysis of content, delivery, and technological integration. Students were asked to comment on the effectiveness of the proposed speaking activities, the appropriate use of digital tools, and the overall applicability of the presented ideas in real EFL classrooms.

The project concluded with a comprehensive reflective component. Participants shared their COUL experience through detailed Padlet posts, discussing their learning journey, challenges faced, and key takeaways. These reflections included insights on teamwork dynamics, the process of adapting to new technologies, and how the project influenced their perspectives on EFL teaching methodologies.

Additionally, students completed a final survey that gathered quantitative and qualitative data on various aspects of the project. The survey included questions about the effectiveness of the collaborative process, the usefulness of the digital tools explored, the quality of peer interactions, and the overall impact on their professional development as future EFL teachers. This multi-faceted conclusion allowed for a thorough evaluation of the project's success and provided valuable feedback for future iterations of similar collaborative online learning initiatives in EFL teacher training.

4. Findings: Post-project survey analysis

Analysis of the post-project survey revealed several significant achievements and outcomes. In the frameworks of the first project, the prevailing majority of students found COUL framework effective while only 4% thought otherwise. As for the most valuable aspect of the collaborative learning experience, participants highlighted the possibility of sharing (responsibilities, project management, ideas, useful resources), collaboration, communication, consensus building, problem solving skills development, and diversity of perspectives.

All student teachers found the online platform (Padlet) suitable for exchanging information, collaboration, and communication. Additionally, users pointed out its organization and self-monitoring potential as they could access all project materials in one place at any time and trace their progress. Besides, the participants found it user-friendly, enabling them to actively participate and seamlessly engage with the content. They also expressed satisfaction of having the ability to post their ideas and react to publications. At the same time, learners mentioned the necessity of using additional digital tools: social networks (e.g. Telegram), Zoom, Canva to organize independent project work in groups and digital books and webinars - to acquire the Module content.

Having been asked about strategies for handling potential conflicts, most project participants stated that it was trust, tolerance and democracy. One of the students noted, "Our group approached challenges and conflicts by fostering open communication and collaboration. Whenever issues arose, we encouraged all members to voice their concerns and perspectives openly and respectfully".

96% of the project participants agreed that the project helped them develop important skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork, while 92% were highly satisfied with the distribution of workload and responsibilities among group members.

In the second project, students consistently rated the overall effectiveness of the project highly in enhancing their understanding of teaching speaking. One student noted, "It was a useful experience for me. I had the opportunity to interact with other people and learn something new from them." Another student emphasized, "For me, the most valuable aspect of collaborative learning is the diversity of perspectives and ideas that it brings. This diversity fosters creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills".

Many reported positive experiences in teamwork, noting improved abilities in handling

challenges and conflicts within their groups. As one participant stated, "We had no conflicts, we worked in pairs and it was easy to do it with my partner." Another student shared, "Our group did not have any conflicts during the preparation of the project. We discussed each member's ideas. We used the brainstorming method and the discussion method during the preparation."

The project was also credited with developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, with most participants rating this aspect 4 or 5 out of 5. One student reflected, "This project taught me how to work in a team."

A key outcome was the marked improvement in students' proficiency with digital tools. Participants became adept at using various platforms for communication and project work. As one student commented, "We used Telegram to communicate, and Canva to create our project." Another noted, "Padlet was very useful for finding information for assignments and knowing who you would be working with."

Students were particularly excited about creating speaking activities using innovative digital tools. They enthusiastically engaged with Genially to design interactive speaking exercises, explored various storytelling apps to enhance narrative skills, and utilized ZOOM collaborative boards for real-time, interactive speaking tasks. Notably, students reported in the survey that they learned how to use these online tools during offline EFL classes, enhancing their ability to integrate technology in traditional classroom settings. One student remarked, "Learning to use these online tools in our regular classes was incredibly helpful. It gave us the confidence to apply them in various teaching contexts." This hands-on experience with cutting-edge educational technology not only enhanced their digital literacy but also expanded their repertoire of engaging teaching strategies for future EFL classrooms, both online and offline.

Practical application of teaching methods was a core benefit of the project. One student remarked, "It was very useful for me, because I developed my speech and also practiced various exercises for future students."

Overall satisfaction levels with the COUL project were high. Most participants expressed greater satisfaction with this learning experience compared to traditional classroom settings and indicated interest in participating in similar projects in the future. As one student put it, "I would like to see more group projects." Another student suggested, "For the future, I would like to have more meetings with students from other universities," indicating enthusiasm for such

collaborative experiences.

The effectiveness of the instructors' support was also noted, with one student saying, "Yes, our instructor was happy to help us and she explained to us what we didn't understand." Another mentioned, "Throughout the project, the instructor provided support and advice as needed."

However, some areas for improvement were also identified. One student suggested, "More participation would be more interesting in my opinion. It would be better if everyone from my team took part in the project with the same level of engagement!" Another recommended, "I would suggest improving teamwork because a lot of people couldn't work effectively in a team."

In conclusion, the COUL project successfully integrated collaborative online learning into EFL teacher training, providing students with valuable experience in using digital tools for language teaching and fostering important skills for their future careers. The project's success in developing collaboration skills, enhancing digital literacy, and providing practical teaching experience underscores the potential of such initiatives in preparing the next generation of EFL teachers for the increasingly digital and interconnected educational landscape. While most participants expressed high satisfaction, as one student succinctly stated, "I liked everything, I didn't want to change anything," the feedback for improvement highlights the need for continued focus on ensuring equal participation and enhancing teamwork skills in future iterations of the project.

5. Problems and Challenges: Adapting COIL to a Single-Country Context

The implementation of Collaborative Online University Learning (COUL) projects in Ukrainian universities, while successful in many aspects, presented unique challenges and problems that deviated from the traditional Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) model. These challenges primarily stemmed from adapting an internationally-focused framework to a single-country context, as well as dealing with the ongoing impacts of war on Ukrainian higher education.

One significant challenge was the lack of cross-cultural experience typically central to COIL projects. As all participating universities were from Ukraine, students missed out on the opportunity to engage with peers from different cultural backgrounds. This absence of international diversity limited the scope of intercultural learning, which is a key component of the COIL framework. To compensate for this, the COUL projects shifted focus towards

developing soft skills, boosting motivation, and fostering creativity among participants. While this adaptation allowed for valuable learning outcomes, it represented a departure from the core intercultural objectives of COIL.

The emergency context, caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine posed significant logistical challenges. For instance, Berdyansk State Pedagogical University had been relocated due to the conflict, necessitating a fully online mode of operation. This situation created difficulties in synchronous meetings, as students from this university were dispersed across different countries and time zones. A certain proportion of students at Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University and Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University who had fled the country with their families at the beginning of the war were supposed to acquire the content digitally while the rest of the participants of the first project studied offline beginning from the second session. Coordinating activities and ensuring equal participation became more complex, requiring additional flexibility and planning from both instructors and students.

The psychological aspect of collaborating with unfamiliar peers presented another challenge. Students had to overcome initial hesitations and build trust with team members they had never met in person. Besides, some of the students noted that building a consensus with their group mates was time consuming, which is explained by the necessity to develop relevant soft skills. This situation required careful facilitation from instructors to create a supportive online environment that encouraged open communication and collaboration.

Despite these challenges, the COUL projects demonstrated adaptability in the face of adversity. By focusing on developing transferable skills, enhancing digital literacy, and promoting creative problem-solving in the context of language teaching, the projects provided valuable learning experiences. The emphasis on the practical application of teaching methods and the use of innovative digital tools helped to maintain student engagement and achieve meaningful outcomes.

A significant and pervasive challenge that underpinned the entire COUL experience was the ongoing stress and anxiety caused by the war in Ukraine. Students and instructors alike were grappling with the psychological toll of conflict, which affected their ability to fully engage in academic pursuits. Many participants were dealing with personal losses, displacement, and constant uncertainty about their safety and future. The COUL projects, however, inadvertently served as a coping mechanism for many participants. Engaging in collaborative learning provided a sense of normalcy and purpose amidst chaos. It offered a productive distraction from

the daily stressors of war and created a supportive community where students could share their experiences and concerns.

Instructors had to be particularly sensitive to the emotional state of their students, often adapting project timelines and expectations to accommodate the psychological challenges faced by participants. This required a delicate balance between maintaining academic rigor and showing empathy for the extraordinary circumstances. The projects also incorporated elements of resilience-building and stress management into their structure. For instance, some of the speaking activities developed by students focused on themes of hope, resilience, and community support, reflecting their own needs and experiences during this difficult time.

Despite these efforts, the impact of war-related stress and anxiety on the learning process remained a significant challenge. Concentration issues, sudden absences due to air raid sirens or power outages, and general emotional fatigue were common occurrences that affected the smooth running of the projects. Nevertheless, many students reported that participating in the COUL projects helped them maintain a sense of progress and connection during a time of great upheaval. The collaborative nature of the work provided mutual support and a shared sense of purpose, which proved valuable in managing stress and anxiety.

In conclusion, while the war presented enormous challenges to the implementation of COUL projects, it also highlighted the resilience and adaptability of both students and educators. The projects not only served their educational purpose but also provided an unexpected source of psychological support and community building during a time of national crisis.

Our work has led us to conclude that, while the absence of international collaboration presented a significant deviation from the COIL model, the COUL projects successfully adapted to create valuable learning experiences within the constraints of a single-country, war-affected context. Future iterations of such projects could potentially explore partnerships with universities from other countries to reintroduce the cross-cultural element, while maintaining the successful aspects of skill development and digital innovation achieved in these initial COUL experiences.

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