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**COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING
IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ENHANCING INTERNATIONALIZATION
AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE**

ABSTRACT

The paper examines Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as an innovative approach to the internationalization of higher education and the development of intercultural communication competence. The study aims to define the conceptual foundations of COIL, identify its key characteristics, analyze implementation practices in the United States, several European countries, and Ukraine, and determine its pedagogical benefits and challenges. The research is based on a qualitative-analytical methodology involving the review and synthesis of empirical studies and institutional case studies. The theoretical framework integrates constructivist learning theory, collaborative learning theory, and intercultural communicative competence theory. The findings demonstrate that COIL represents a structured model of virtual international collaboration in which instructors from different countries jointly design and deliver academic courses or projects. The approach combines disciplinary learning with the development of intercultural awareness, communication abilities, teamwork and digital literacy skills. The paper highlights successful COIL practices implemented at universities in the United States, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Ukraine. The study emphasizes that COIL expands access to international learning opportunities without requiring physical mobility and therefore contributes to inclusive and sustainable internationalization. At the same time, several challenges are identified, including technological barriers, language difficulties, differences in academic calendars and the need for faculty training. Special attention is also paid to collaborative task design and assessment strategies in virtual exchange environments. The author concludes that COIL has significant potential for the modernization of higher education and further development of virtual international collaboration.

Keywords: *collaborative online international learning, virtual exchange, internationalization, intercultural communicative competence, academic course, project, team work, higher education.*

**СПІЛЬНЕ МІЖНАРОДНЕ ОНЛАЙН-НАВЧАННЯ У ВИЩІЙ ОСВІТІ:
ІНТЕРНАЦІОНАЛІЗАЦІЯ ТА РОЗВИТОК
МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОЇ КОМУНІКАТИВНОЇ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТІ**

АНОТАЦІЯ

У статті розглядається спільне міжнародне онлайн-навчання (COIL) як інноваційний підхід до інтернаціоналізації вищої освіти та розвитку міжкультурної



комунікативної компетентності. Метою дослідження є визначення концептуальних засад COIL, виявлення його ключових характеристик, аналіз практик впровадження у Сполучених Штатах Америки, низці європейських країн та Україні, а також окреслення його педагогічних переваг і викликів. Дослідження ґрунтується на якісно-аналітичній методології, що включає огляд та синтез емпіричних розвідок та аналіз конкретних інституційних практик. Теоретична база дослідження інтегрує теорію конструктивістського навчання, теорію спільного навчання та теоретичні засади розвитку міжкультурної комунікативної компетентності. Результати засвідчують, що COIL є структурованою моделлю віртуальної міжнародної співпраці, у межах якої викладачі з різних країн спільно розробляють та реалізують навчальні дисципліни або проекти. Цей підхід поєднує вивчення фахових дисциплін із розвитком міжкультурної обізнаності, комунікативних навичок, уміння працювати в команді та цифрової грамотності. У статті висвітлено успішні практики COIL, реалізовані в університетах США, Нідерландів, Великої Британії та України. Наголошується, що COIL розширює доступ до можливостей міжнародного навчання без необхідності фізичної мобільності, сприяючи в такий спосіб інклюзивній та сталій інтернаціоналізації. Водночас ідентифіковано низку викликів, зокрема технологічні бар'єри, мовні труднощі, розбіжності в графіках освітнього процесу та потребу в підвищенні кваліфікації викладачів. Особливу увагу приділено розробці спільних завдань та стратегіям оцінювання в середовищі віртуального обміну. Зроблено висновок, що COIL має значний потенціал для модернізації вищої освіти та подальшого розвитку віртуальної міжнародної співпраці.

Ключові слова: спільне міжнародне онлайн-навчання, віртуальний обмін, інтернаціоналізація, міжкультурна комунікативна компетентність, академічний курс, проект, командна робота, вища освіта.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid internationalization of higher education has significantly transformed pedagogical approaches, particularly through the integration of digital technologies and virtual collaboration. One of the most innovative models in this context is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which enables students from different countries to engage in structured online collaboration within academic courses.

The COIL approach is not based on a fixed curriculum or a specific delivery platform. Instead, it functions as a flexible framework that supports course design, fosters collaboration between institutions, faculty and students, and contributes to broader institutional objectives related to student learning and engagement. In this context, COIL can assist universities and departments in expanding access to global learning and cross-cultural experiences for a larger number of students.

The growing relevance of COIL is closely associated with the need to provide inclusive international learning opportunities without physical mobility contributing to equal access to global learning experiences. Recent empirical studies demonstrate that COIL enhances intercultural competence, communication skills, global awareness among students and significantly improves students' cultural intelligence. These findings highlight the pedagogical value of COIL and justify further investigation of its implementation in different educational contexts.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to provide a clear definition of COIL approach, to identify its key characteristics, analyze the experience of implementing COIL practices in higher



education institutions in the United States, some European countries and Ukraine, to identify its pedagogical benefits and challenges in the context of internationalization and development of intercultural communication competence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative-analytical approach based on the review and synthesis of empirical research, case studies, and scientific publications. A comparative method is used to analyze implementation practices across different countries, including the United States, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Ukraine. Data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports and case studies of COIL projects.

The theoretical basis of COIL is represented by several key approaches, including constructivist learning theory, which highlights the role of interaction and collaboration in knowledge construction; intercultural communication competence theory, which focuses on developing cultural awareness and communication skills; and collaborative learning theory, which underscores the significance of peer interaction in the learning process.

The concept of COIL was introduced by the State University of New York (SUNY) in 2006. This initiative led to the establishment of the SUNY COIL Center (SUNY COIL Center, n.d.), which has played a central role in supporting and promoting this approach (Rubin, 2017). Although COIL first developed in the United States, it has gradually gained attention in Europe. This expansion has been supported by the development of the SUNY COIL Global Network. Growing interest in COIL is reflected in the increasing number of related presentations at the annual conferences of the European Association for International Education (EAIE). Another important milestone was the first European COIL conference, held at The Hague University of Applied Sciences in 2016 (The Hague Online, 2016). The conference, which reached full capacity, gathered experienced COIL practitioners from around the world to share ideas and develop new partnerships. It also attracted newcomers, thereby expanding the community and strengthening the global COIL network.

Several factors have contributed to the growing popularity of COIL all over the world. First, higher education institutions have recognized that only a small proportion of students participate in traditional mobility programs, such as studying or interning abroad. This has created a need for more inclusive and accessible forms of internationalization, and COIL has emerged as one such solution. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to online and blended learning. This shift highlighted COIL as a practical alternative to mobility-based experiences. Third, increasing concern about the environmental impact of international travel, especially carbon emissions, has encouraged institutions to adopt more sustainable approaches (Nikula et al., 2022; Shields, 2019).

COIL is often positioned within the broader concept of Virtual Exchange (VE), which encompasses various forms of online international learning (O'Dowd, 2021). Although the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, this practice can create conceptual ambiguity. COIL is typically characterized by structured, collaborative learning between students, whereas other forms of VE may involve limited interaction or may not include collaboration at all. Therefore, COIL should be considered a distinct approach rather than being entirely incorporated into a broader category of VE.

RESULTS

The COIL approach is characterized by a set of specific features, and its successful implementation depends on careful course and task design. In this context, 'design' refers to the deliberate planning of methods, procedures, learning activities, timelines, group



formation strategies, role distribution, scaffolding, facilitation methods and assessment approaches that educators use to structure COIL experiences and to promote meaningful and effective learning (Hackett et al., 2023).

Central to this process is the principle of constructive alignment, which ensures coherence between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods (Kirschner et al., 2022).

COIL typically involves instructors from two or more higher education institutions located in different countries who collaborate to co-design and co-deliver a shared course or project. Such projects may vary in duration, ranging from short-term engagements of several weeks, as recommended by the SUNY COIL Center, to full-semester implementations (SUNY COIL Center, 2020).

A key component of this approach is the formation of international student teams who work together online to complete curriculum-based tasks. These tasks are often interdisciplinary in nature and require students to jointly produce an outcome such as a report, presentation, or solution to a shared problem. For example, students from different academic backgrounds and cultural contexts may collaborate to investigate a research question or design an educational product.

Interaction between students and instructors may take place both synchronously, through scheduled online meetings, and asynchronously, using tools such as email or messaging platforms, which are particularly important when real-time communication is not achievable.

The learning process in COIL is commonly structured in phases. Initial activities focus on establishing communication and building trust among participants, often through icebreakers and discussions that encourage the exchange of cultural perspectives. This is followed by more intensive collaborative work, during which students engage in joint problem-solving and knowledge construction. The final phase typically involves reflection on both the collaborative process and intercultural learning outcomes. To support effective collaboration, instructors may also use structured guidance such as collaboration scripts that define roles, interaction patterns, and time allocation (Hackett et al., 2024).

By taking part in COIL, students collaboratively build knowledge while also acquiring a variety of transferable skills. These skills include working in teams, collaborating through digital tools, and communicating effectively across cultural differences. One key outcome is the development of intercultural communication competence, which involves understanding both one's own and other cultures, as well as skills such as interpretation and active listening, together with attitudes of openness and respect (Hackett et al., 2024). Thus, collaboration functions not only as an instructional approach but also as a basis for fostering intercultural learning.

Assessment in COIL is generally aligned with collaborative outcomes and may include both group and individual components. Group assessment often focuses on shared products such as presentations or written reports, while individual assessment may include reflective tasks that capture students' personal contributions and learning experiences. In addition, participation in collaborative activities and engagement in online sessions may also be included in the assessment criteria.

Although COIL is commonly integrated into compulsory academic courses, it can also be implemented as an extracurricular activity. However, when it is not associated with formal assessment or academic credit, levels of student engagement often decline. Embedding it at the institutional level promotes inclusivity and ensures that opportunities



for international learning are accessible to a wide student body, rather than being restricted to those who are already highly motivated or have prior international experience (Van Mol & Perez-Encinas, 2022).

To successfully achieve the aim of our research it is also necessary to consider efficient COIL practices implemented at the universities in the United States, some European countries and Ukraine.

The United States is the birthplace of COIL and remains a leader in its implementation. COIL is now recognized by organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as an effective strategy for global learning and international collaboration. American universities implement COIL in different disciplines, including education, business, engineering, healthcare, language studies, and social sciences. Courses may be fully online, hybrid, or face-to-face with embedded virtual exchange modules. Typically, COIL projects last from several weeks to a full semester and involve synchronous and asynchronous communication tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, discussion forums, and collaborative digital platforms.

One of the most developed examples of COIL implementation can be observed at Florida International University (FIU). The university launched its first COIL courses in 2017 and officially established the Office of Collaborative Online International Learning in 2021. FIU has implemented hundreds of COIL projects connecting students with peers from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. According to university reports, by 2021 FIU had implemented 104 COIL courses involving more than 5,000 students from the United States and partner institutions abroad.

FIU also developed professional training programs for educators and international partners. The university organizes leadership institutes and faculty development workshops focused on virtual exchange pedagogy. Its COIL projects often address global challenges such as sustainability, intercultural communication, and international cooperation. In 2024, FIU received the Institute of International Education Andrew Heiskell Award for widening access to international education through COIL initiatives (Florida International University, n.d.).

Another important example is University of Washington. Since 2014, the university's campuses have supported faculty members implementing COIL collaborations through training programs, fellowships, and financial support. COIL projects at the university focus on multicultural teamwork and the development of digital literacy skills. Faculty members from different disciplines cooperate with international partners to integrate virtual exchange into curricula. The university highlights that COIL helps students address global challenges such as climate change, misinformation, migration, and technological transformation through collaborative international learning (University of Washington, n.d.).

At University of Alabama, COIL was implemented through participation in the ACE U.S.–Japan COIL Initiative. Supported by a grant from the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and the Japanese Ministry of Education, the university collaborated with Chiba University in Japan. Faculty members jointly designed courses in nursing and education, allowing students to compare healthcare systems, educational practices, and intercultural perspectives. These projects demonstrated how COIL can strengthen bilateral academic partnerships and foster international dialogue among students (University of Alabama, n.d.).

Ohio State University also actively promotes COIL through its Office of International Affairs. According to the university reports, COIL projects generally last between five and ten weeks and emphasize equitable participation of all students involved.



In Ohio State University, virtual exchange prepares students for participation in the global labor market by developing intercultural communication and teamwork skills (Ohio State University, n.d.).

European higher education institutions have also adopted COIL as part of their internationalization strategies. The Netherlands has become one of the leading European countries in the development of virtual exchange and COIL practices. Many Dutch universities already teach a significant number of courses in English, making international online collaboration more accessible.

An important contribution to the theoretical understanding of COIL was made by researchers from Utrecht University. The university has developed a wide range of international partnerships involving institutions in the United States, Egypt, Canada, Germany, India, and other countries. Examples include projects on global health challenges, sustainable fashion, crime and community wellness, social work, and responsible management linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Utrecht University, n.d.).

Nottingham Trent University (United Kingdom) has established numerous international partnerships and implemented COIL projects in disciplines such as business, fashion, social work, public health, biosciences and criminal justice. Examples include “Design Culture and Identity” with the Fashion Institute of Technology, “Crime and Community Wellness” with Humber College, and “Tackling Global Health Challenges” with New Mansoura University. These projects involve collaborative online workshops, international teamwork, presentations, and project-based learning focused on global issues such as sustainability, healthcare, leadership, and community wellbeing (Nottingham Trent University, n.d.).

The University of Glasgow (United Kingdom) considers COIL an important form of ‘virtual mobility’ and internationalization at home. The university emphasizes that COIL should be a credit-bearing component of a course rather than an optional extracurricular activity. The university has developed detailed institutional guidance for staff, including recommendations on course design, assessment, technology, and intercultural learning outcomes. It has also published COIL case studies demonstrating interdisciplinary collaboration in areas such as language education, STEM challenges, literature and intercultural exchange. Furthermore, Glasgow emphasizes institutional support for educators through its “Pathways to COIL” initiative, which helps staff establish and sustain international partnerships (University of Glasgow, n.d.).

In Ukraine, the implementation of COIL is a relatively recent but rapidly developing phenomenon. Institutions such as Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Sumy State University, Uzhhorod National University and Khmelnytskyi National University actively integrate COIL into academic programs to provide students with international learning opportunities through virtual collaboration. Examples include COIL-based collaborations between Ukrainian and European universities in language education, pedagogy, economics and international relations.

Sumy State University began implementing COIL projects in 2019 through cooperation with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the United States. By 2024, the university had implemented around twenty COIL projects involving more than fifty faculty members and nearly eight hundred students across disciplines such as management, law, philology, journalism, engineering, and medicine. (Sumy State University, n.d.).



Khmelnytskyi National University successfully implemented several COIL initiatives such as “Advising and Helping Skills in Student Affairs” organized in cooperation with the University of South Florida. The project involved Ukrainian and American students working together in mixed international teams on collaborative research and digital presentations. Another large-scale project, “Moving Minds: International Business,” was organized in partnership with UCLL University of Applied Sciences in Belgium and engaged more than 180 students from Ukraine and Belgium. These projects focused on intercultural communication, global business practices and language development.

The COIL project “Breaking Borders: International Business, Trade & Wellbeing Across Cultures” brought together 176 students and educators from Ukraine, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark to explore issues related to international trade, global economic processes, cultural diversity, and social wellbeing. The project combined interactive lectures, workshops, discussions, and collaborative project-based learning in an intensive online format. An important aspect of the project was the creation of short documentary films in which students analyzed real-life cases and compared cultural perspectives on economics, trade and wellbeing (Khmelnytskyi National University, n.d.).

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Thus, taking into account both the theoretical foundations of COIL and its broader conceptual background, including collaborative learning, social interaction, and online education, several core characteristics can be identified that distinguish COIL in higher education settings. First, COIL is based on an international teaching partnership in which at least two instructors from higher education institutions located in different countries collaborate with one another. These educators jointly design and implement a shared course or a series of online collaborative learning activities, ensuring that the educational process is built around cooperation between institutions and participants.

Another important characteristic of COIL is its integrated learning focus, as the model combines disciplinary content learning with the development of intercultural awareness, communication abilities and collaborative skills. Learning activities are deliberately structured according to the principles of collaborative learning and therefore include elements such as interdependence, active participation, individual accountability, teamwork, and group reflection. In most cases, student participation in COIL activities is formally assessed and linked to grading or the awarding of academic credit, which distinguishes COIL from informal virtual exchange initiatives.

COIL is also characterized by considerable disciplinary flexibility. It can be implemented across a broad range of academic fields and may additionally be designed in an interdisciplinary format. Typically, COIL projects are conducted over a defined period of several weeks, usually between four and fifteen, and include repeated opportunities for synchronous online interaction between students from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Furthermore, COIL represents a form of embedded and sustainable internationalization because it is integrated into the formal curriculum, including elective courses and minor programs, and does not require physical mobility. As a result, it offers an inclusive and environmentally sustainable alternative to traditional study abroad programs. An additional advantage of COIL is that participation generally does not create any extra financial burden for students, since they are not required to pay fees beyond standard tuition costs.

The analysis of international experience allows identifying key benefits of COIL: development of intercultural competence and global awareness; improvement of



communication and collaboration skills; increased accessibility of international learning opportunities; integration of digital technologies into teaching.

At the same time, several challenges are observed: differences in academic calendars and curricula; technological barriers and unequal access to resources; language proficiency issues; the need for additional teacher training.

Prospects for further research include: investigation of long-term learning outcomes of COIL; analysis of discipline-specific models of COIL implementation; exploration of the role of artificial intelligence in enhancing COIL environments; study of COIL integration in crisis contexts, including war-affected educational systems.

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