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COIL-based experiential learning for intercultural communication: Global South EFL students' challenges and strategies

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Abstract

In acquiring intercultural skills, Global South students face numerous challenges, including limited resources, mobility and limited contact with those from other cultures. This study investigates a COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) project involving Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and their Japanese and Australian peers. Specifically, it examines the perceived impact of COIL on the development of the Indonesian students' intercultural skills. Data were drawn weekly group reflections and individual post-program reflections. The findings indicate a decided impact on students' intercultural skills over a short period of time. Based on these results, we argue that COIL provides a valuable opportunity for the acquisition of intercultural competence among students in the Global South. This study highlights how instructors can enhance the benefits of COIL by implementing instructor-guided scaffolded reflections to support Indonesian students' experiential learning.

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Introduction

In today's globalized world, intercultural communication skills are vital as mobility and internet access break down national barriers. Higher education institutions must equip students with these skills to foster global citizenship and professional collaboration. Extending beyond language abilities, intercultural competence includes aspects such as intercultural knowledge (Byram, 2020), understanding subjective perceptions (Chun, 2011), empathy, respect, and adaptability (Byram, 2020; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002). Developing these skills may drive more meaningful internationalization aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), moving beyond competitive and economic motives (see De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). However, opportunities to develop such multifaceted competence remain limited for Global South students, who often have fewer resources and opportunities. This is particularly the case in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning context. While virtual exchanges offer a more accessible and cost-effective alternative than traditional mobility programs, innovative approaches are needed to better address the needs of such students to enhance their engagement in online intercultural learning.

To develop intercultural competence, students need meaningful cross-cultural experiences rather than just theoretical classroom learning (Byram, 2020; Shih, 2013). Byram (2020) stresses that real-world practice should complement classroom learning. Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984) suggests that interaction alone is insufficient for promoting learning. For Kolb, converting experience into knowledge requires reflection. This emphasis on reflection is widely shared in the literature. For example, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) highlight that language learners must not only experience communication in the target language but also reflect on the process to enhance their understanding of communication. Through reflection, learners may come to recognise how knowledge is socially, linguistically, and culturally constructed (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Accordingly, adequate reflection plays a central role in intercultural learning. However, it is not always clear what goes into making intercultural exchanges "meaningful" and how to make reflections meaningful.

Moreover, many factors often hinder EFL students from engaging in meaningful experiences and reflections (see Farahian et al., 2020). One more recent line of thinking has been to highlight the importance of developing scaffolded reflections in online exchanges to maximize students' learning from their intercultural experience. Scaffolded reflections enable instructors and students to recognise the nuances of how intercultural learning and development unfolds. Scaffolded reflections have been studied in many virtual learning contexts, but surprisingly not often in language learning contexts (despite the noted value of "scaffolding" to language-learning experiences). Additionally, while virtual exchange programs in business and management are relatively common (Cathro, 2018; Kirste & Holtbrügge, 2019; MacNab, 2011; Zwerg-Villegas & Martínez-Díaz, 2016), they remain limited for language learners, especially in EFL contexts (e.g., Gokcora & Oenbring, 2021; Carlisle, 2023; Lázár, 2015). Moreover, no existing studies have specifically focused on methods that scaffold students' reflective practices. Addressing this gap, this study examines Indonesian EFL students' experiences in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)-based experiential learning with tailored reflection support to foster intercultural competence. It explores their challenges and strategies, offering insights into how experiential learning and scaffolding can enhance intercultural learning among Global South EFL students.

Literature review

Intercultural learning and competence

Intercultural learning involves acquiring knowledge and skills to understand and interact with people from diverse cultures (Lane, 2012). Byram (2020) stresses that language teaching should integrate linguistic and intercultural competence. Even native speakers benefit from intercultural competence in situations that require cultural sensitivity (ACTFL, 2015). King et al. (2013) found that intercultural learning occurs through direct interactions with other cultures, with learners using strategies like observing, empathizing, and reflecting, highlighting the need for experiential learning. In line with this, Deardoff (2006) outlines a framework where intercultural competence includes developing attitudes like respect and curiosity, which foster communication skills and adaptable behaviours. Likewise, Fantini (2000) identifies five essential aspects for effective intercultural communication: awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and language abilities. He also highlights several key de-

-scriptors often used to characterize an intercultural speaker, including respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, motivation, a sense of humour, tolerance for ambiguity, and a willingness to suspend judgment. Understanding these traits is crucial for supporting learners in intercultural training and evaluating their intercultural competence development.

Experiential learning

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This cycle helps learners apply new knowledge in real-life contexts. Expanding on this, McNab (2012) implements an intercultural education model emphasizing guided experience and reflection. In his seven-stage model, learners progress from developing cultural awareness to engaging in experiential learning, receiving feedback, and participating in group discussions. However, while useful for management, it does not fully address language learners' needs, particularly Global South EFL students, who need repeated reflection on experiences and teacher facilitation to deepen their understanding of experience and develop intercultural competence (see Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Highlighting the essential role of experiential learning in intercultural learning, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argue that developing the capacity to learn through experience out of the classroom is perhaps more important than learning cultural specifics while in school.

COIL and experiential learning in language education

COIL is an innovative teaching and learning approach that allows teachers and students to work online with peers located in different countries. Since COIL first emerged in 2006, the approach has gained popularity, on the back of technology-based communication tools, social networks, elevated out of the restricted overseas travel of faculty and students due to terrorism (Rubin, 2017), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu & Shirley, 2021). COIL, as a form of virtual exchange based on blended or hybrid courses involving international partners, has become an increasingly significant strategy of internationalization (De Wit & Altbach, 2020). COIL may benefit various learning areas/courses, but it provides opportunities for enhancing language and intercultural communication skills. An alternative to study abroad programs, COIL leverages technology to foster intercultural learning among students and staff (Liu & Shirley, 2021; Rubin, 2017). It enabled faculties and students from different countries to work together and experience intensive intercultural interactions (Rubin, 2017). However, challenges include time zone differences, difficulties in finding institution partners, and language barriers (Redden 2014, cited in Reed, 2016).

Many studies involving L2 learners or students have reported the use of COIL or virtual exchange for intercultural learning (e.g., Hagley, 2020; Lázár, 2014). However, fewer have implemented experiential learning (Carlisle, 2023; Gokcora & Oenbring, 2021; Lázár, 2014; Ramírez-Marín, Núñez-Figueroa, & Blair, 2020). For instance, Ramírez-Marín et al. (2020) ran a six weeks' virtual exchange between 20 academic writing students from US and 20 upper-intermediate to advanced English students from Mexico. Elected for their positive attitudes towards cross-cultural activities and online learning familiarity, the participants progressed through four stages in pairs: (1) introduction and rapport building, (2) drafting literacy narratives and exchanging stories for peer feedback, (3) writing reflective responses, (4) revising with instructors' feedback. The study reports benefits in language learning, cultural comprehension, and shared life experiences, fostering skills such as openness, respect, self-awareness sociolinguistic awareness, empathy and relationship-building. Students' deep engagement through writing and reflective responses and adequate English levels seemed to have contributed to these positive outcomes.

Like Ramírez-Marín et al. (2020), Carlisle (2023) virtual exchange program involved higher proficiency ESL learners - 15 Spanish-speaking Mexican students in their final year before university and 20 Chinese and Korean students preparing to enter university in Singapore. Over six sessions across eight weeks, students engaged in ice breakers, comparative analyses, and collaborative sessions. Activities included cultural exploration, name games, and fairy tale comparisons and adaptations. Students logged weekly reflections on what they had done, learned, and how they would use this learning in the next meeting. Although experiential learning cycles were evident, the study did not report specific instructor support for reflection. Survey responses from 18 students sh-

-owed modest benefits, including English practice unique experiences, and cultural discovery. Challenges arose from cultural differences and differing expectations. Lower English proficiency led Asian students to feel shy, remain off-camera, and stay silent. Academic peers had to intervene to encourage visibility and participation, helping to initiate discussions. At times, frustrations escalated with group members criticizing each other rather than addressing issues constructively.

Gokcora and Oenbring (2021) examined virtual exchange relationships among English as a Second Language (ESL) students, focusing more on raising awareness of global social justice issues than directly fostering intercultural competence. Nevertheless, this study highlighted the power of reflection in virtual exchange. Through reflective questioning on attitudes to education in their own and their partners' countries, the program yielded positive outcomes. It involved 95 ESL tertiary students from the Bahamas and US migrants coming from various levels of English. Paired across countries, participants interviewed each other to inform their individual essays, then created YouTube videos analysing advertisements or images related to their topics and cultural contexts. Commenting on each other's presentations, students engaged in dialogue and reflection. Although the US ESL students were "remedial" students (p. 59), the Bahamian students recognized and valued their contributions, reflecting positive intercultural attitudes. The program not only expanded awareness of global citizenship but also enhanced language skills, especially in negotiating meaning when the levels of English were different. Most important to our discussion here, this study's authors relied on students' dialogues and reflections. This emphasized the need for more rigorous data analysis to deepen insights into virtual intercultural education and the role of reflections for understanding how students gained knowledge and experience in intercultural exchanges.

Not all virtual exchanges take place at higher levels of language acquisition. Moreover, studies of these other exchanges suggest scaffolded acquisition may be even more important for students with lower proficiency. Lázár (2014) studied a virtual exchange involving 78 EFL high school lower proficiency students from Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy and Turkey. Conducted over five months and supported with teacher scaffolding in preparation and reflection, the program had positive outcomes. The intercultural program combined online collaboration via Moodle with in-classroom activities. International teams discussed various topics such as self-introduction, hometowns, meals, and table manners and wrote reflections in journal entries and Moodle forum discussions. Although the teachers provided "in-class preparatory and debriefing sessions" between stages, it was not clear whether they assisted students in reflecting on their experience (p.215). Early challenges included superficial cultural knowledge, language difficulties, and ethnocentric views. However, over time, students became more engaged and showed improvement in their intercultural competence. They learned to appreciate cultural differences, developed skills in communication and interaction, and became more open-minded and respectful. Teacher facilitation proved essential in helping students overcome language barriers and navigate intercultural challenges, highlighting the value of structured reflection and guidance in experiential learning contexts.

In sum, literature suggests that reflections are important to virtual exchange and the learning of intercultural competence. Scaffolded reflections have been integrated in many virtual exchange contexts, but not many language-learning exchange ones. In those language-learning contexts in which scaffolded exchanges have been included, they appear to have a positive impact on student experience. Drawing on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, this study conceptualizes scaffolded reflection as both an experiential and socially mediated process. Through this synthesis, we argue that greater instructor involvement - as teachers, guides and mentors - can positively influence student experience, especially for students in the Global South, who, due to limited infrastructure, resources and access, as well as cultural difference, have fewer opportunities to interact with students in the Global North. COIL offers a valuable context for such experiential and scaffolded learning, supporting a more inclusive model of internationalization aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Jones et al., 2021; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). This study therefore examines how these theoretically grounded scaffolding processes can enhance Global South EFL students' intercultural competence.

Methodology

Research context

This qualitative study explores the experience of 44 Indonesian EFL undergraduate students collaborating with 16 Japanese and 32 Australian undergraduate students in an inclusive COIL program. Coming from different regions of Indonesia, the participants consisted of 33 second-year students and 11 students retaking the course after previously failing it. The program was integrated into a compulsory three-credit course on Language, Culture, and Identity (LCI), offered at the end of the second year of an English language education program. While the unit targeted intermediate-level learners, several participants were estimated to be at pre-intermediate or advanced levels. For most, this was their first interaction with international English speakers. Although English was used in most classroom activities, students had limited exposure outside class, often switching to Indonesian or local languages. In contrast, the Japanese participants, all EFL/ESL learners, were enrolled in a global citizenship course, while the Australian group included both native and ESL students taking an intercultural communication course.

Since fostering intercultural skills takes time (MacNab, 2011), the COIL program lasted for seven weeks, with weekly collaborative sessions labelled Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) and numbered sequentially. This structure supported both social engagements and a joint final project. The students scheduled their meetings independently to accommodate different timetables. Each university had the flexibility to design the instructional content and assessment beyond the international interaction activities, allowing the LCI course to adopt an experiential learning approach that encouraged critical reflection. This experiential learning consisted of two dimensions: the shared COIL activities and reflection-based support by instructors. By integrating real world interactions with reflective practice through collaborative and autonomous learning, the approach aimed to address various pedagogical aspects, including knowledge and soft skills, to enable the course to foster students' intercultural skills. As part of a larger research project, this paper will address the following research questions:

1. What were the students' challenges and strategies in the COIL intercultural interactions?
2. What areas of intercultural competence did the students find beneficial from experiential learning with scaffolded reflections?

COIL activities

The COIL activities developed were essentially task-based drawing on students' collaboration in groups of eight to ten students, with 4-5 Indonesians, 1-2 Japanese students, and 3-4 Australian students per group. Grouping was instructor-led, with a mix of speaking abilities in each group. The activities were employed to foster critical and creative thinking while also developing soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and time management.

COIL support activities through experiential learning

To assist the EFL students construct meaning from the COIL experience, the interactions were structured around scaffolding processes that align with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning and Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development.

a. Pre-COIL awareness development

The Indonesian students were given foundational information on cross-cultural communication in several on-site classes as part of the LCI course before the COIL project started. This included the concept of culture, issues in intercultural communication (e.g., stereotyping), and frameworks of cultural dimensions, based on selected chapters from Samovar et al. (2013). The stage ends with a preparation session for the COIL activities by drawing general conclusions on culture, language, and intercultural communication, and a briefing for the first week of the COIL program. The briefing emphasized the importance of adopting positive attitudes for their intercultural learning (Deardoff, 2006). During this session, students also made initial contact and introduced themselves to their international group members.

b. COIL-based collaborative experiential learning cycles

There were four learning cycles, which were tailored to the number of COIL interactions the students had. Each cycle consisted of the following stages in which students worked collaboratively in groups:

1. COIL concrete experience

This refers to the interactions the EFL learners had with the international students (Australian and Japanese) involved in the COIL program online every week through different digital platforms (email, Zoom, and Flip).

2. Collaborative reflective observation and abstract conceptualization

After each week's intercultural encounters, which can be considered a concrete experience in light of Kolb's experiential learning, students wrote a guided group reflection. They reported what happened during the interaction, described their challenges, analy-

| Week | Independent tasks | Objectives |
|---|---|---|
| Week 1-OIE1 | Each group member from the same university made a brief introduction video in English and uploaded it to the Flip platform (https://flip.com). The COIL program created space for each university for this. Through Flip, students were able to greet each other and get to know their peers before they had direct interactions through Zoom. | Students could get to know each other asynchronously online within one week before they had direct encounters through Zoom. |
| Week 2-OIE 2 | Students from the three universities communicated through email to discuss how they would meet online for the first time. They followed it up with communication through WhatsApp or other media to get the first meeting organized. | Students could practice transactional communication with people from different cultures in written form. |
| Week 3-6 Four Zoom meetings, each meeting lasting 60-90 minutes OIE 3,4,5 | Each week, students met all their designated peers from the three universities via Zoom to discuss one of ten topics provided (e.g. social media, gender roles, effects of the pandemic, and sustainable tourism). After each meeting, the group members of the three universities took turns uploading a report summarizing their discussion on a Flip video. The Indonesian students also wrote a group reflection and shared it with their Indonesian peers in LCI course in a larger forum. At the end of the program, all the COIL groups consisting of students from the three universities collaborated on a final project – poster, videos, or cartoons – incorporating the cultural perspectives of the three countries. | Students practiced communicating with people from different cultures on real-life topics. |
| Week 7 OIE 6 | The international groups posted the project outputs on Flip in the seventh week for everyone to see and comment on. | Cultural interactions continued asynchronously. |

-zed their experience, and reported lessons learned along with developed strategies for their next interactions. Students both reflected and constructed new knowledge on what they had experienced.

3. Following the group reflection, students shared their reflections in a general meeting involving all the parallel LCI classes. With feedback from instructors and other students, they further analyzed their experiences to support collaborative learning and knowledge construction. While each group presented, the rest of the class could ask questions or give comments. Instructors then posed critical questions to help the group further explore, understand, and evaluate the experience, relating it to the foundational theory and other components of intercultural competence. The class ended with general conclusions on lessons learned.

4. Active experimentation

During this stage, students applied their new knowledge in further interactions with the international partners (active experimentation) while having another concrete experience of intercultural communication.

c. Individual reflective observation

At the end of the COIL program, students wrote individual reflections on all the COIL and class experiences and submitted them to their instructor for feedback. They were expected to build a deeper understanding of intercultural communication and further strengthen their skill development. Similar to the other reflection tasks, this assignment was evaluated but with a higher percentage to give more weight to individual student performance in the course assessment.

Data collection

The study employed two data collection methods: weekly written group reflections and post-program written individual reflections. For the reflections, students were given guided questions which were developed by two authors and were validated by the other authors. The weekly group reflections were submitted after four international interactions (week 2 to 5) and shared in an onsite weekly larger forum involving all the LCI classes facilitated by the instructors. The individual reflection, on other hand, was assigned once at the end of the program and submitted within one week. All 44 students participated in this data collection and wrote both reflections in English or Indonesian or a mix, and submitted them through Google Forms.

Data analysis and findings

The group and individual reflections were analysed using iterative thematic coding and categorization following Saldaña (2021), conducted in four cycles to ensure data validity. In the first cycle, a research assistant coded the data using deductive categories informed by previous studies, then expanded them with inductive, data-driven codes. These codes were then divided among the Indonesian authors for cross-checking and refinement, then reviewed together, with discrepancies resolved through mutual agreement. Finally, one of the authors further analysed the data to map students' week-to-week responses over the exchange.

Data collected from 44 Indonesian students divided into 10 groups revealed several significant patterns across multiple dimensions. A first round of cross-coding was conducted by the research team to cluster overall categories of challenges (see Appendix Table 1), followed by refining these categories to identify sub-categories (see Appendix Table 2). The following sections present the key themes resulting from these analyses, focusing on students' challenges and strategies in the COIL interactions and areas they had benefited from the experiential learning with scaffolded reflections.

What students found difficult during the COIL project

The most common challenge was technical problems, accounting for 27.4% of all reported issues. Poor internet connectivity was the most frequently cited concern (14 instances). As one group described: "Sometimes, the signal [was] so bad that we could not hear others well or others could not understand what we were saying due to lag. We sometimes left the meeting by accident because of the signal too" (Group 1).

Language-related difficulties were the second most common challenge (20.2%). In their weekly group reflections, students reported that their primary obstacle was difficulty in communicating ideas (7 instances). Unfamiliarity with different accents (6 instances) was also reported, and the fact that "We often mispronounce members' names because our tongues are not used to it." (Group 6).

Notably, affective challenges represented 20.2% of the total issues. Feelings of awkwardness during interactions were the most frequently reported (9 instances), followed by lack of confidence (3 instances) and nervousness (2 instances), suggesting significant socio-emotional factors at play during cross-cultural communication. Students attributed these feelings partly to their low levels of English, as one group mentioned: "Some of us were confused, worried about the grammar, nervous, and not confident enough to talk to." (Group 5).

Communication strategies accounted for 15.5% of the reported challenges, reflecting the complexities of managing intercultural communication dynamics. Silence (5 instances) often created confusion, as one group noted "Starting the meeting [was difficult] at that time because all the members were just silent." (Group 3). Conversation flow and turn taking (2 and 3 instances) were also challenging: "[It was] a bit difficult to speak when it's our turn because sometimes we have the words in mind but don't know or unsure about how to say it." (Group 2). Interruptions further complicated communication, with students suggesting causes such as the Indonesian students speaking too slowly (Group 7) or receiving too many explanations or questions at once (Group 2).

The data also indicated that students struggled with finding conversation topics (11.9%), an issue which also illustrates particular affective dimensions of intercultural communication, as outlined in this comment: "We also struggle in finding topics to talk about with the international students, feeling a bit guilty that they had to be the one coming up with various interesting topics most of the time." (Group 9).

The least mentioned challenges were about logistics, specifically related to meeting management through the specific platform used (4.8%). One group reported: "The most important problem at this fourth meeting was the difficulty of finding the right time for everyone to take part in the zoom meeting. This is due to the relatively large time difference, and also some of us have activities other than studying, [such as] part-time work or off-campus activities." (Group 8)

Interestingly, as shown in Figure 1 below, the distribution of these challenges varied across the four weekly reflection periods. While technical problems showing an increasing trend from the second to the fourth period (5 to 8 instances), language problems and affective challenges generally decreased over time (from 6 to 1 and 6 to 3 instances respectively). This temporal pattern suggests that while technical issues persisted or worsened, students gradually developed better language capabilities and emotional resilience.

How students addressed challenges

Students employed a range of strategies to manage the challenges they faced during their online collaborative project (see Appendix, Table 3). Verbal strategies were the most common, accounting for 31% of all reported strategies. The most frequent tactics included "ask[ing] [them] to repeat", "ask[ing] as many questions as possible", and "answer[ing] questions". This suggests a strong reliance on direct communication to navigate intercultural interactions. Group 6, for instance, outlined an effective action plan:

"[a] If you didn't catch something or if a word is unclear due to the accent, you can politely ask the person to repeat what they said. You can say, 'Could you please repeat that?'; [b] Asking to make sure we said the name correctly. There's no need to be embarrassed to ask; [c] Asking for feedback (ping-pong) ... and understanding by nodding, making appropriate facial expressions." (Group 6)

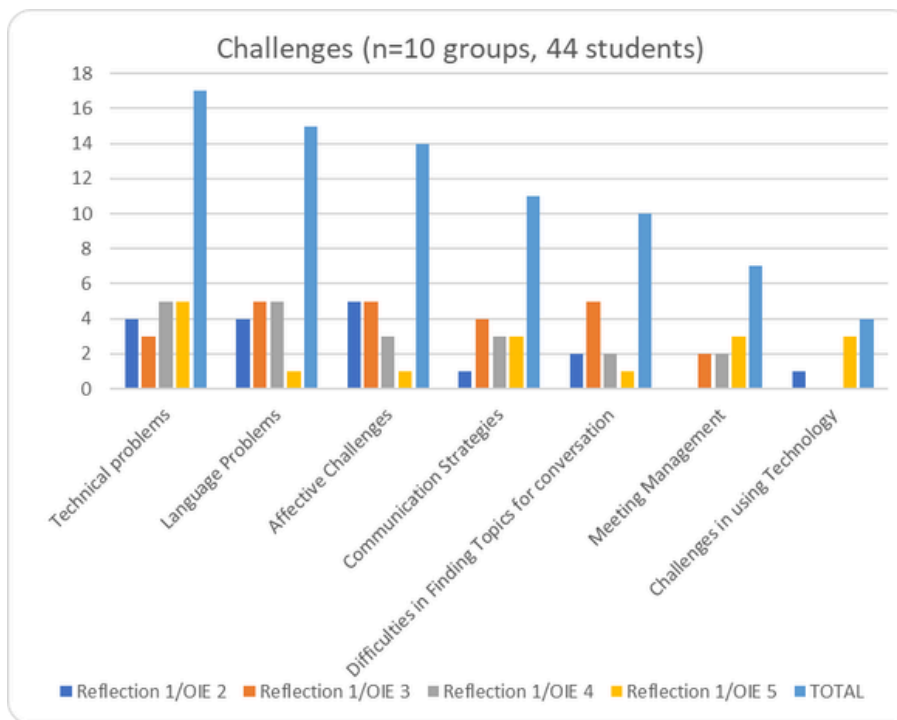


Figure 1. Summary of group challenges.

The second most common strategy was the use of technology (15.5%), indicating students' active efforts to leverage digital tools to enhance their collaborative experience, with suggestions such as 'use chat box to write unclear words' or 'using vote apps'. Students also described specific tips, such as:

"Share Screen is the best way to deal with our problem. It helps us to understand the words that we don't know. We also used a Chat Box in Google Meet for [...] spelling word[s] [...] We even used pictures by googling some of them to make it easier for us to explain and give them a glimpse of what our holidays and cultures are visually." (Group 9)

Technical readiness (11.9%) was another prominent strategy to ensure smooth online interactions. Group 1 commented as follows:

"Our strategies for those challenges are that we need to be more prepared for the meeting. From the devices that we will use, checking the connection, making sure that the audio is good and also preparing some topics that we can discuss in the meeting." (Group 1)

On the other hand, affective strategies, accounting for 10.7% of the total, demonstrated students' conscious efforts to manage emotional and social aspects of their cross-cultural communication. Illustrating the technique of positive reinforcement usually applied by educators, some students commented on the importance of "[motivating] shy friends to speak up [by providing] them with encouragement and motivation so that they were willing to speak." (Group 3).

Content preparation and non-verbal strategies each represented 8.3% and 7.1% respectively, though they were not substantially commented, suggesting moderate attention to these areas. Likewise, meeting management strategies made up 7.1% of the total, indicating structured approaches to organizing online interactions. Less frequently reported were meta-cognitive strategies (6%), such as note-taking, and language preparation (2.4%).

As shown in Figure 2 below, the temporal distribution of these strategies across the four reflection periods reveals interesting patterns, particularly in the use of verbal strategies, which peaked during the second period (10 instances) and maintained relatively consistent usage in other periods. Technology utilization showed an increasing trend from OIE 2 to OIE 4 (1 to 6 instances), suggesting growing comfort with digital tools. Notably, affective strategies maintained consistent usage (3 instances) through OIE 2-4 before declining in OIE 5, possibly indicating reduced need for emotional regulation as students became more comfortable with cross-cultural interactions.

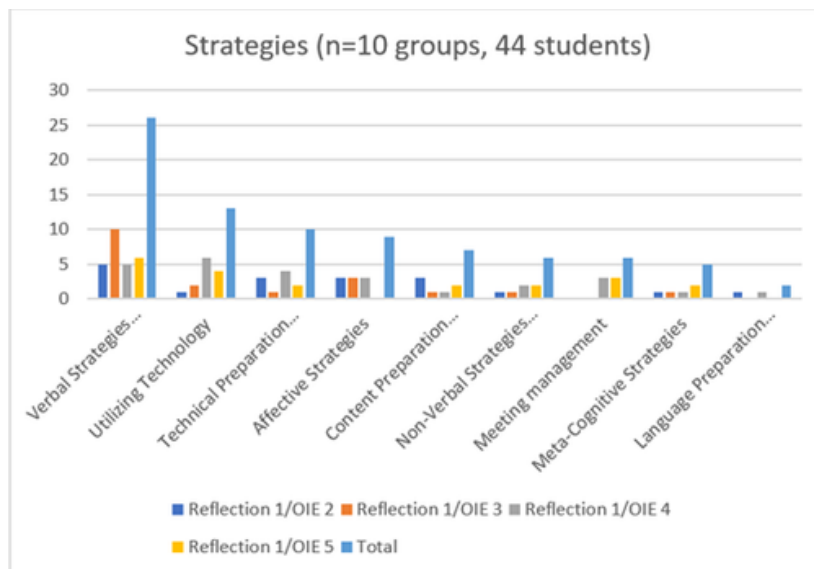


Figure 2. Summary of strategies.

Furthermore, a comparison of students' current and anticipated future strategies in COIL projects reveals significant shifts in their approach to cross-cultural online collaboration (Figure 3 see also Appendix, Table 4). Most notably, preparation strategies (language, content, and technical) show a substantial increase from current (19) to future (35) implementation intentions, while communicative strategies demonstrate a marked decrease from current (32) to future (19) usage intentions. Affective strategies maintain relatively stable representation between current (9) and future (11) intentions. The data indicates declining emphasis on technology utilization (from 5 to 2), meta-cognitive strategies (from 4 to 1), and meeting management (from 9 to 2) in future planning.

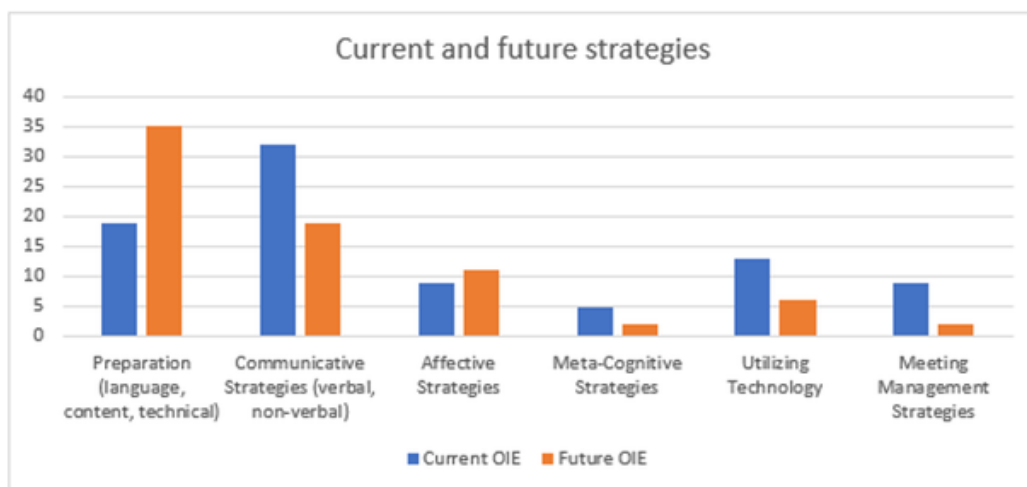


Figure 3. Comparison between current and future strategies.

Areas of intercultural competence that benefited from experiential learning with scaffolded reflections

Individual reflections on key learning outcomes from the COIL project revealed three main areas of development (See Appendix, Table 5). Affective aspects of intercultural competence emerged as the most significant learning outcome (32 instances), with respect (10 instances) and tolerance (8 instances) being the most frequently cited elements, followed by openness (6 instances). Intercultural knowledge was the second most prominent category (22 instances), primarily reflected in general intercultural knowledge (18 instances) and reduced stereotypes (4 instances). The third major area was intercultural communication skills (18 instances), mainly focused on communication strategies (15 instances) and adaptability (3 instances). Other categories, including intercultural awareness (4 instances) and various practical skills such as meeting management and content preparation (2 instances each), were notably less prominent.

When students were surveyed on their perception of the scaffolded group reflections (See Appendix, Table 6), three main themes emerged, and they are helping them to evaluate their COIL experience (18 instances), assisting their strategic planning to communicate with their international partners (8 instances), and allowing them to learn from their peers (7 instances). Additionally, when students were surveyed on their perception of the scaffolded instructor-led class reflections, over 10% of them mentioned having opportunities to share and learn from peers within a larger group, receiving encouragement from instructors, and receiving mentorship in intercultural communication from instructors (see Appendix, Table 7). It seems that students benefited from not only their instructors but also their peers. The scaffolded group reflections and instructor-led class reflections allowed students to listen to the experiences and challenges other groups were facing while they were engaging in intercultural communication. They were able to learn strategies from each other, receive encouragement, and receive advice related to intercultural communication. Data suggests that the scaffolded reflections were able to assist students' development of intercultural competency in terms of affective aspects, knowledge, and skills.

Discussion

This study provides detailed documentation on students' challenges and strategies through intercultural experiential learning, reinforcing findings of previous studies (Carlisle, 2023; Gokcora & Oenbring, 2021; Lázár, 2014; Ramírez-Marín et al., 2020). It reveals various factors influencing the Global South students' intercultural interaction in the online exchange. Supporting previous research (Redden, 2014, cited in Reed, 2016), COIL poses many technical issues due to time zones and timetables. However, this study highlighted Indonesian students having technology challenges as the most dominant problem during the program.

Students' language challenges could be expected as most had relatively lower levels of English (CEFR B1-B2) than their Australian counterparts. Beyond linguistic difficulties, the study also revealed that affective challenges were equally prominent, occurring at similar percentages. This pattern aligns with Carlisle's (2023) study, which involved lower English proficiency students. Although students' negative feelings may be caused by various factors, students who are not confident about their L2 are likely to have more anxiety in their language use and interactions with native speakers (Lou & Noels, 2020). Being EFL students in an English department, they were continuously exposed to assessments, which might have made them self-conscious of their language competence. These highlight the importance of instructors' mentorship, which was done by fostering students' confidence and encouraging their risk-taking in English use, to prevent vicious circles among such factors (Sevinç & Backus, 2017). In future programs, it is also crucial to help EFL students embrace a growth mindset viewing their language competence as a developing ability in intercultural interaction (Lou & Noels, 2020). Such a view may motivate students to interact with higher proficiency interlocutors in intercultural communication.

Managing relatively long conversations (over at least 30 minutes per meeting) was shown to be challenging for the Indonesian students. Not being able to initiate, sustain, or get a turn in conversations, students were struggling to participate effectively in the intercultural exchanges. Dealing with silence was a common problem, highlighting communication breakdowns during the students' intercultural communication. Nevertheless, findings suggested that students managed to improve their communication using various strategies. Using verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, they made active efforts dealing with different aspects of intercultural communication. Their shifts of strategies overtime demonstrate their improvement and adaptability. These shifts in strategic priorities suggest students' evolving understanding of cross-cultural online collaboration, with increased recognition of the importance of preparation while anticipating reduced need for direct communicative interventions and technical support as their experience grows. Affective strategies had also been essential although they declined on the fifth meeting, reflecting their increased confidence levels near the end of the program.

Scaffolded reflection tasks/activities played an important role in the intercultural development of the Indonesian students by enabling them to identify their problems and build strategies to perform better in the next cycle. The small group scaffolding was strengthened by the instructor-led class reflections. Primarily viewed as opportunities for mentorship and facilitation, the sessions achieved their goal to support students based on the principles of proximal zone development. The success highlights the role of teacher-led briefing sessions between stages in Lázár's (2014) study, which involved students with lower proficiencies of English.

Furthermore, results on students' key program outcomes based on the individual reflections suggest that the OIE experience primarily fostered development in affective and knowledge-based dimensions of intercultural competence rather than technical or practical skills. The emphasis on respect, tolerance, and openness reflects students' growth in their intercultural attitudes, which are the pre-requisite for effective intercultural interaction (Byram, 2020). Students' next most cited learning outcome, knowledge, seemed to show that the students, who mostly did not previously contact with foreigners, were beginning to get more informed about other cultures. Particularly noteworthy was the reduction of stereotypes, as this showed that students could critically assess their preconceived views and change them, which often form deep-seated barriers to intercultural understanding. For example, one student initially assumed that English-speaking people, presumably native speakers, would be unfriendly or reluctant to interact with foreigners, but discovered through the program that they were in fact open and eager to converse with participants. Similarly, another student had believed that Japanese people were uniformly introverted, but came to recognize through his interactions that this generalization did not hold true for all individuals. Such shifts illustrate how direct intercultural engagement can challenge essentialist notions and foster more balanced and open perspectives.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research provides an in-depth analysis of Global South EFL students' experience in a COIL program incorporating experiential learning with scaffolded reflections. It highlights Indonesian EFL students' various challenges and strategies in the online exchange and how the particular learning approach assisted them to build intercultural competence. Technical issues, particularly unstable internet connections, were the most cited problems, underscoring the digital divide in the Global South context. Ensuring a robust technical support is essential to address this gap and improve participation in future programs. As students had lower English abilities and were not used to international contact, language, affective, and communication challenges were also prominent.

Despite challenges, the Indonesian EFL participants demonstrated growth in their intercultural competence. Both instructor-led and group reflections were crucial in helping students learn from their experience, address various problems, and improve during the program. Positive perceptions towards instructors' mentorship highlights the value of nurturing an asset-based and growth mindset to encourage risk-taking and sustained engagement among Global South EFL students in intercultural communication. The reiterative, structured reflections were central to this study and were able to nurture students' agency, self-regulation, and adaptability in navigating through the international encounters. Grounded in the zone of proximal development, they provided scaffolding for more meaningful participation, leading to strongest intercultural learning outcomes in knowledge and affective areas.

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Appendix - Group reflections and individual reflections

Table 1. Overall categories of challenges (group).

| Code | Description | Reflection 1/OIE 2 | Reflection 2/OIE 3 | Reflection 3/OIE 4 | Reflection 4/OIE 5 | No. of occurrences | % |
|-------|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1 | Technical problems (including technology use) | 5 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 23 | 27.4 |
| 2 | Language problems | 6 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 17 | 20.2 |
| 3 | Affective challenges | 6 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 17 | 20.2 |
| 4 | Communication strategies | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 13 | 15.5 |
| 5 | Difficulties in finding topics for conversation | 2 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 10 | 11.9 |
| 6 | Meeting management | 0 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 9.5 |
| 7 | Challenges in using technology | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 4.8 |
| TOTAL | | | | | | 84 | 27.4 |

Table 2. Sub-categories of several challenges (group).

| Techni problems | Code | No of occurrences | % |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|----------|
| Microphone | 2 | 1 | |
| Camera problems | 4 | 1 | |
| Cannot access the applications used | 5 | 1 | |
| Audio problems | 3 | 6 | |
| Poor internet connection | 1 | 14 | |
| SUB TOTAL | | 23 | 27.4 |

| Language problems | Code | No of occurrences | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|------|
| Grammar problems | 6 | 1 | |
| Listening comprehension | 5 | 1 | |
| Mispronunciation | 4 | 2 | |
| Limited vocabulary | 2 | 3 | |
| Unfamiliarity to different accents | 3 | 6 | |
| Difficulties to communicate ideas | 1 | 7 | |
| SUB TOTAL | | 17 | 20.2 |

Table 2 (cont.). Sub-categories of several challenges (group).

| Affective challenges | Code | No of occurrences | % |
|---|-------------|--------------------------|----------|
| Feeling guilty for not initiating the conversation | 2 | 1 | |
| Feeling shy | 4 | 2 | |
| Lack of confidence | 1 | 3 | |
| Awkwardness | 3 | 9 | |
| Nervousness | 5 | 2 | |
| SUB TOTAL | | 17 | 20.2 |
| | | | |
| Communication strategies | Code | No of occurrences | |
| Needing more time to think before responding | 2 | 1 | |
| Difficulties to initiate or maintain the conversation | 3 | 2 | |
| Difficulties to lead the conversation | 5 | 2 | |
| Difficulties to interrupt appropriately | 1 | 3 | |
| Difficulties in dealing with silence | 4 | 5 | |
| SUB TOTAL | | 13 | 15.5 |

Table 2 (cont.). Sub-categories of several challenges (group)

| Meeting management | Code | No of occurrences | % |
|---|------|-------------------|-----|
| Not knowing who will present the information | 1 | 1 | |
| A long waiting time in the asynchronous meeting | 4 | 1 | |
| How to encourage participants to turn on their camera | 3 | 2 | |
| Difficulties of finding the right time | 2 | 4 | |
| SUB TOTAL | | 8 | 9.5 |

Table 3. Strategies used (group).

| Code | Description | Reflection 1/OIE 2 | Reflection 2/OIE 3 | Reflection 3/OIE 4 | Reflection 1/OIE 5 | No of occurrences | % |
|-------|--|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------|
| 4 | Verbal Strategies (Communicative Strategy 1) | 5 | 10 | 5 | 6 | 26 | 31 |
| 9 | Utilizing Technology | 1 | 2 | 6 | 4 | 13 | 15.5 |
| 3 | Technical Preparation (Preparation strategy 3) | 3 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 10 | 11.9 |
| 6 | Affective Strategies | 3 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 9 | 10.7 |
| 2 | Content Preparation (Preparation Strategy 2) | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 8.3 |
| 5 | Non-Verbal Strategies (Communicative Strategy 2) | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 7.1 |
| 8 | Meeting management | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 7.1 |
| 7 | Meta-Cognitive Strategies | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 6 |
| 1 | Language Preparation (Preparation strategy 1) | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2.4 |
| TOTAL | | | | | | 84 | 100 |

Table 4. Current and future strategies (group).

| Codes | Strategies | Current OIE | % | Future OIE | % |
|-------|---|-------------|------|------------|------|
| 123 | Preparation (language, content, technical) | 19 | 21.8 | 35 | 46.7 |
| 45 | Communicative strategies (verbal, non-verbal) | 32 | 36.8 | 19 | 25.3 |
| 6 | Affective strategies | 9 | 10.3 | 11 | 14.7 |
| 7 | Meta-cognitive strategies | 5 | 5.7 | 2 | 2.7 |
| 8 | Utilizing technology | 13 | 14.9 | 6 | 8 |
| 9 | Meeting management strategies | 9 | 10.3 | 2 | 2.7 |

Table 5. Overall key learning outcomes (group).

| Code | Key learning outcomes | Total | % |
|------|---|-------|------|
| 6 | Affective aspects of intercultural competence | 32 | 39 |
| 7 | Intercultural knowledge | 22 | 26.8 |
| 8 | Intercultural communication skills | 18 | 22 |
| 9 | Intercultural awareness | 4 | 4.9 |
| 11 | Meeting management strategies | 2 | 2.4 |
| 2 | Content preparation | 2 | 2.4 |
| 13 | Culture sharing | 1 | 1.2 |
| 4 | Verbal strategies | 1 | 1.2 |
| 12 | Utilizing technology | 0 | 0 |
| 10 | Meta-cognitive Strategies | 0 | 0 |
| 5 | Non-verbal strategies | 0 | 0 |
| 3 | Technical preparation | 0 | 0 |
| 1 | Language preparation | 0 | 0 |
| | TOTAL | 82 | 100 |

Table 6. What was the role of the group reflection in your intercultural learning during the online international exchange program? (individual).

| Codes | Themes | No of occurrences | % |
|--------------|---|--------------------------|----------|
| 3 | Helping to explore experience | 1 | 1.5 |
| 4 | Helping internalize experience | 1 | 1.5 |
| 7 | Tracking progress | 1 | 1.5 |
| 11 | Finding solutions | 1 | 1.5 |
| 17 | Not effective as not everyone worked | 1 | 1.5 |
| 2 | Sharing experience | 2 | 3 |
| 6 | Synthesizing experience | 2 | 3 |
| 10 | Enhancing collaborative problem solving | 2 | 3 |
| 16 | Developing public speaking skills | 2 | 3 |
| 8 | Nurturing empathy | 3 | 4.5 |
| 9 | Enhancing group collaboration | 3 | 4.5 |
| 13 | Enhancing engagement in the program | 3 | 4.5 |
| 14 | Enhancing improvement | 3 | 4.5 |
| 15 | Enhancing intercultural awareness | 4 | 6.1 |
| 18 | Documenting experience | 4 | 6.1 |
| 1 | Learning from peers | 7 | 10.6 |
| 12 | Strategic planning | 8 | 12.1 |
| 5 | Helping evaluate experience | 18 | 27.3 |
| | TOTAL | 66 | 100 |

Table 7. What was the role of the class reflection with the instructor(s) in your intercultural learning during the online exchange program? (individual).

| Codes | Themes | No of occurrences | % |
|--------------|--|--------------------------|----------|
| 3 | Evaluating experience in larger group | 1 | 1.1 |
| 4 | Learning from feedback to other groups | 1 | 1.1 |
| 5-4 | Receiving instructors' mentorship (in intercultural learning) | 1 | 1.1 |
| 6-2 | Receiving instructors' facilitation (in evaluating experience) | 1 | 1.1 |
| 6-4 | Receiving instructors' facilitation in raising intercultural awareness | 1 | 1.1 |
| 8 | Expanding intercultural knowledge | 1 | 1.1 |
| 2 | Learning from peers | 2 | 2.2 |
| 5-1 | Receiving instructors' mentorship (learning from instructors' experience) | 2 | 2.2 |
| 5-5 | Receiving instructors' mentorship (in completing assignments) | 2 | 2.2 |
| 9 | Enhancing students' confidence in intercultural interaction | 2 | 2.2 |
| 5-2 | Receiving instructors' mentorship (receiving instructors' feedback) | 4 | 4.4 |
| 5 | Receiving instructors' mentorship | 5 | 5.6 |
| 7 | Collaborative problem solving | 6 | 6.7 |
| 6-1 | Receiving instructors' facilitation (assistance in exploring/understanding their intercultural experience) | 7 | 7.8 |
| 6-3 | Receiving instructors' facilitation in problem solving | 8 | 8.9 |
| 1 | Sharing experience within a larger group | 10 | 11.1 |
| 2-1 | Learning from peers within a larger group (from other groups' experience) | 11 | 12.2 |
| 5-6 | Receiving instructors' mentorship (encouragement/motivation) | 11 | 12.2 |
| 5-3 | Receiving instructors' mentorship (in intercultural communication) | 14 | 15.6 |
| | TOTAL | 89 | 100 |

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