

Research Article

Internationalization of Higher Education: Critical Examination of Virtual Intercultural Exchange Models at Moroccan Universities

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Abstract

This article explores an intercultural and international teaching approach for higher education through the implementation of Collaborative Online Intercultural Learning (COIL) models to bolster cross-cultural communication competence among Moroccan EFL students. In particular, the integration of virtual exchange models aims to internationalize teaching practices and simultaneously equipping undergraduate students with critical skills such as intercultural awareness, intercultural competence, empathy, and global citizenship. These skills are essential for effective communication in diverse cultural contexts. The article underscores the importance of developing students' ability to critically engage with cultural differences, reflect on their own cultural assumptions, and navigate the complexities of intercultural interactions in a globalized world. The COIL approach fosters not only language proficiency but also an ethical understanding of the cultural 'other,' thus preparing students to become active participants in a multicultural and interconnected world. To pursue this endeavor, the study adopted a qualitative research method in order to investigate the role of tele-collaborative projects in Moroccan higher education. The article presents a case study of involving students and teachers from Morocco and the United States, highlighting how the COIL model enhances cross-cultural awareness, promotes dialogue, and deepens understanding of diverse cultures. The findings reveal that incorporating COIL was key to both internationalizing teaching methods and fostering students' intercultural competence, making it a valuable tool in preparing students for global engagement.

Keywords

Intercultural/International Approach, Online Virtual Models, Moroccan Higher Education

1. Introduction

The importance of developing EFL learners' inter-cultural communication competence has been a recurrent discourse in the literature of intercultural education [1]. This proposition mandates practitioners and instructional designers to internationalize the teaching practices and learning outcomes in

order to prepare learners to be cross-cultural navigators in this globalized world [2]. In this sense, internet-mediated intercultural models and telecollaboration are the contemporary approaches that espouse this philosophy of inter-cultural education [3]. These tools provide students with direct exposure to

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other cultures, experiences and perspectives. In such a pursuit, telecollaboration practitioners tend to design teaching contents and materials that are culturally-informed, aiming at promoting inter-cultural awareness and dialogue in online intercultural exchanges. In this regard, a plethora of empirical studies have been carried out to provide insights into the role of online intercultural exchange programs have to play in the internationalization of higher education and explore key themes pertinent to the pedagogy of telecollaborative learning. Most of the findings of these studies disclose that the outcomes of online collaborative intercultural projects include heightening of cultural awareness of one's home culture as that of the interlocutors, helping students to discuss information from different perspectives and decenter their frame of references, facilitating teamwork and ultimately brushing up their language proficiency and intercultural communication competence. In this light, integrating collaborative projects in Moroccan higher education with the purpose of internationalizing the teaching practices is of paramount importance. As such, this article seeks to explore both instructors and students' perceptions regarding the extent to which online collaborative models contribute to the internationalization of the tertiary curricula and the development of participants' cross-cultural awareness, dialogue and communication competence. To achieve this, a qualitative research method is implemented to gather data about the main quest of this study.

2. Critical Engagement with Internationalization of Higher Education

In the past few decades, internationalization of higher education has begun to receive a wider attention in the academic literature and research circles [4]. In this context, in a study, [5] internationalization of higher education was defined as "the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension to the content of the curriculum and teaching and learning models...so that it purposefully develops all students' international and intercultural perspectives as professionals and citizens". Other scholars, for example, [6] maintain that higher education has become a real part of international and intercultural relations, precipitating critical and reflexive methodologies that are essentially aware of the socio-political and lingua-cultural complexities of southern contexts. Equally important, taking note of the fact that virtual mobility/ distance education, cross-cultural contact, student mobility and the teaching of 21st century soft skills are becoming the timely topics of debate among scholars, practitioners, educators and stakeholders, the shift towards the internationalization of the tertiary education is nowadays considered as a necessity in educational policies of different countries across the globe (e.g. US, Canada, Australia).

In the same line of thought, a group of scholars [5] agree on the fact that internationalization of higher education starts

with the content of syllabus taught to students so as to bolster their cross-cultural communication competence. It is, to my stance, the first step towards embracing this kind of international learning without which we might not be well-informed about other cultures—be it an online or in-person contact. Relatedly, the emphasis on the cultural dimensions of collaborative cohort models reflects one of the revolutionary trends of education—that is the teaching of cultural components besides the communicative or linguistic ones. As a result, this change has transformed the orientation of teaching and learning languages to a great extent. In other words, language learning is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in linguistically, socio-linguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways [7]. Rather, it is defined in terms of the intercultural competence, which stands for one's ability to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately across cultures [8]. In this vein, virtual intercultural exchange models are efficient instruments whereby students can be introduced to a plethora of information about cultural differences and characteristics of the host groups.

2.1. Intercultural/ International Turn in Foreign Language Education

Intercultural/international education has become a commonplace discourse among educators, practitioners and stakeholders since the inception of information communication technologies (ICTs) to the educational landscape. Equally significant, given that some Moroccan universities—the case of Mohamed First University—are moving towards internationalization, incorporating telecollaborative intercultural models into the curriculum is central to preparing post and undergraduate students to be active cross-cultural navigators in this digitalized world.

It is noteworthy that the ultimate goal of collaborative learning as a pedagogical approach is to capitalize on exchanges on promoting inter-cultural awareness and other aspects of intercultural competence such as tolerance, respect, appreciation of cultural differences, and mutual understanding [9-11]. Similarly, it caters for what [12], an advocator of intercultural approach to foreign language education, describes as "acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural contexts (worldviews), including one's own, and developing a greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts". For example, virtual exchange initiatives such as Soliya have focused on bringing students from the West into dialogue with students from the Muslim world with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others on important socio-political issues and also to develop critical thinking, intercultural communication and media literacy skills [13]. In the same vein, initiatives by some English professors at Mohammed First University to implement collaborative interna-

tional online learning in partnership with the United States was helpful in co-creating an intercultural site of cross-cultural exchange and meaning negotiation between Moroccan undergraduate students and their American counterparts.

In a nutshell, the outcomes of COIL are to help students to function effectively in diverse classrooms and to apply multidisciplinary knowledge to working with increasingly diverse interactants and interconnected global issues. To attain these competencies, practitioners and stakeholders alike need to integrate online intercultural exchange models into the curricula and make it accessible to all learners.

2.2. The Pedagogy of Virtual Intercultural Exchange

The literature underlying online virtual intercultural exchange delineates different models for the promotion of intercultural dimensions in the classroom [14]. This article adopts the model of [8] of intercultural competence as a frame of reference for vetting the student's intercultural awareness. The model identifies a cluster of competencies—notably attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness. Byram labelled them *savoirs*. Firstly, intercultural learning takes places through *savoir être*—an attitude which involves relativizing one's cultural self and valuing others. This is often characterized by curiosity and openness towards other cultures.

Some researchers refer to this skill as 'decentering'. Secondly, the term *savoir* itself refers to sociocultural knowledge about the behavior of self and others. Thirdly, *savoir comprendre* is defined by Byram as the skills of interpreting and relating (e.g., texts but also events and behaviours), whereas *savoir apprendre/faire* designates the skills of discovery and interaction, which involve an ability to acquire and operationalize new knowledge of cultural practices. This includes the acquisition of intercultural pragmatic strategies. Lastly, *savoir s'engager*, which denotes to critical cultural awareness, defined as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" [8].

3. Methodology

3.1. Aims of the Study

The primary aim of this article is to investigate the extent to which virtual intercultural exchange models, such as COIL, contribute to the development of culturally competent undergraduates and the internationalization of higher education. By adopting a qualitative research approach, specifically interviews, the study gathers in-depth insights into how these models shape students' intercultural awareness and global

engagement. The participants included undergraduate students and professors from Mohammed I University in Morocco, though only a small proportion of the overall participants (10%) and three professors responded to the interview questions. This limited response is attributed to the relatively small number of students who participated in the COIL project, highlighting a key challenge in implementing such models on a wider scale.

Despite the limited sample size, the study provides valuable insights into how COIL fosters intercultural competence, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. It also sheds light on how virtual exchanges contribute to the broader goal of internationalizing higher education by offering students a global learning experience without the need for physical mobility. The findings emphasize the potential of COIL to transform traditional teaching practices by incorporating digital tools to create meaningful intercultural exchanges, fostering a sense of global citizenship among students. Furthermore, the study highlights challenges such as limited participation, access to technology, and the need for institutional support, which are critical factors to consider when scaling up virtual exchange models in higher education.

3.2. Instruments of Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized interviews as the primary instrument for data collection, a method commonly employed in qualitative research to gather in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perspectives [15]. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses from participants regarding various aspects of the COIL project. Specifically, participants were asked to describe the content and learning outcomes of the COIL experience, including how the project contributed to the development of their cross-cultural communication skills and facilitated intercultural dialogue [16]. Furthermore, the interviews explored the challenges—both communicative and cultural—that participants encountered while interacting with their American counterparts, as cross-cultural exchanges often expose learners to linguistic and sociocultural complexities.

In addition to these core areas, the interviews sought to uncover deeper reflections on participants' perceptions of cultural differences, their ability to navigate misunderstandings, and the strategies they employed to overcome communication barriers. These questions aimed to identify how the COIL experience shaped students' awareness of diverse communication styles, values, and social norms, as well as how it encouraged them to critically reflect on their own cultural frameworks. The data gathered through these interviews provided valuable insights into how virtual exchange programs like COIL foster not only language development but also empathy, adaptability, and a greater appreciation for global diversity [17].

The qualitative nature of the interviews allowed for rich, nuanced data that highlighted the participants' personal expe-

periences with intercultural challenges, such as language barriers, misinterpretations of cultural cues, or differing academic expectations. Additionally, the study explored how students navigated these challenges in real-time, developing essential problem-solving and negotiation skills for effective cross-cultural communication. By focusing on these elements, the study offers a comprehensive picture of the intercultural learning process, capturing both the successes and areas for improvement in COIL-based education.

4. Findings

This section provides insights into the thematic units drawn from interview data. They displayed and discussed in nuance and depth.

4.1. COIL as an Intercultural Project

It is widely recognized that in virtual paired classrooms, fostering an understanding of the cultural "other" is a key objective. This aligns with the concept of "intercultural competence" as defined in the academic literature on intercultural education [8]. In the context of Moroccan COIL projects, the learning content is designed to develop this competence by focusing on: (a) building meaningful relationships and engaging with members of the host culture, (b) valuing people from different cultures through respect and openness toward the counterpart's culture, including its history, customs, and beliefs, and (c) coping with ambiguity—understanding others' experiences and behaviors from their own cultural frame of reference.

Interviews conducted with professors leading the COIL projects revealed how collaborative online learning effectively enhanced students' cross-cultural awareness. One professor stated, "*Students were introduced to cultural repertoires about the U.S., such as values, social norms, and communication styles, which helped them better understand how relationships are formed and maintained in American culture.*" Another professor emphasized the significance of these projects for Moroccan students, noting that "*COIL has allowed our students to experience a different way of thinking and communicating. It is not just about learning English; it's about understanding the values and worldview behind the language.*"

The data gathered from student interviews also corroborated these perspectives. One student shared, "*Before COIL, I had a lot of misconceptions about American culture. I thought I knew about it from TV and movies, but interacting with real students changed my perspective. I learned to appreciate the differences, especially when it came to how they express opinions or show respect.*" This reflection highlights the way COIL projects helped students deconstruct cultural stereotypes and engage with their American counterparts on a more meaningful level.

In addition to enhancing cultural knowledge, COIL

projects facilitated knowledge construction through interaction, meaning negotiation, and active engagement with both peers and professors in connected classrooms. Students were tasked with activities that required them to collaborate across cultures, leading to dynamic discussions and the negotiation of meaning. One student recalled, "*Sometimes it was hard to communicate because we were used to different ways of speaking and thinking. But that challenge made us work harder to explain ourselves and understand each other better.*" This student's response underscores the importance of active engagement and the value of overcoming communication difficulties to foster mutual understanding.

The interviews also uncovered some of the communicative and cultural challenges students faced during their interactions. Several participants highlighted difficulties related to differences in communication styles. One Moroccan student noted, "*It was challenging at first because Americans tend to be more direct in their communication, whereas we are more indirect. I had to adjust to that and be more straightforward in my responses.*" Another student commented on the differences in academic expectations: "*They are very participative and express their ideas more openly. We had to learn how to express our opinions more confidently, which was new to many of us.*"

Professors emphasized that such challenges are an essential part of the intercultural learning process. One professor remarked, "The goal is not to avoid challenges, but to learn from them. These cultural and communicative barriers are valuable learning opportunities that help students develop their cross-cultural competence." Another professor commented on how the experience broadened students' perspectives: "*COIL forced them to step out of their comfort zones and critically reflect on their own beliefs and behaviors. This kind of reflection is crucial for intercultural competence.*"

Students also reported that the COIL projects provided them with opportunities to critically reflect on their cultural assumptions and to compare them with those of their peers from the U.S. "*I realized that some of the things we take for granted here, like how we show respect to elders, are very different in the U.S. It made me think more about why we do things the way we do and how they see it,*" one student shared. Another reflected, "*I learned that being open to other people's views doesn't mean agreeing with everything. It means respecting their perspective and being willing to discuss things in a respectful way.*" These reflections highlight how COIL fosters critical thinking, open-mindedness, and empathy—key components of intercultural competence.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that COIL projects embody the principles of interculturality by offering students a platform to engage meaningfully with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Through these projects, students develop critical intercultural awareness, empathy, and the ability to navigate complex cultural interactions. As one professor summarized, "*COIL isn't just about learning a new cul-*

ture; it's about learning how to learn from another culture. This is what makes it a truly transformative educational experience." The data clearly show that COIL fosters both linguistic and intercultural skills, preparing students to become active participants in a multicultural and interconnected world.

4.2. The Cultural and Linguistic Barriers of COIL

The interviews revealed that students faced various communicative and cultural challenges throughout the COIL project. One Moroccan student explained, "It was hard at first to keep up with the American students because they speak fast and use slang. I had to ask them to slow down and explain some expressions. But they were patient, and after some time, I got used to it." This demonstrates how language barriers, while initially daunting, became manageable through practice and adaptation. Another student echoed this, saying, "I used to feel shy about making mistakes, but the more we talked, the more confident I became. I learned that making mistakes is part of the learning process."

Cultural misunderstandings were also a common theme. A student shared, "In our culture, we are more indirect when we want to give feedback. But during one discussion, an American student gave me direct feedback, and I was a bit shocked. Later, I understood that in their culture, this is normal, and it's not meant to be harsh." This highlights how COIL fosters an understanding of cultural differences in communication, encouraging students to adapt and appreciate alternative styles without taking offense.

The professors emphasized that COIL provided opportunities for students to reflect critically on their intercultural experiences. One professor noted, "The key to intercultural competence is the ability to reflect on cultural encounters. It's not just about learning facts about another culture but about understanding the deeper meaning behind interactions and adjusting one's perspective accordingly." Another professor explained how COIL projects push students to reconsider preconceived notions: "In many cases, students realized that their initial judgments of the other culture were based on limited knowledge. COIL allows them to develop a more nuanced and informed view."

Students echoed this sentiment in their own reflections. One student remarked, "At first, I thought it would be easy to work with American students because we've seen their culture in movies. But it was much deeper than that. I had to really listen and think about why they do things differently from us." Another student shared how this critical reflection helped them grow: "It's not just about accepting differences, but understanding them. I had to challenge my own assumptions and learn to see things from their point of view."

Cultural barriers were another significant challenge identified by both students and professors. One major area of difficulty was differing communication styles. Moroccan

students reported that their American counterparts often communicated in a more direct and assertive manner, which felt unfamiliar and, at times, uncomfortable. One student shared, "In our culture, we're more indirect, especially when giving opinions or disagreeing with someone. But the American students were very direct, and sometimes it felt a bit rude, even though I know they didn't mean it that way." This difference in communication styles often led to misunderstandings or discomfort during discussions.

Another cultural barrier mentioned was differing approaches to participation. In Moroccan classrooms, students are generally more reserved and tend to wait for the teacher to guide the conversation. However, the American students were more accustomed to open, student-led discussions. One Moroccan student explained, "In our classes, we usually wait for the teacher to ask questions. But in COIL, the American students were always jumping in with their ideas, and it took some time for us to adjust." This contrast in classroom dynamics initially created an imbalance in participation, with Moroccan students taking a more passive role.

Professors recognized these challenges but saw them as valuable learning opportunities. One professor commented, "These cultural differences are part of what makes COIL so important. It's through navigating these barriers that students learn the most about themselves and others." Another professor added, "The goal isn't to eliminate these barriers but to teach students how to work through them, because that's what real intercultural communication is about."

5. Discussion

The importance of building bridges of cross-cultural communication dialogue through collaborative project is documented in the scholarship of online intercultural exchange programs as a salient component underlying a successful online learning environment [7]. The qualitative results of this article clearly reveal that connected classrooms provide ample opportunities for both instructors and students to widen their knowledge about the cultural aspects of the counter-part students, be aware of cultural differences and how the latter orchestrate their communication styles and behaviors, use English communicatively and authentically and build a learning community environment. The article's findings also report some challenges inherent in collaborative learning projects. Indeed, these findings accord with the previous research studies accentuated in the literature.

Regarding the cultural aspect of collaborative models, ample research data report that the instructional content of online learning should hinge on the promotion of cultural awareness. That is, the instructors should design teaching and learning materials that are culturally informed and help students be aware of how cultural factors influence their learning experiences and performance in an online environment. For instance, it was stated by [18] "culture impacts every facet of

online learning, from course and interface design, to communication in a sociocultural space, and to the negotiation of meaning and social construction of knowledge". As for the development of inter-cultural communication competence through COIL project, a plenty of studies highlight this aspect. In a study conducted by [19] on cultural awareness in online learning, the results showed that there is a need for online instructors to devise a culturally inclusive virtual learning environment in order to enhance students' intercultural communication competence. Other studies [13] suggest that internationalization of virtual instructional contents facilitated the cohort students' participations and decreased cultural disparity because the content is culturally relative to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, online collaboration tools have potentials to ease smooth and effective cross-cultural co-operative learning and dialogue among the participants.

Collaborative learning projects are not bereft of challenges either in terms of engagement or communication. The results regarding the drawbacks of a COIL project reported in this article intersect with previous research findings. For instance, in a study by [20], it was found that lack of group participation in inter-cultural group work was the major complaint of participant. This is accounted for in terms of cultural differences between group members that make collaboration challenging. Similarly, other studies reveal that many students prefer to work with peers from than own culture than with those from other cultures. This is, in turn, can expounded in light of culture perception of group work. In the same vein, other research findings called for online instructors to understand the cultures of diverse learners with different cultural backgrounds in order to facilitate the efficiency of cross-cultural communication.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, online collaborative models are assuming a major role in the internationalization of higher education and the development of cross-cultural communication. Literature underpinning online intercultural exchange identifies the incorporation of cultural elements in paired online classrooms as fundamental for creating an online learning environment that is culturally-inclusive and hence bolstering the learners' cross-cultural communication competence and dialogue. Critical reflection, collaboration, empathy, tolerance and respect are highly highlighted among the learning outcomes that cohort students should be able to cultivate by the end of the program. In this connection, this article attempts to come up with promising results that might be of added values to Moroccan higher education. The results obtained from this article call on the incorporation of virtual intercultural exchange models in order to promote Moroccan EFL learners' awareness about cultural differences and ultimately intercultural dialogue.

Abbreviations

COIL	Collaborative Online Intercultural Learning
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
IC	Intercultural Competence

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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