

# Applications for Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in the Era of COVID

Denis Dyshko, Elizabeth Minei, & Tanya Razuvaeva,

## *Abstract*

*The COVID-19 outbreak caused university professors and students all over the world to scramble in finding different and effective ways of remote teaching and learning amidst a pandemic. This study addresses multiple issues specifically facing English language learning and the dissemination of effective remote content and the creation of a transformative pedagogy through the development of a university-to-university project that bridges the technology and language gap. In the following pages, we: 1) outline the impact of COVID on language learning; 2) discuss the implications for the English language learners caused by the COVID outbreak; and 3) review the challenges of the English learning process for the marginalized populations in higher education. For the purpose of the study, we define the marginalized population to be students representing various racial groups and social classes, as well as the students from rural areas, who did not have access to technology as opposed to the students and residents of large cities, such as New York, United States and Rostov-on-Don, Russia.*

*The COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) projects, like the one described throughout, blend remote content learning, and increase the opportunity for multilingual students to engage in real time practice with native speakers. The project also provides inclusion benefits for underprivileged students with technology concerns.*

**Keywords:** *remote content; COIL; multilingual students; COVID*

Today, more than ever, technology has become a centerpiece in promoting global learning, providing cultural understanding and building relationships (Reed, 2007). In this context, this qualitative study describes a semester-long Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project (De Castro, Dyba, Cortez, & Genecar, 2019) in combination with the experiences students went through during the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. We illustrate how two international language classrooms partnered together to provide expanded educational opportunities to its students (Minei, Razuvaeva, & Dyshko, 2021). The basic premise of the COIL program is that students from one university are paired with students from another university to study English, learn each other's culture, and develop interpersonal connections through international exchanges (Garies, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Aaron, Cedeño, Gareis, Kumar, & Swaminathan, 2018). The interpersonal connection component was viewed as a particularly beneficial element during the COVID-19 pandemic, since there many students suffered from depression, loneliness, loss, and anxiety (Luchetti, Lee, Aschwanden, Sesker, Strickhouser, Terracciano, & Sutin, 2020). The fact that stu-

dents are typically so reluctant to reach out to other classmates in a virtual context due to hesitations commonly associated with interpersonal interactions in first-time exchanges (Seller, 2012), COIL created a particularly effective opportunity for online student interaction during the COVID-19.

### **COVID-19 and the Educational Landscape**

At the end of 2019, an unknown respiratory disease surged in China and was later labeled as COVID-19. Within just a few months the COVID-19 virus turned into a global pandemic with a high fatality rate (Muralidar, et al., 2020). By August of 2020, over seven hundred thousand deaths had been reported by the World Health Organization (WHO), with over twenty million confirmed cases across the world (Muralidar et al., 2020). Governments announced lockdowns and implemented measures to stop the spread of the pandemic based on the guidelines from the authorities. A new way of living emerged, including social isolation, mandatory quarantining, 6-foot distance maintenance, wearing masks, and in some cases, requiring all facets of organizations to switch to virtual means (Koonin et al., 2020).

This health crisis affected every industry globally, including higher education which is the focus of this study. Higher education faced unprecedented challenges and was forced to redevelop the curriculum for many of the classes and disciplines, transitioning from on-campus to online teaching (Crawford et al., 2020). With the spread of COVID-19, students went from predominantly face-to-face instruction to a predominantly online learning-based curriculum. While students were attending to the shakeup that occurred with their learning spaces, faculty scrambled to find ways of moving content online and making that content meaningful. The sudden change mandated teachers, instructors, professors to convert their lectures into recordings or use web tools to teach their students, and many were unprepared to do so (Toquero, 2020). The introduction of online technology as a primary medium in pedagogical interactions expanded limited curriculum prospects to include global and international possibilities. Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the definition of normalcy and dictated new rules, online learning must readjust and reassess what effective online learning means based on the redesign of the curriculum and cautious planning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). We specifically focused on two specific concerns: the implications of online learning for the language learners, and challenges for marginalized populations without technology access.

### **Multilingual Language Learners and Remote Learning**

Our study focuses on the remote learning process as an opportunity for success for multilingual college students and offers suggestions about how online pedagogy can offer better access for them. Some scholars use the term ‘English learners’ for bilingual or multilingual students and we call attention to the fact that many students who are learning English are already either bilingual or multilingual (Martinez, 2018). As documented, the research shows that bilingual and multilingual students have better metalinguistic awareness of the language skills than the students who are monolingual but who have comparable native language skills (Ransdell, Barbier, Niit, 2006). Multilingualism as well as bilingualism is a common phenomenon that has received much scholarly attention in recent years, but not necessarily in the realm of digital spaces. Cenoz (2013) suggested that bilinguals are more experienced language learners and have potentially developed learning

strategies to a larger extent than monolinguals, which could be beneficial when introducing technologies that require at least some level of adaptation. Scholars also focused on the advantages that bilinguals have over monolinguals when acquiring an additional language. Wright, Boun, and Garcia (2017) also present the first comprehensive international reference work of the latest policies, practices, and theories related to the dynamic interdisciplinary field of bilingual and multilingual education. Multilingualism is also an interdisciplinary phenomenon that can be studied from both an individual and a societal perspective and in our case researched in the areas of linguistics, communication, language policy, and sociolinguistics. With the outbreak of COVID-19 and crushing travel restrictions, language learners benefit from the opportunity to connect with invested parties from all over the globe. These connections can offer immense benefits, not only in assisting in the language learning process, but in creating friendships, sharing culture, and creating meaningful interactions (Aaron, et. al., 2018).

### **The Online Learning Landscape and Common Challenges**

Online and remote learning has been attracting attention since technologies became available. Early iterations of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) technologies such as electronic mail, bulletin board services, computer conferencing systems, and the World Wide Web proved to have a profound effect on education (Harasim et al., 1995). As an ultimate goal, students also benefit from autonomy and ownership: online learning requires the student to serve in the role of the principal actor of his or her own learning (Martin, 2003). Remote learning has positive effects, but there are also challenges stemming from online learning. First of all, access to these technologies equalize learning for students from geographically remote locations or if a course or a project includes students from different countries when students have no opportunities to attend classes and lectures. This inclusion is crucial during present challenges when the world is undergoing big changes during the so-called COVID-19 era. In the wake of the rapid global shutdown following COVID-19, the transition to the online mode of instruction might have saved the educational process in the short term. The quick switch to online instruction also introduced another issue: access to the internet in the rural areas and accessibility of the web by the various groups of population (Shahzad et al., 2020).

Research on the effects of online learning has been in process since the concept was introduced. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) outline numerous challenges including technology, socioeconomic issues, assessment and supervision, compatibility, competencies, and even an intrusion of pets. From another perspective, Owens, Hardcastle, and Richardson (2009) identified a sense of isolation and the limitations of the teaching staff. Lecturers also face some difficulties with the method of instruction. This challenge may provide a perfect stage for the opportunities to develop quality education in conjunction with online methods of instruction. Research supports that online learning in the COVID-19 era affected the most vulnerable groups of students, such as those with low socioeconomic status, who do not have access to technology or internet access (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Another consideration is the type of use and engagement with technology. Even though many students are tech-savvy, tech-savviness alone does not ensure they will do well with remote learning. Some education experts say that, “there is a huge gap between what students can do for fun on their cellphones and gaming systems and how good they are at using a device for educational tasks such as reading a document, answering a question, or figuring out a problem” (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020, p. 2).

Ethical issues also present when instructors have to figure out how to assess students fairly when learning is done remotely and many teachers face concerns of academic misconduct in that the increased distance in remote learning facilitates cheating and other ethical concerns (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020). Thus, the necessity to design an inclusive curriculum and teaching methods that address the challenges of both language learners and those facing technology issues is important. Carter, Rice, and Yang (2020) indicated that many teachers and students in the USA and various parts of the world are migrating some aspects of education online out of necessity while identifying strategies of a self-regulated learning (SRL) framework for students learning in online environments. Clearly, the remote environment created by COVID-19 produces challenges for higher education and additional challenges for language learners and individuals who may be marginalized learners due to issues with technology access. Our study bridges the use of technology, distance, and how these affect the learning process by proposing a focus on a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project (Rubin & Guth, 2015).

### **COVID-19 Remote Learning Through COIL**

COIL projects allow for collaborative partnerships that span borders. Thus, just like in our project, students from a university in Russia could be paired with students in the United States for partnerships on a similar curriculum. The details of the project are simple and take place virtually. The first step in a successful COIL project partnership is to find a collaborator from a university in another country. There are multiple methods of finding collaborators including pedagogical social media platforms, or through established COIL based centers, like the SUNY COIL Center. From the student perspective, the students will need a reliable internet connection and a device that can support face-to-face, digital, synchronous conversations. As an alternative, this activity can be achieved domestically between universities in the same country. However, international pairings can bring a richer and broader platform for culture and language sharing, opportunities for negotiating difficult logistics, and an enriching opportunity to connect theory to practice. We outline the basic scope of a COIL project as well as describe additional benefits of the digital/technical nature of such a project.

#### **COIL Scope**

There are numerous advantages to COIL projects. First, as any course can be part of COIL, based on the professor's curriculum outcomes, there are multiple opportunities to shift the learning goals to both an interpersonal and an intercultural focus. Interpersonally, primary tensions occurring from self-disclosure are common in the experimental phase of new relationships but students engaging in a COIL project can learn how to navigate those tensions and develop the language necessary to communicate sharing preferences and boundaries through the engagement in the task as per the curriculum designed by leading instructors. A COIL project requires students to explore new interactions through which they may mediate feelings of loneliness and subsequent depression for college students (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005).

Interculturally, as new friendships emerge, students will encounter challenges requiring them to address primary tensions with self-disclosure concerns, break down stereotypes, and confront their perception biases (Zhang & Merolla, 2007). Encounters in education that can successfully build these perception skills can transfer into more successful professional lives because students would have had the opportunity to work through dissonant experiences. The opportunity to

deal with dissonant experiences is essential in that “dissonant experiences put students in challenging or uncomfortable situations...it forces students to examine their previously held assumptions” (Motley & Sturgill, 2013, p. 184).

Second, there are opportunities to develop a curriculum for language-learning programs to partner for native speaking practice. Senyshyn and Chamberlin-Quinlisk (2009) found that there were multiple beneficial outcomes, like greater reflection and exploration of assumptions and gaining confidence in a new role, for language immersion activities that span a long-term semester project. The benefit of an additional language component is that low-income language-learning students are still able to experience a version of cultural immersion like what they might encounter on a study abroad trip.

Third, the medium of a COIL project, primarily mediated through digital technologies, allows for students to develop and hone their skills in dealing with the challenges of technology and the logistics required to successfully complete the project with a high degree of autonomy. In short, this project is cost-effective, allowing students the chance for personalized interpersonal and cultural immersion as they communicate with their peers in another country. The setup also offers a plethora of rich pedagogical directions for professors who may not necessarily be trained in COIL, and can be applied in a wide variety of disciplines to center their lessons on a variety of perspectives and learn from one another, while developing both interpersonal and intercultural competence (Savicki, 2020). Set up may include synchronous or asynchronous interactions between the students and the professors, and can be done using various platforms such as Zoom or Skype. Lastly, an added and unexpected benefit of this project is the successful transferability to distance or remote learning environments. As the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated, there is a strong need for a compelling curriculum that can be delivered virtually or in a distance learning capacity to present meaningful educational opportunities. While this project is designed for digital learning as a means of maximizing the multimodal potential of online communication, there are also opportunities for in-person adaptations.

## **COIL Project**

This activity describes a semester-long COIL project (De Castro, Dyba, Cortez, & Genecar, 2019) that demonstrates how two (or more) international classrooms can partner together for expanded educational opportunities. In the COIL project we implemented, the students from one country [USA] were paired with students from another country [Russia] for conversation, language learning practice, and as a means of addressing specific pedagogical content (i.e., self-disclosure norms through emerging friendships, challenging cultural biases, and ethnocentrism; reducing technology uncertainty). Overall, when participating in the COIL project, the students are guided through a series of conversations (See *Appendix A*) that can allow them to develop the language, the attention to interpersonal constructs, and to develop mastery over their online learning experience (Minei, Razuvaeva, & Dyshko, 2021). Students utilize Facetime, WhatsApp, Skype, and other free synchronous applications accessible without extra fees. However, one of the important aspects that needs to be taken into account is time difference if the teams are located in different parts of the world. Thus, in our project there was an eight-hour difference between New York City and Rostov-on-Don. The above mentioned technologies have proved to be indispensable (Yildirim, Elban, & Yildirim, 2018) especially in the lockdown during COVID-19. Because the project develops a strong intersection between international and multilingual language learners and digital

technologies used for education, we connect our outcomes to speak to the ways in which this project can inform online learning in the wake of the transformed educational landscape emerging from COVID-19. We ask “What are the benefits, challenges, and implications of the COIL project for language learners, and how this can affect marginalized populations during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

## Method

### Participants

This study relied on data from two different types of classes. English Speaking Country Study from the Southern Federal University in Rostov-on-Don, Russia and Interpersonal Communication in New York City. The students ranged from the first year to senior year, and the median age was 19. Over the course of two semesters 155 students participated in the project. Of which, there were 71 English-Speaking Country Study participants and 84 Russian students. All the students were bilingual or multilingual. The participants, on both sides [the US and Russia], were of various backgrounds, representing different racial groups beyond just the nationalities of ‘Russian’ and ‘American’ and marginal composition. Throughout the duration of the research project a reliable wi-fi or internet connection was not available to some of the students at all times. The participating students were facing challenges as a result of the time difference between the US and Russia. As mentioned earlier, for the purpose of the study, we defined the marginalized population to be students representing various racial groups and social classes, as well as the students from rural areas, who did not have an expanded access to technology as opposed to the students from large cities, such as New York, United States and Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Further, the groups were composed of the students from various regions (Greater New York City and Greater Rostov-on-Don), and all the students were commuter students.

### Data Collection

The data were collected in two phases, primarily because the partnership first occurred in the fall of 2019 (pre-pandemic) and then again in the spring 2020 semester. However, after the outbreak of the COVID-19, the main question that the study had shifted its focus and became “What are the benefits, challenges, and implications of the COIL project for language learners, and how can this affect marginalized populations during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

This project ran over two semesters and included 155 students ( $n=155$ ) altogether. As mentioned earlier, there were 71 students in the US class, and 84 in the Russian class. Some Russian students had two partners. One professor from Russia taught English Speaking Country Study where her students were primarily focused on English proficiencies and the other professor taught Interpersonal Communication in the United States. The students had three conversations each semester throughout the duration of the project. Each conversation lasted for 45 minutes with the particular topic based on the assignment from the Professors. In the Fall 2019 semester, data were collected using focus group style interviews provided by the English-Speaking Country study professor to develop perspectives from students about their experience. Both the American and Russian students participated in the groups. The questions included a request for the feedback, such as: “You have now had three conversations with your partner. What were some of the elements of self-disclosure that surprised you?” and “What are 3 takeaways that you might apply to future

interpersonal interactions that you learned during this experience? How might you apply your experience to business situations, international communication opportunities, new friendships in social settings, romantic relationships?” and “What worked well within the project? What suggestions do you have for improvement?”. These questions were asked with an aim to learn more about the practical components of remote learning, and useful tools the students found to be helpful during the pandemic.

In the spring 2020 semester, data were collected via open-ended questions on a distributed survey created by the Interpersonal Communication Professor, Dr. Minei. The instrument was composed of the questions which welcomed students to share their experiences and interests in regards to their peers and what topics should be selected for the following conversations as a part of the project. The reason for implementation of the open-ended questions survey was to develop responses pertaining to two different areas of inquiry: 1) Impressions from the language-learning students about their experience, and 2) Impressions from the international students about their understanding of the process. Both methods are beneficial in allowing a wide range of responses, with answers that resemble more of a dialogue. Another benefit of open-ended responses (both conducted in a focus group, and also as a narrative opportunity on a survey) is that there is greater freedom given to the respondents as they form their impressions rather than selecting their experience on a Likert based scale.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed through the use of a modified content comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), by sorting the responses into two categories reflecting the challenges and benefits of completing the COIL project. Any data falling beyond the mention of benefit or challenge were reduced. Coders decided on categorizing each code resulting in two focused codes: Benefits and Challenges. We are further explaining the two categories below.

### **Data and Interpretation**

The purpose of focusing on the benefits and challenges of the students' experience, especially during the pandemic, can help inform the creation and implementation of this project for other instructors looking to simulate such a collaboration. We start first with benefits as they address a multitude of touchpoints including: 1) Language and Cultural Immersion; and 2) Comfort with Technology that contributed to better learning outcomes for the students. We conclude with the expressed challenges from the students which include: 1) Logistical Inconvenience; and 2) Issues in Compatibility of the equipment and running software used to connect the students during the project.

#### **Benefit: Language and Cultural Immersion**

Students described a number of benefits to their learning that centered around different access to immersion and different cultures and overcoming their fears and lack of communication through the COIL program, which was especially useful during the pandemic. Alice, a 3rd year Journalism and Intercultural Communication major from SFU commented:

[The online collaborative project] can personify what we learn, because culture and language are not texts in a textbook, but real people you interact with. Such conversational sessions will also prepare students for a multicultural global world where they have to learn how to work. They will encourage students to think critically and emphatically about global events and will give a new perspective. It is also a great way to practice the skills, find new connections and friends as well as expand your network.

Other students noted similar benefits to language learning practice. Polina, a 3rd year Foreign Philology student noted: “The first benefit is getting new acquaintances from another continent with whom we have decided to keep in touch. The second is getting the opportunity to improve my language skills (English and Spanish) and to get help with it.” Other students noted the easing of social tensions they felt when talking with their partner, “I felt excited and nervous at the same time but I was so happy to have an opportunity to communicate with native speakers and learn more about their way of life, values, hopes and expectations” (Parmina, 3rd-year student, Philology, Journalism and Intercultural Communication). Other students described the chance for immersion based on their limitations to travel due to COVID-19. Ilya, a 3rd-year SFU student, majoring in Journalism and Intercultural Communication noted:

The three most important goals for me were cultural, linguistic, and technological. Yes, I have always thought that cultural learning is an important component for me. I think it can help me to know more about foreign people and to develop new horizons, especially when now we have no chance to travel as much as we used to. I will try to explain my thoughts in another way with different words. Friendship, exploration, improvement.

Some students noted the enhancement to their learning through the interactions. For example, Lyudmila stated that, “Through conversations, I was able to learn not only about traditions and culture but also about some slang words and other language peculiarities. Living in Rostov, I rarely come across any native speakers” (Lyudmila, 3rd-year student, Journalism and Intercultural Communication, SFU). The students in the USA also felt there were benefits to cultural immersion that could help overcome political positions generated by the media and allowing students to form their own opinions:

By participating in the program, our network broadens outside of the States, with perspectives other than hearing from the news. I learned the daily lives of Russian students, which is ironic as we live in a diverse city. I think having the opportunity to have a one to one conversation with a person physically living in Russia, gave me a better understanding of the daily lives of Russian students. Overall, I see participation in the program as a way to expand our aspects of the world. (Michael, junior, Interpersonal Communication Major, New York City).

Lastly, others overcame personal hesitations through the immersion, like Konstantin, a 4th-year student of Philology, Journalism and Intercultural Communication at SFU, who said, “I thought I would feel embarrassed and have a heavy weight of responsibility on my shoulders. When I speak with foreigners I never tell them I study linguistics not to be ashamed to make



mistakes but this project and this experience helped me to overcome these difficulties. I find remote learning especially important in such a specific and weird period of lockdown.” This inclusion of remote access during COVID-19 also revealed other benefits through the use of technology.

### **Benefit: Building Interpersonal Skills with the Help of Technology**

We also found out that multilingual students greatly relied on modern technologies, such as Zoom or Skype, not only in their everyday life but also during the learning process. Some students noted building skills within their own intrapersonal repertoire: “For the last video call meeting, my partner and I had trouble committing to our scheduled time. I learned to control my emotions and not blame the situation on my partner regardless of who’s ‘fault’ it is” (Nicole, senior, Interpersonal Communication Major, New York City.) When asked which technologies are likely to revolutionize work in the coming decade, students said that they were most enthusiastic about the potential of virtual reality. “Remote learning gives you an opportunity to save money that otherwise would be spent on commuting to the university or paying rent for the apartment in another city. Learning from home is less stressful because you don’t have to deal with crowds of strangers at the university” (Galina Cheremisina, 2nd-year student, Higher School of Business and Economics, SFU). Additionally, the students shared that: “...it’s not the end of the world, but sometimes it drains your energy. You can attend more lectures through the Internet. And get more out of them because nothing hinders you from listening to the information” (Galina Cheremisina, 2nd-year student, Higher School of Business and Economics, SFU). Others found that they had better interpersonal interactions: “I learned to be calm when dealing with online connectivity issues. I also learned to be a better active listener especially to a person whose first language is not English” (Roberta, senior, Intercultural Communication Major, New York City).

The abundance of the current technologies and projects have kept the education process going, resulting in students that found more benefits than drawbacks in the new remote situation. Another great motivating factor was that students during the pandemic were seeking communication as the lockdown period turned out to be longer than expected. Anna describes this phenomenon here: “But then because of Coronavirus, quarantine, and online-education we had more time to have conversations at comfortable hours for both of us and it really helped to improve my speaking and listening skills” (Anna 4th-year student, Philology, Journalism and Intercultural Communication, SFU). Nevertheless, there were some challenges students faced. We detail these challenges in the following section.

### **Challenge: Logistical Inconvenience of the project**

Sometimes the Internet connection was slow and the learning process took more time than they expected. Students were aware of this challenge, but recognized the benefit of overcoming that issue. Illya stated that, “It is not the same to talk to somebody in person and via gadgets. You can not feel them and react accordingly but we have to learn as it seems to be our future” (Illya, 4th-year student, Institute of Philology, Journalism and Intercultural Communication, SFU). Other students learned to position the challenges as a learning experience. Max said,

Communication on a screen has pushed me to become more comfortable interacting virtually. The channel richness is less and requires alternative communication signals to get

the same idea across. This is applicable in a professional, especially in international banking. I have had Skype interviews before and I'm becoming more comfortable with interviewing via Skype. (Max, junior, Business Major, New York City)

Other students noted issues with coordination: "It is not even negative, but inconvenient. We could talk only in the evening, at 9 or 10 p.m. because of the time difference, when I usually prepare for sleep. (Polina, 3rd-year student, Foreign Philology, SFU). For some students, the slow internet access yielded disappointed feelings because their educational environment had been more conducive to learning prior to the crisis. This difference was reflected in some students' approach to the lesson.

### **Challenge: Issues in Technological and Personal Compatibility**

There were a lot of feelings that students had about the project concerning compatibility, which was made apparent when students were asked about the quality of interactions with their partner. "I think one of the negative aspects is that partners are sometimes only interested in completing the task. I think that is a cultural aspect as well. Students in the US work more than students in Russia. In Russia, students depend more on their parents than on scholarships and grants" (Ilya, 3rd-year student, Philology, Journalism and Intercultural Communication, SFU). While this disappointment was about the partnership, some students critiqued the orientation to technology offering suggestions of their own for improvement: "I guess, remote learning saves a lot of time, effort and energy but when you completely depend on technology, it's not good either." (Vlada, 3rd-year student, Institute of Philology, Journalism and Intercultural Communication, SFU). While our participants indicated frustrations with technology and compatibility, we were able to use those to generate suggestions for overcoming future issues.

### **Discussion**

Our findings include: 1) an overview of the experience of communication with native speakers; 2) the ability to overcome both language and cultural barriers; and 3) a discussion of the challenges and solutions to the technology that can be constructed as a best practices guide for future projects.

First, students described a clearly beneficial and enjoyable experience in communicating with their partners, and particularly in the emphasis of native English speakers being able to assist the language learners. Not only do interpersonal and intercultural communication students make genuine connections with individuals from another country, but the language learning students also get a customized experience of practice with native speakers and the ability to overcome both language and cultural barriers. Students understood the importance of dedicating the time to practice together through the course of the project, where they spent on average 45 hours, and generally respect the time needed to succeed.

We also recognize the technological barriers that can be present in online learning and find workable solutions around this issue. This project is unique in that the creation and parameters deliberately centered multilingual students in the forefront of the experience, and accounts for marginalized students who may not have the most advanced access to technology (Zabala & Gutierrez, 2017). As a result, students who were partnered with other students located in another

country and from another culture were introduced to opportunities, such as learning specific aspects of norms of communication (e.g. rules of addressing the superior) that could assist in challenging and breaking down both language and cultural barriers. This outcome becomes particularly important when assessing the placement in the greater standing of marginalized educational experience and the presentation of certain identity constructs (Goffman, 1978). There is a long and storied history of disadvantaged outcomes for students experiencing disparate learning based on socioeconomic differences (Shen & Dumani, 2013; Potnis, Adkins, Cooke, & Babu, 2017). We can conclude from our study that students were able to overcome some struggles with technology where access was concerned which reduces the disparate experience based on status. When the educational experience heavily relies on technology, rather than airfare, lodging, and per diem costs, the opportunities for access increase exponentially. When the study abroad experience is conducted remotely and as an equal opportunity, there is no need for mitigating embarrassment that might stem from a lack of funding for programs.

An additional finding centered on the opportunity to practice integrated processes of learning. Although the physical location of the students was Russia and New York City, the participants were of varied backgrounds expanding beyond just the nationalities of ‘Russian’ and ‘American’ and in fact, were composed of a great deal of diversity. As a result, they all had an opportunity to learn more multicultural information and develop their knowledge in different fields. Most strikingly, we found that many of the English-Speaking Country Study participants (n=62 out of 71) mentioned that they found a common language and common interests quickly as a means of breaking down interpersonal tensions and almost all the Russian students (n=79 out of 84) reported that they were able to confront self-disclosure concerns with minimal discomfort. Most participants (n=148 out of 155) from both classes claimed feelings of mutual support and encouragement during the conversations. A resulting takeaway for students was the recognition that although both cultures have many specific features of their own, both Russians and Americans have much in common (Naumov & Puffer, 2000).

## Recommendations

In offering additional support for instructors who may want to take on a similar project, we provide the following recommendations.

1. **Students who do not feel comfortable with their space can be coached to develop solutions to disclosing their physical environment professionally:** Instructors can coach students who are nervous about sharing their personal spaces or their home environment, by focusing on problem-solving solutions like establishing a space that is neutral (i.e., against a solid wall in their home), encouraging them to set up a space for conversation in a neutral at school (i.e., renting a library pod), or brainstorming about other options they might feel comfortable with (i.e., planning to go to a family or friend location with more comfortable aesthetics). Additionally, some of the platforms, such as Zoom or Google Meet, offer an option of creating a virtual background. Instructors can explain the correlation between problem-solving in an appropriate virtual space and creating an environment conducive to success on, for example, a virtual job interview.

2. **Students who have technical issues or connection issues can be trained to troubleshoot these common workplace difficulties:** Instructors can do some preliminary research into understanding the available technology resources on campus. Some campuses have computer labs, laptop/MacBook rental opportunities, and stable internet connections on campus. Students can also explore the opportunities on their personal devices through conversations about different technology options that capitalize on problem-solving (i.e., if Zoom or Skype are not feasible, explore Whatsapp, FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, or Microsoft Teams). If there are truly unmovable barriers to technology problems, an instructor can assign specific students to partner with individuals from the same school but from a different class for in-person conversations that can overcome the technology barriers.
3. **Students may complain about time zone challenges can be trained on how to overcome international and intercultural difficulties:** In our project, our teams experienced an 8 hour time difference. We provided students with a chart showing the most feasible time blocks for both the Russian and the US students, with options and possibilities for 7:00 a.m. start times for both, as well as the 11:00 p.m start times for both. Encouraging students to find collaborative compromises and to adjust to time blocks that are not always ideal becomes transferable in greater professional contexts.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study, like all studies, had some limitations. While the open-ended responses on a survey may contain richer details, some respondents might have been hesitant to give articulate answers, which could impact the depth and richness that could have been obtained. Future researchers may consider a Likert scale for data collection that can address pre and post project assessments on several variables, including the comparison of achieving learning outcomes after the project concludes. Likert-scale questions could be used in addition to the open-ended responses to get a fuller picture of what went well within the project and how the experience could have been improved. This method of data collection (i.e., the combination of Likert Scale and open-ended focus questions) can also be replicated or reproduced when COVID is no longer a factor in the curriculum. Future researchers can also add additional data collection methods to test the language proficiencies of the non-native English speakers by conducting a pre and post-test. Additionally, one of the limitations was a limited access to technology by some students from the rural areas. The limited access to technology and internet access was one of the limitations during the study, especially during the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak. Lastly, time difference appeared to be a limiting factor when it came to scheduling specific activities between the students.

### **Conclusion**

Although this project seems simple, we do not aim to trivialize this process at the expense of clear pedagogy. Trivialization of culturally relevant pedagogy involves reducing curriculum “to steps to follow rather than understanding it as a paradigm for teaching and learning” (Sleeter, 2012, p. 569). The benefits from this project include flexible technology use, and greater inclusion among a marginalized population, rather than forcing educational outcomes to rely on high-cost websites or modalities. This project is cost-effective, delivers meaningful content, and can be replicated in

classes where the focus is on rapport building in interpersonal contexts, increasing intercultural competence, developing immersive language learning, and increasing students' comfort with even the most basic technologies. We instead propose an alternative that provides clear benefits for students who are both language learning and at a disadvantage concerning technological access.

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## Appendix A: Directions for COIL Project

**Overview:** Over the course of the semester, the *Interpersonal Communication* students at UNIVERSITY in the USA will be participating in a partnership with Professor NAME of the UNIVERSITY in YOUR COUNTRY. Professor NAME teaches a course called: *English Speaking Country Study*. Professor NAME's course introduces the English language to students and develops students' understanding of the language, grammar patterns, and customs attached to English and English speaking countries. The purpose of this partnership is to develop intercultural and interpersonal communication skills in dyadic situations. You may be partnered with a student in YOUR COUNTRY with the expectation that you will complete the partnership with the help of guided conversations.

The purpose of this unit is to reflect on the interpersonal dynamics at play in new friendships. Areas of focus include interpersonal communication, personality, self-disclosure, hyperpersonal communication, and more with applied practice that we can use in a real-life intercultural interaction. This unit is accompanied by **three preparation units** that must be completed before contacting your assigned partner. This unit also includes **three guided conversations** with your UNIVERSITY partner. Finally, this unit closes with **a post-conversation** reflection and wrap-up. For each activity, there may be additional instructions given to assist you in reflecting on the activity. Follow the guide as well as adding additional insights you may gain from your experience.

### Preparation Assignments

There are three preparation assignments that you must complete before meeting your UNIVERSITY partner for the first time.

#### Preparation Assignment 1: Exploring Expectations: Perception Checking (15 Points)

The goal of this assignment is to think through our normal expectations about cross-cultural interactions and exchanges. This assignment is designed to get you to reflect on the nature of unconventional interpersonal exchanges and develop thoughts on the experience of our current comfort levels concerning self-disclosure. Keep in mind, the students at UNIVERSITY also have their own concerns, fears, expectations, and interests. Then, complete your reflection and feedback assignment prior to the first conversation with your UNIVERSITY Partner.

#### Preparation Assignment 2: Introduction 1-Page Brief: Reducing Uncertainty (20 Points)

Students will create a brief introduction bio infographic that you can share with your partner. Keep in mind, this submission will be the first impression your partner will have of you, and should be professional. The bio brief should be professional, colorful, interesting, and grammatically correct. I encourage you to be as creative as you like with this assignment. Your submission should include some or all of the following, or additional information that you want your partner to know about you:

- Your name and what to call you (if you have a nickname that you prefer, etc.). You might share the meaning of your name or elements of heritage.
- Best contact information/handle of your social media that you will be using for chats



- A broad picture, or map of where you live. Keep in mind, a map might help our partners understand more about where you live in relation to “New York City.”
- You might share a topic, hobby, interest that is particularly important to you.
- You might share your feelings about the project. Excitement? Nervous? Hesitant?
- You might ask a question of them--what do you hope to find out about?

### **Preparation Assignment 3: Language Practice: Combating Ethnocentrism (15 Points)**

This assignment is designed to familiarize you with a few basic phrases that you might consider using in your exchanges with your partner. There are two parts to this assignment, 1) brief videos on 3 basic PHRASES NATIVE TO YOUR LANGUAGE that you can employ in your conversations and 2) A basic phrases guide with pronunciations to get you to become familiar with the sounds of Russian Language.

1. Watch: Basic Video: "Nice to meet you"; Basic Video: "Thank you"
2. Practice: Basic Phrases: [http://www.russianlessons.net/lessons/lesson3\\_main.php](http://www.russianlessons.net/lessons/lesson3_main.php)
3. Finally, answer the assignment reflection prompts.

### **Guided Conversations**

#### **Conversation Assignment 1: Get-to-Know-You Conversation (50 points)**

The purpose of this initial chat is to meet your partner and get acquainted through discussion about general subjects that you might feel comfortable sharing (see topics that you generated in preparation assignment 2). As expected, this first interaction may be awkward, uncomfortable, or strange because we understand that new interactions also include primary tensions that need to be broken down before self-disclosure can occur. Please aim for 45-60 minutes of conversation with your partner. When you have completed the conversation, please make sure to add a screenshot of your time to your formal reflection. Following the conversation, you will write a formal reflection on the experience.

#### **Conversation Assignment 2: Cultural Artifact Sharing (50 points)**

Please select 2-3 different cultural artifacts that have some significance to you and share these with your partners. Draw inspiration from your favorite: poems, family recipes, songs, television shows, websites, movies, newspaper articles, blog sites, books, holiday traditions, rituals, etc. You will provide your partner with the cultural artifacts (e.g., pdfs, links to resources, etc.) and your partner will share 2-3 cultural artifacts with you. The cultural artifacts should move beyond surface-level items because these artifacts are going to be the focus of your second in-depth conversation and should be about the experience that you both assigned to each other. **(Please, keep in mind: we are representing each other as representatives of YOUR SCHOOL. Please do not choose cultural artifacts that are R-Rated, controversial, politically or religiously provocative, or generally in bad taste--please use your best judgment).** Please aim for 45-60 minutes of conversation with your partner. When you have completed the conversation, please make sure to add a screenshot of your time to your formal reflection, and a copy of your artifact. Following the conversation, you will write a formal reflection on the experience; please make sure to include your artifacts at the end of your turnitin.com submission. **\*\*For this reflection, I want you to move away from self-disclosure, schemas, intrapersonal assumptions, and face.**

**Conversation Assignment 3: Student-Driven Conversations (50 points)**

Take this time to explore a more serious topic to discuss that you and your partner can discover together: stereotypes, family patterns, family relationships, marriages, living conditions, etc. When you have completed the conversation, please make sure to add a screenshot of your time to your formal reflection. The purpose of this project was to develop intercultural and interpersonal communication skills in dyadic situations. Please complete your reflection and feedback assignment after you've finished **all conversations** with your COIL Project Partner.