

Chinese Learners' Engagement in a China-Mexico-U.S. COIL Project

Zheng Li

*School of Foreign Studies, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Jinan, 250000, China
angel1535908362@163.com*

Abstract: *Globalization requires an economical way to guarantee inclusive and equal international exchange opportunities. In that case, collaborative online international learning (COIL) has become a novel topic in the field of second language education, and most of the studies focus on the results of the students learning rather than the process. However, this study focuses on student engagement in cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social dimensions during a three-party collaborative online international learning. This study will use qualitative study by collecting 15 Chinese junior students' reflection essays written after COIL and analyzing these materials based on the four dimensions of engagement. The results of this project show that the Chinese students' language ability and international outlook were improved. What's more, the significance of international communication and virtual exchange has become a spotlight.*

Keywords: *collaborative online international learning; learner engagement; second language education*

1. Introduction

With increasing transnational exchanges, the internationalization of education is bound to be a seminal tendency. Specifically, an increasing number of universities and employers identify a need for graduates to have an intellectual and global mindset beyond disciplinary competencies^[1]. What's more, the concept of global citizen has been more prevalent these years. International exchange includes exchange programs and studying abroad. Traveling physically is the conventional approach to developing an international perspective. However, it is neither inclusive nor economic since only a minority of people have the capital or certification to go abroad. Take China as an example, based on The Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2023-2024) compiled by the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), it illustrates that only a small number of residents have the opportunity to study abroad. The campaign of internationalization at home, therefore, has been introduced to redeem these drawbacks. For instance, collaborative online international learning (COIL) and virtual exchange (VE) have become novel topics for research. COIL refers to an innovative approach to facilitating the growth of intercultural competency in shared multicultural learning settings^[2]. However, it is worth noting that the studying process and learner engagement in COIL are different from that in conventional classroom learning. The previous research on COIL mainly pertains to its benefits to learners' academic achievements rather than their studying process. Specifically, it has been proven that the COIL is capable of stimulating multiple competencies including intercultural communication, critical thinking, global citizenship, multicultural collaboration, and adaptation to virtual work environments and technologies^[3]. Conversely, the studying process of this revolutionary pedagogy has been considerably neglected, thus a limited number of researchers have explored learner engagement in COIL activities. In addition, participants in existing studies are mostly from South African countries and American countries, particularly university students^[4, 5]. Commonly, the previous related empirical study is two-way cooperation, whereas this study will commence to build a three-way COIL project. Aimed to expand COIL-related with the subject of Chinese college students research, this study focuses on the engagement of Chinese learners in COIL by using a qualitative study, hoping to enhance the validity and efficiency of some subsequent COIL projects based on this COIL experience.

2. Literature review

2.1 Collaborative online international learning (COIL)

This increasingly popular international exchange namely 'COIL' was initially coined in 2006 and originated from the State University of New York (SUNY) [6]. As a form of Internationalization at Home and Virtual Exchange, COIL refers to a bilateral exchange and correspondingly pedagogical format that is integrated into already-existing courses at two or more institutions by utilizing the Internet [7]. The COIL course overcoming the geographic distance can last between four weeks to even a semester, and typically entails the formation of multicultural teams composed of students from both institutions who collaborate virtually on group projects [8, 9].

Regarding establishing a COIL partnership, the class's instructor at a higher education institution from one country needs to link online with a professor and his or her class from another region or country [7]. Specifically, the first to do so is to get fully prepared for course content and institutional resources about the COIL project, ensuring that the content is suitable, the cutting-edge technology is applied to the pedagogy, and the project has gained support from the institution. Secondly, finding a fit partner with an alignment of goals and a sense of trust will literally facilitate the COIL course. What's more, it is indispensable to discuss with your partner the details of the project, to prevent accidents [6].

In terms of the subsequent implementation, it can be generally split into four parts. Firstly, after making sure the partnerships, a pre-questionnaire and a post-questionnaire administrated officially need to be finished by the participating students respectively. Consequently, there's an instructive orientation for the participating students. As for the approaches to communicating cross-culturally and multi-nationally, the majority of projects focus on focus group discussions (FGDs) [5]. Then, the data will be collected from the surveys or other tangible materials like recording tapes and related drafts. The last step is analyzing the data and reaching conclusions.

COIL is indeed a cost-effective and sustainable pedagogy. Compared with traditional classes, COIL courses merely require certain tools and educational context rather than exceeding financial means and physical mobility. In other words, it has a lower financial threshold. A study also demonstrates the results that joining in virtual exchange could be beneficial for the participants' lifetime development in several aspects, such as intercultural, digital-pedagogical, and linguistic competencies, it can also motivate their innovation and international learning in the university classroom.

2.2 Learner engagement

Engagement has been studied intensively in the field of educational psychology over the past decade. Philp and Duchesne [10] deemed that this buzzword commonly talks about the students' interest and participation in an activity. In today's educational psychology research, another definition of this term is that engagement is a dynamic, multifaceted construct consisting of situated concepts of affect, cognition, and behaviors, including social interactions, where participation in action is necessary [11].

As the construct of engagement, Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris [12] propose a definition of engagement consisting of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Even though the social dimension is not compassed in all models of engagement, this dimension referring to interaction should be added because it is crucial to the context of group language learning [13]. Behavioral engagement is described by Lambert et al. [14] as a continuum that is closely linked to the degree and quality of learners' participation. Emotional engagement is related to the learners' attitudes towards language learning activities, interlocutors and/ or the state they present [13]. Cognitive engagement is particularly relevant to the learner's psychological investment in the learning tasks [12]. Social engagement mainly focuses on surportiveness and interactiveness during the project [15].

According to myriad empirical studies in different research contexts, the majority of which have proven that engagement is positively associated with student's academic performance. In addition, engagement is a constructive factor that impacts the learning process and achievements, and thus enhancing and improving students' engagement is a common goal of both the faculty and the school. In the field of second language learning, there's a consensus among numerous scholars that engagement can positively predict students' academic performance. Examining the learner engagement pattern in the COIL projects being a new teaching mode is conducive to finding the improper engagement framework under this condition. Comprehending certain learner engagement patterns in different move of COIL projects is also benefited from this examination. In addition, analyzing learner engagement also plays a

paramount role in the teaching method and learning acquisition. As for the teachers, they could see the students' difficulties in different stages of the projects and prepare for the corresponding scaffolding. This study could also improve the virtual exchange activities based on learner engagement. Regarding the learning process, the teachers will be capable of knowing the shortcomings of students' learning in advance, which will help teachers guide students on how to engage in the projects in different steps.

3. The present study

Generally speaking, previous studies available for this research rarely focus on engagement during the process of the COIL project. Additionally, only few Chinese students are participating to COIL activities and related research. It is noteworthy that the majority of the studies are two-party cooperation, whereas this study is a three-party COIL project. Correspondingly, the present study aims to address this research question: How did college EFL learners cognitively, behaviorally, emotionally, and socially engage in the COIL project?

4. Methods

4.1 Instructional settings

This U.S.-Mexico-China COIL project was held in the fall 2020. This project was committed to offering students a platform where they develop cross-cultural competence, collaboration, and critical thinking through group work. The participating students from three different nations and classes were divided into different groups and had virtual face-to-face meetings lasting for four weeks. In addition, the tentative schedule and discussion topics (e.g., campus life, a typical day in your life, family, and food) were provided. Simultaneously, the Chinese students should submit the video conference recordings and reflection essays.

The interviews would take place once a week for four weeks, and the virtual face-to-face video meetings will be held aimed at helping students to get familiar with multiple foreign cultures based on the topic given by the official. Significantly, these meetings should last at least 45 to 60 minutes each time. Punctuality is another critical factor for not only the collaboration with classmates but also for the video connections with the foreign participants. Students would also be allowed to continue the discussion outside of the video conference through other contact technology like email. Finally, the videotaping of their sessions and the process of cross-cultural communication should be guaranteed by applying screen video technology. Prior to the implementation of this project, the participating students should undergo a instruction, prepare for a Zoom, Skype, and email account, and complete all pre-COIL surveys. In the sixth week, there is a presentation for Chinese students pertaining to their reflections and findings of this experience. With the project ending, the Chinese students were exclusively supposed to compose an essay corresponding to their whole experience simultaneously.

4.2 Participants

The major subject of this study consists of 15 Chinese university students. To be specific, the Chinese students participating in this study were aged between 19 and 22 (average:20), and all of them were juniors minoring in English with the exception of one sophomore. Although only one student showed no interest in this COIL project all the Chinese participants, the rest of the students were interested in the project. What's more, these 15 students are all equipped with previous experience of the COIL project.

5. Data collection

The main source of data in this project is the reflection essay handed by Chinese participants. They were asked to finish a 2-3 page essay responding to the prompts given to them by their instructor. The content of this essay consists of different parts. Firstly, a description of their teams and their own assessment of their contribution to their group work should be mentioned. Secondly, they should write about the discussion of how the group worked together. Thirdly, their essays should reflect on the process of collaborating with other partners from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, the problems encountered in the project and their corresponding solutions. Plus, they should find the strengths and weaknesses during the team project and the overall reflections of the COIL-enhanced portion of the course. Briefly speaking, the Chinese students were supposed to realize the problems and challenges in

this project and give reasonable and concrete solutions step by step. What's more, the students should also show the process or the finished products that they were particularly content with, and what was you learned about themselves as they worked on this project. Some other questions that have they changed any ideas and the benefits gained in working with a different culture, and even how you think it could be applied to their future life must be included in their essays.

6. Data coding and analysis

The researcher analyzed the four different dimensions of learner engagement based on the reflection essays handed by the Chinese students. The thematic analysis was used in this study.

The thematic analysis of this study went through five stages as follows:

(1) Familiarization with the data: The researcher read through the essays written by the 15 Chinese participants in order to have a good command of detailed information and have a better understanding of the Chinese participants' opinions towards this COIL project.

(2) Initial coding: The researcher embarked on recognizing, highlighting, and labeling the segments of the text bearing on students' mental perspective and physical actions during the process of this project.

(3) Generating themes: Similar codes were grouped together, and then the preliminary themes were formed. Simultaneously, these themes show concepts encapsulating the Chinese students' mental perspective and physical actions detected in the essays.

(4) Reviewing and refining themes: Aimed to guarantee the the facts that these themes were capable of reflecting the content precisely and they were different from other themes, the researcher was bound to reconfirm the themes.

Defining and naming themes: After reviewing the themes, these themes could be classified into four superordinate themes named behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and social engagement respectively. Finally, composing the results was available.

7. Results and Discussion

In order to analyze the question of how college EFL learners cognitively, behaviorally, emotionally, socially engaged in the COIL project, a detailed analysis was needed based on the previous thematic analysis. This part will show the results and findings of this research according to the classification of four dimensions of leaner engagement.

7.1 Cognitive engagement

Confronting the limited vocabulary, many students confessed that it was hard for them to convey their ideas during the discussion. Chinese students as English learners often confronted deficiency in speech production, failing to articulate their ideas spontaneously and thus missing opportunities to participate in group discussions. However, at the end of the project, most students found that their language skills, especially their speaking skills, had been improved owing to the practice and encouragement from the foreign partners, especially fluency and clearness in speaking English. Simultaneously, Chinese participants' attitudes towards different cultures became much more inclusive. They were gradually willing to get familiar with the information about the rest of the planet and become open-minded. For example, an advanced language teaching system in Mexico was learned by a student in this project. Specifically, the mother tongue in Mexico is Spanish, but English has been excessively advocated to learn in bilingual schools and some metropolises where English teaching has been starting from kindergarten to college. A great number of students mentioned that they commenced to think about something from different perspective because of the experience of being exposed to culture shock. Besides cognition in terms of knowledge and information, the significance of some values, including persistence, punctuality, and preparation foregrounded through this activity.

7.2 Behavioral engagement

As for the behavioral dimension, most students made progress in participation degree and quality. Owing to their limited language ability, particularly oral English, some students thought highly of the related exercise and deliberately prepared materials in advance. Because of this project, the content and

form of their speaking English become more idiomatic. Plus, some instinctively shy or introverted students broke out of their comfort zone by pushing themselves to speak intuitively and actively. However, some Chinese participants complained about the motivation and initiative of their peers. Besides the inevitable side-effects of the time difference, some of them even held a perfunctory attitude towards this project. For example, a Chinese participant mentioned in the reflection that a member in the group just answered the questions or even said nothing, which indeed negatively affected their whole communicative experience.

7.3 Emotional engagement

Nearly all the Chinese participants held a positive attitude towards this project at the beginning. For example, although they confronted many hardships from the time difference attributed to the three-party form and their limited language ability, these students still made all their efforts to negotiate the issues about online communication with the American and Mexican participants. In other words, all these Chinese students still did not show a perfunctory mood to the process of this project under a hectic schedule. During the process of being exposed to American and Mexican culture, the majority of the Chinese students expected and enjoyed getting in touch with the charisma of American and Mexican cultures. For instance, Americans intend to choose meat as their dish, which is different from the Chinese dining habits that view rice and flour as the main dish, and the preference for a wide range of vegetables. However, some people gradually became aware of some shortcomings of this project's arrangement and some negative views emerged. Some students strongly showed their dissatisfaction about the three-party form bringing some complications to the operation of their interviews. For instance, undeniably, a few students confessed that it is hard to make sure of the speech order of all the participants due to too many participants in each group. Therefore, some people said that they would not like to register for any three-party project with exceeding pressure. What's more, it is a fact that some misconducts of their partners, such as turning on and turning off the macro phone frequently, disturbed the discussion.

7.4 Social engagement

The social dimension is another decisive dimension of this research. Besides the help of their foreign counterparts, it is the universities and their professional faculty that offer this opportunity to the students to experience this intercultural interview. During this project, the Chinese students have improved their social ability in various aspects, such as empathy, negotiation, and cooperation. To start with, when communicating with the group members based on the given topics, the Chinese participants intended to avoid sensitive topics and respect the other countries' cultures. Many participants played a critical role in alleviating the embarrassment during the online seminar. Plus, with the connection between Chinese students and American and Mexican partners closing, an American student in her forties even treated her Chinese peers as her daughters, with tremendous patience, care, and concern. As a result, their taking atmosphere would be more relaxing. In the beginning, some students worried about their mistakes in pronunciation and grammar, but the response of the foreign partners cheered them up and mitigated their insecurity. Then, due to the culture shock and jet lag, it is necessary for the participants to spend some time negotiating meeting time through e-mails. Such negotiation pushed them to use English and improved communication and interaction skills in English.

8. Conclusions

The Chinese students' cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social engagement during the three-party COIL project was detected and analyzed, which is also the initial aim of this study. Such a project indeed enhanced the language ability of the students and broadened their horizons, but the COIL project still needs further improvement. To start with, the participants should be collected based on a strict standard, which can prevent the emergence of some perfunctory participants spoiling other students' cherishing experience. In other words, nice attitudes and acknowledgment towards these projects should be ensured. Secondly, the limitation on the number of participants in a group and that of parties should be taken into account according to the disparate personal circumstances of different organizations. Specifically, the temporal and labor distribution of each session should be regulated flexibly in different situations. Finally, the participants of this study are only the students from one party. As a result, future research could view the participants from different parties as their subjects at the same time. Overall, this qualitative three-party COIL project revealed the significance of learner engagement in four dimensions and its contribution to the virtual exchange.

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