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Expanding Global Horizons: Leveraging COIL to Enrich Student Experiences Abroad

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Abstract

Higher education institutions have made significant strides in internationalization strategies as they have prioritized initiatives that promote student exposure to diverse cultures while enhancing their intercultural competencies (de Wit & Hunter, 2015). Study abroad programs have been highly valued as strategies that provide linguistic and cultural immersion opportunities to prepare students to contribute to an increasingly globalized world (Maharaja, 2018; Mu et al., 2022; Stebleton et al, 2013). At the same time, implementing Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as an internationalization tool in undergraduate courses has proven beneficial in promoting intercultural learning and enhancing intercultural communication, in addition to providing cost-effective options for students who cannot study abroad (Rubin, 2016). Studying abroad has been extensively examined and studies focused on COIL continue to emerge; however, scholarship on the simultaneous impact of both approaches on students' intercultural competence and cross-cultural adaptability is scarce. This qualitative study sought to address this gap by exploring how undergraduate students perceive COIL while participating in a faculty-led study abroad program in South America. The data revealed four key themes: heightened cultural awareness, strengthened sense of global connection, enhanced intercultural communication skills, and appreciation for lifelong learning. The findings demonstrated that COIL fostered a transformative experience for the students while studying abroad as they enhanced their cultural awareness and communication skills. This reinforces COIL's capacity to enrich study abroad programs and cultivate globally connected learners.

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Abstract in Spanish

Las instituciones de educación superior han avanzado significativamente en sus estrategias de internacionalización, ya que han priorizado iniciativas que promueven la exposición de los estudiantes a diversas culturas, para así fortalecer sus competencias interculturales (de Wit & Hunter, 2015). Los programas de estudios en el extranjero se valoran como estrategia que brinda oportunidades de inmersión lingüística y cultural, y que prepara a los estudiantes para contribuir en un mundo cada vez más globalizado (Maharaja, 2018; Mu et al., 2022; Stebleton et al., 2013). Por su parte, la implementación del Aprendizaje Colaborativo Internacional en Línea (COIL, por sus siglas en inglés) como herramienta de internacionalización en cursos subgraduados, ha demostrado ser beneficiosa para favorecer el aprendizaje y la comunicación interculturales, además de ofrecer opciones rentables para los estudiantes que no pueden estudiar en el extranjero (Rubin, 2016). Los estudios en el extranjero han sido ampliamente investigados mientras que los centrados en COIL continúan emergiendo; sin embargo, la literatura sobre el impacto de la implementación simultánea de ambos enfoques en la competencia intercultural de los estudiantes es escasa. Este estudio cualitativo abordó esa brecha y exploró cómo estudiantes subgraduados perciben la implementación de COIL en un programa de estudios en el extranjero, en América del Sur. Los datos revelaron cuatro temas clave: aumento de la concienciación cultural, fortalecimiento de la conexión global, ampliación de la comunicación intercultural y apreciación por el aprendizaje permanente. Los hallazgos demostraron que la implementación de COIL propició una experiencia transformadora para los estudiantes durante su estudio en el extranjero, ya que amplió sus competencias interculturales y sus habilidades comunicativas. Esto refuerza la capacidad de COIL para enriquecer los programas de estudios en el extranjero y formar aprendices interconectados globalmente.

Keywords

COIL; experiential learning; high-impact practices; intercultural communication; intercultural competence; study abroad

1. Introduction

The increase in the implementation of internationalization strategies in higher education institutions to expose students to other cultures and enhance their intercultural competence has been noteworthy (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; de Wit & Hunter, 2015). Study abroad programs have long been valued as approaches that provide linguistic and cultural immersion opportunities to

prepare students to contribute to an increasingly globalized world (Maharaja, 2018; Mu et al., 2022; Stebleton et al., 2013). Additionally, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has proven effective in promoting intercultural learning and communication, offering cost-effective options (Rubin, 2016). Despite decades of research on studying abroad and a growing body of work on COIL, the simultaneous implementation of both approaches remains uncommon, and research on their combined impact on students' intercultural competence is still scarce. This phenomenological study aims to fill this gap by examining undergraduate students' experiences with COIL during a short-term faculty-led study abroad program, focusing on intercultural interactions both online and in person.

This study aimed to inform the development of effective international education and global learning initiatives that enhance students' intercultural competence. The findings will benefit faculty, international/global education administrators, and staff seeking to facilitate impactful, inclusive, and transformative experiences. This study also addressed a gap in the literature on study abroad programs and COIL, and the data will pave the way for further investigation and inform evidence-based practices in international education. This study was driven by the following research question: How do undergraduate students perceive COIL while participating in a faculty-led study abroad program?

2. Literature Review

In today's interconnected world, higher education institutions recognize the importance of internationalization and global learning (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020; Cantu, 2013; Knight, 1994; Kreber, 2009; Zhang & Pearlman, 2018; Zolfaghari et al., 2009). To prepare students for a globalized society, institutions have intensified efforts to promote global learning experiences. This emphasis on internationalization has become a core aspect of many institutions' missions and values in the US, impacting students, faculty, staff, and administrators alike (Zilberberg Oviedo & Krimphove, 2022). To meet the demand for global interconnection, higher education institutions have embraced high-impact practices (HIPs) like study abroad programs and COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning). HIPs enhance student learning and engagement in multicultural environments (Kilgo et al., 2015; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021; Valentine et al., 2021). These practices align with essential learning outcomes (ELOs) and promote academic achievement, appreciation of group work,

student engagement, and development of intercultural competence (Schneider, 2008; Finley & McNair, 2013; Wismath & Newberry, 2019). Diversity/global learning HIPs encourage exploration of cultures and perspectives, and COIL has become an important approach to promote internationalization and intercultural competence within that realm (Kuh, 2008). However, more research is needed to integrate COIL effectively into curricula and understand its impact on students.

2.1. Study Abroad

Study abroad programs offer students exposure to diverse cultures and the opportunity to apply learned concepts through direct experience as they enhance their understanding of their own culture. Research indicates that participating in study abroad programs fosters social agency (Tweed & Reinders, 2023) and enhances language skills (Borràs & Llanes, 2021) and intercultural communication (Brandell, 2016; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Salisbury et al., 2013; Song, 2020). Despite these benefits, few undergraduate students participate in study abroad programs due to planning and logistics concerns, financial limitations, and academic credit equivalence issues (TFEA, 2022). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted study abroad programs, with a 91% decline in participation (Institute of International Education, 2022), prompting higher education institutions to innovate and embrace technology-facilitated global learning as an alternative.

2.2. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

In response to the rapid growth of digital communication and the need to address barriers to study abroad programs, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) emerged as a cost-effective way to promote international education from home (Gokcora, 2021; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). Founded in 2006, COIL is an educational approach that facilitates virtual international academic exchange and helps co-create innovative learning experiences through online collaboration (Rubin, 2017). With renewed emphasis during the COVID-19 pandemic (Borger, 2022; Gokcora, 2021; Liu, 2023), COIL has become a central component of higher education institutions' internationalization strategies. COIL is built on collaborative and social learning principles (Rubin, 2017) and distinctively emphasizes using cultural differences to create dialogue and interpret content (Guth & Rubin, 2015). Research suggests that COIL can positively influence student motivation and engagement (Nishio et al., 2020) and foster awareness of the interconnectedness of culture, language,

and technology (O'Dowd, 2020). COIL also provides opportunities for underrepresented students to gain international experiences (Poe, 2022).

2.3. Intercultural Competence and High-Impact Practices

The value of intercultural competence is recognized in higher education institutions across the globe. Nonetheless, this multilayered and complex term (Heinzmann et al., 2015; Williams, 2009) has been subject to different interpretations; hence, a consensus on the definition has not been achieved (Deardorff, 2011). Hammer et al. (2003) defined intercultural competence as “the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways” (p. 422) and explained that the development of cultural competence depends directly on the level of intercultural sensitivity of the individual. The authors defined this sensibility as “the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422). Therefore, intercultural competence and sensitivity, although two separate but interdependent constructs are interrelated in terms of the affective and attitudinal aspects related to the perception, understanding, and appreciation of cultural differences (Tarchi & Surian, 2022). Deardorff (2006) argued that the definition of intercultural competence lacks clarity due to the challenge of pinpointing its constituent parts. Deardorff (2006) proposed a definition encompassing attitudes, knowledge, and skills to enable effective and appropriate communication in intercultural situations. Through the Delphi technique, this definition gained strong endorsement from academics, offering a clearer understanding of intercultural competence. Barrett (2013) acknowledged the complexity of intercultural competence and builds upon Deardorff's (2006) definition:

Intercultural competence is the set of values, attitudes, knowledge, understanding, skills and behaviours which are needed for understanding and respecting people who are perceived to be culturally different from oneself, interacting and communicating effectively and appropriately with such people, and establishing positive and constructive relationships with such people. (pp. 5-6)

Research has demonstrated that study abroad programs hold greater potential for fostering intercultural competence and adaptability compared to on-campus programs (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Clarke et al., 2009; Covert, 2014). This immersive experience enhances self-confidence, assertiveness, adaptability, self-awareness, engagement, and linguistic skills (Maharaja, 2018; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Ramirez, 2016; Sobkowiak, 2019). In a longitudinal

quantitative study, Heinzmann et al. (2015) found that the duration of the experience abroad and the affective starting points of the participants are factors that significantly impact the development of intercultural competence and their communicative skills in a foreign language. The longer an individual spends immersed in another culture, the more opportunities they will have to develop intercultural competence.

Other studies have found that participation in study abroad programs does not always lead to a uniform improvement in intercultural competence (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Mu et al., 2022; Paras et al., 2019). Anderson et al. (2015) highlighted that motivation, whether driven by interest in specific regions or entertainment, plays a crucial role in learners' active participation. However, their study found no significant differences in the participants' intercultural development before and after the experience abroad. Mu et al. (2022) revealed mixed outcomes, with some participants demonstrating cultural awareness, self-confidence, and linguistic adaptability, while others exhibited negative behaviors such as judgmental attitudes, discomfort with intercultural engagement, and difficulties with experiences related to discrimination and bias. These findings suggest that study abroad programs are not a guarantee of improved intercultural competence and that individual experiences and motivations play a significant role.

There has been a noticeable growth in the literature related to the integration of COIL in the curriculum and its impact on learners' intercultural competence (Asojo et al., 2019; Dorner, 2018; Hackett et al., 2023; Mestre-Segarra & Ruiz-Garrido, 2020; Muñoz-Escalona et al., 2022; Zilberberg Oviedo & Krimphove, 2022). In a study about a COIL project completed by students from institutions in the United States and Mexico, King de Ramirez (2021) found that collaboration among learners from both countries fostered their global citizenship skills. The students enhanced their perceptions of the other country and showed more awareness of social systems and practices and socioeconomic connections. Dorner (2018) also found positive effects of using COIL, specifically on integrating information, skills, and previous knowledge, developing critical thinking skills, and enhancing and applying discipline-related areas and telecollaborative practices. COIL's impact has been explored from various perspectives. Other studies have found a positive impact of COIL on participants' creativity (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2022), academic self-efficacy (Naicker et al., 2022), leadership and communication skills (Swartz et al., 2020; West et al., 2022), language learning (Nishio et al., 2020), career-related knowledge (House et al.,

2022; Muñoz-Escalona et al., 2022; Niitsu et al., 2023; Vahed, 2022; Withanachchi et al., 2022), and environmental awareness (Adefila et al., 2021).

Researchers have suggested the importance of implementing pre-departure cultural training programs or cultural mentoring interventions to facilitate students' understanding and interpretation of their experiences abroad (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2018; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2018; Paras et al., 2019; Sobkowiak, 2019), the implementation of on-campus global learning initiatives (Soria & Troisi, 2014) and encouraging virtual interactions (Elola & Oskoz, 2008). Furthermore, research stressed the impact of the participant's personal characteristics and their intercultural experiences before going abroad (Paras et al., 2019; Terzuolo, 2018) as crucial elements in developing intercultural competence significantly.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

Considering the significance of identifying accessible and feasible educational practices to prepare students for their experience abroad and enhance their intercultural competence, this study explored undergraduate students' experiences with COIL during short-term faculty-led study abroad programs in South America. Both COIL and study abroad are rooted in experiential learning, where participants actively engage in collaboration, negotiation, and knowledge construction through contact with others and their environment. This process of learning by doing is closely tied to individuals' experiences and interactions (Dewey, 1938). Dewey emphasized that human knowledge emerges from practical experience and inquiry, and people develop patterns of inquiry that evolve with their needs and interests (Garrison, 1997). In addition, experiential learning enables critical thinking and reflection. Similarly, Freire (2008) argued that education should move away from the passive "banking model" and empower students as active agents who engage in learning processes through interaction and reflection, rather than being mere receivers of information.

Building on a socio-cultural perspective, this study applied Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984, 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Kolb's model posits that learning results from a transforming experience. His experiential learning model cyclically combines four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This cycle emphasizes the importance of experience and ongoing reflection and application. Kolb's experiential learning cycle presents a holistic process where

each stage is interconnected and supports others in a logical sequence. Learning occurs when individuals receive information through direct experience, reflect on it, and apply it in action (Kolb et al., 2015). While learners can choose preferred learning abilities, effective learning requires executing all four stages (Kolb, 1984). This model emphasizes experience as a trigger for reflection and learning, making it suitable for this study. Additionally, it caters to different learning styles (Kolb, 1984, 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Previous studies have applied Kolb's model to enhance intercultural competence (Muñoz-Escalona et al., 2022; Tarchi & Surian, 2022).

This study is also grounded in Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which clarifies the assessment of intercultural competence and has been used to explore the impact of international education (Covert, 2014; Mu et al., 2022; Zilberberg Oviedo & Krimphove, 2022). Deardorff's model describes the development of intercultural competence as an ongoing process from individual attitudes to visibly transformed interpersonal cultural levels (external outcomes/behaviors). An individual's attitudes, such as respect, openness, and curiosity, play a crucial role in developing skills that foster deeper cultural understanding and knowledge about oneself and others. Internal indicators like attitudes, knowledge, and understanding enhance external outcomes (Deardorff, 2006). While a shift in internal frame of reference may not always occur, it can lead to a smoother transition to culturally appropriate behaviors and communication approaches, which in turn influence attitudes and perceptions. Both Kolb's cycle and Deardorff's model emphasize experience and reflection as essential components of knowledge construction. By using these models as the theoretical foundation, this study will gain a deeper understanding of students' COIL experiences while studying abroad and their impact on intercultural competence.

3. Methodology

COIL, an approach that has gained popularity in higher education (Liu & Shirley, 2021), offers benefits like global awareness, critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, digital literacy, and exposure to diverse perspectives (Gokcora, 2021). However, research on COIL's impact on motivation, learning, and intercultural competence has mostly overlooked its use in study abroad programs and student perceptions of these combined experiences. To address this gap, this study employed a phenomenological approach to capture and interpret students' lived experiences with COIL while participating in a faculty-

led study abroad program in South America. Phenomenology was chosen because it provides a rigorous way to explore participants' meaning-making processes and uncover the essence of their intercultural encounters (Moustakas, 1994).

3.1. The Program and the Project

This study focused on a six-week summer faculty-led study abroad program for undergraduate students at University of the South (UoS), a public university in the southeastern United States. The program was part of a three-credit Latin American culture and civilization course in which students explored Bolivia and Ecuador's historical, political, social, and cultural issues. Open to all majors with no language requirements, the program included a domestic and international component. Two full-time faculty members designed and co-taught the course.

The on-campus experience spanned two weeks and included lectures, readings, interactive activities, discussions, and virtual conversations with guest lecturers from both countries. The international component spanned three weeks, including ten days in each country, beginning with Bolivia. The faculty leaders collaborated with local providers to offer immersive experiences, such as cultural sites visits, and exploring local cuisine, music, art, and folklore. During the final week of the program, the students from the United States were required to meet online with the faculty to deliver their final presentations, exchange ideas, and reflect collectively. This allowed students to reflect on their experience and solidify their newfound understanding of the Andean region's cultural richness.

The program also featured a virtual academic exchange with a Liberal Arts Institution (LAI) in Quito, Ecuador, through COIL. The partnership with LAI was established through prior professional collaborations between the faculty involved and from earlier study abroad programs conducted in Quito, which included visits to the LAI campus but did not incorporate COIL projects. While the study abroad itinerary also included a visit to Bolivia, no COIL activities were developed in partnership with Bolivian institutions due to differences in academic calendars that made collaboration unfeasible. In addition, the purpose of the Bolivia component of the program was primarily centered on service-learning activities, which were not directly aligned with the learning objectives of the COIL collaboration developed in Ecuador.

Students from the United States worked in pairs with Ecuadorian peers, communicating virtually during the first weeks of the program before meeting in person at the LAI. The COIL project involved five tasks: (1) an introductory video in which students creatively shared personal, academic, and cultural background information with their partners; (2) a short expectations video, presented as a story, where students reflected on their perceptions of Ecuador and articulated their hopes for the experience abroad; (3) regular virtual communication with their Ecuadorian partners, which included exchanging messages, images, or short videos to build rapport and share experiences before meeting in person; (4) the completion of a collaborative audio-visual project, first developed virtually and later finalized during in-person meetings in Quito, which was presented to both groups of students and faculty; and (5) a final reflection paper in which students individually and critically analyzed their COIL experience, highlighting cultural insights, challenges, and the impact of collaboration on their learning.

3.2. Participants

This phenomenological study involved seven undergraduate students who completed the COIL project and traveled to South America as part of a faculty-led study abroad program embedded in a Latin American culture and civilization summer course. A total of nine students were enrolled in the course. Out of the nine students originally enrolled, one withdrew due to health reasons, and another did not respond to the invitation to participate in the research. Participants' first language, cultural background, Spanish proficiency, and prior experiences abroad were not considered as selection criteria, given that the course was open to students of any major and at any stage of their undergraduate studies.

Of the seven participants, one did not have any background in Spanish, one was a beginner, three had a high-intermediate level, and two were heritage speakers of Spanish. To facilitate collaboration, students were paired with their Ecuadorian partners in groups that included two students from the United States, allowing them to support one another throughout the project. All the Ecuadorian students who participated in the project had intermediate to high-intermediate fluency in English, which enabled meaningful cross-cultural communication and project development. The sample size aligns with phenomenological research standards, which emphasize depth over breadth to explore lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data through three primary sources: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) document analysis, and (3) observations. We conducted one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experiences with COIL during a three-week faculty-led study abroad program. We chose to do interviews to allow participants to narrate their experiences in their own words while giving us the flexibility to ask probing questions that encouraged deeper reflection. Interviews lasted about 60 minutes and were conducted in-person or virtually over Zoom.

TABLE (1)
DATA SOURCES USED IN THE STUDY

Data Source	Description	Purpose in Analysis
Semi-structured interviews	One-on-one, 60 minutes, via Zoom	Capture personal narratives and meaning-making about COIL and study abroad
Reflection essays	Final assignments structured around cultural learning and COIL	Provide in-depth reflections on intercultural experiences and project outcomes
COIL tasks	Introductory/expectations videos, collaborative audiovisual projects	Document collaboration process, communication

We performed document analysis with participants' written authorization and focused on the reflection essays as the final assignment of the course. The essays prompted students to critically examine their cultural perceptions, experiences of collaboration, and personal and professional growth. Because the essays followed a common framework, they provided systematic and comparable insights into how students interpreted their learning. We also reviewed course-related artifacts, including introductory and expectations videos as well as a collaborative audio-visual project, which offered evidence of students' communication strategies, creativity, and intercultural engagement. Finally, we recorded observations through informal field notes taken during on-campus meetings and abroad to capture students' participation, collaboration, and engagement across program activities. These field notes contextualized student behaviors and interactions, serving as a valuable complement to the interview and document data.

Data analysis followed a constant comparative method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We coded interview transcripts, essays, and artifacts inductively to

identify initial patterns, which were then grouped into broader categories and refined into emergent themes. To ensure credibility, data were triangulated across the three sources (interviews, documents, and observations) to allow us to confirm findings from multiple perspectives. Reliability was strengthened through peer debriefing between both researchers, who independently coded a subset of transcripts before meeting to reconcile differences. We also employed member-checking by sharing preliminary themes with participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their experiences.

4. Results

In this study, we explored how undergraduate students perceive the integration of COIL into a faculty-led study abroad program in South America. In exploring the research question, how do undergraduate students perceive and experience COIL while participating in a faculty-led study abroad program, the data revealed four key themes: (1) heightened cultural awareness, (2) enhanced intercultural communication skills, (3) strengthened sense of global connection, and (4) appreciation for lifelong learning. The emergent themes showcase the transformative power of COIL in shaping students' international experiences and fostering cross-cultural collaboration and understanding as they engage with global partners.

4.1. Heightened Cultural Awareness

The analysis of the interview and reflective essay data revealed that participants possessed scant knowledge about South America or more specifically Ecuador before participating in the faculty-led study abroad program. None of the participants had traveled to South America, with some having never left the United States. They were essentially starting with a clean slate, and the pre-departure lessons provided a limited but essential framework of knowledge, intended for the participants to use to bridge the gap between their prior knowledge and the new forthcoming experiences in Ecuador. Since participants were unfamiliar with COIL, the project's introduction sparked fresh reactions. Curiosity, hesitation, and excitement were among the initial emotions shared by participants when asked about their thoughts on the COIL project. They acknowledged that the COIL project enhanced their experience abroad and the intercultural encounters in a unique way that is onerous to replicate in more traditional or common settings. In that regard, Rosario, a participant, expressed, “[..] It just opens your mind to see many different possibilities and different aspects of a culture that you might not get to know from a picture or a

video on YouTube.” Similarly, Paul, another participant, noted, “I felt like the COIL project took us from being observers in Ecuador into participants of Ecuador.” These statements highlight that COIL offered a tangible, hands-on experience that traditional settings could not match as it allowed for a more immersive and interactive encounter.

COIL provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences, backgrounds, and preconceptions about South America as a whole and Ecuador and its people specifically. Santiago, one of the participants, explained:

I had grown to appreciate more of Ecuador through [my partner’s] perspective as someone born and raised within Quito. [...] being able to step into her life as a student at LAI truly shattered my misconception of international universities (with the falsehood of U.S. universities reigning supreme). In that sense, the COIL video project [...] granted me an opportunity to meet students who were of a similar age frame as me; a closer comparison between their world and mine.

By completing the COIL project, participants gained insight into the similarities and differences between Ecuadorian and American universities. Monica, one of the participants, noted, “The COIL project impacted my experience abroad by giving me a completely different perspective on university life abroad. So much of our lives were much more similar than I realized.” While most comparisons focused on the university context, some participants, like Paul, extrapolated to the broader Ecuadorian culture as he explained, “The COIL project really gave me a peek [...] in a very positive way COIL did help me to understand Ecuadorian culture through its academia.” Furthermore, some participants demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of culture by recognizing that their COIL partners, being part of a private institution, may not be representative of the entire Ecuadorian society, but rather a specific socioeconomic sector. In this regard, Santiago expressed that his partner in the LAI “lived a more privileged life that most people in Ecuador and that [...] she feels her university and Quito sorts of hide a bit of a true Ecuador [...].” This revealed the complex social stratification within Ecuador, and participants recognized they had gained a deeper understanding of these nuances which showed a heightened cultural awareness.

4.2. Strengthened Sense of Global Connection

The data highlighted the participant's development of a strengthened sense of global connection as another significant theme. Before enrolling in the program, none of the participants had experience with COIL projects or traveling to South America, they also did not have experience working with people from other countries. Working in a COIL project with a partner from Ecuador changed their perspective not only about Ecuadorian people, but also about their own skills. In their reflective essays, participants like Camila acknowledged that "the COIL project was out of [their] comfort zone." Participants reported COIL's positive impact on their ability to collaboratively work with someone to achieve a specific goal. This allowed them to develop a sense of connection they had not experienced before. About this, Javier said that "the dialogue with my partner helped me understand that there was a cultural connection between the United States and Latin America that I was largely unaware of." Having the opportunity to connect virtually with someone from a different country helped create a space for meaningful discussions, where they could explore similarities, differences, and new perspectives.

Through their COIL project, the participants gained insight into their partner's personal experiences and gained a unique perspective on life in Ecuador. This mutual understanding simultaneously diminished the significance of their differences, allowing them to discover and appreciate alternative connections. Santiago expressed that "within our COIL project [...] we connected more so as young adults as opposed to students from foreign countries." Therefore, an intergenerational bond emerged between partners, allowing them to prioritize shared connections and values over cultural differences. Moreover, this bond significantly enhanced the participants' confidence, leading them to feel proud of their personal growth and adaptability. For instance, Rosario expressed that the COIL experience "gave me the confidence to know what I'm capable of achieving, especially working with someone from a completely different country." By working together with their COIL partners, participants came to appreciate the value of collaborative effort and the complementary nature of their diverse skills and experiences. This helped them complete the project while simultaneously cultivating a sense of shared accomplishment and mutual respect.

4.3. Enhanced Intercultural Communication Skills

By incorporating COIL into a study abroad program, participants were immersed not only in an intercultural environment but also in an interlinguistic context. However, this first raised concerns for some participants as they wondered if they could communicate and collaborate effectively. Participants harbored doubts about their Spanish proficiency and, simultaneously, had reservations about their Ecuadorian partners' English skills. Santiago articulated these concerns, saying, "I would be honest and tell you that I was initially a bit hesitant, not because I had bad expectations, but more so because I was not sure what I would be bringing. Would there be a language barrier? And if so, how will we go past that? How will we, you know, get through it?" As participants gained confidence in their abilities and discovered that their partners spoke English, their initial hesitation dissipated. Both parties demonstrated mutual understanding of each other's languages, albeit to varying degrees, which helped mitigate the language barrier and facilitate effective communication. Participants revealed that they sometimes compromised on using a mix of both languages, as Santiago explained, "Most of our Zoom calls were completely in Spanish, so there was little to no language barrier, and even if there was usually, we would be able to translate or utilize a little bit Spanglish." Regarding linguistic negotiation through code-switching, participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the intercultural and creative aspects of COIL collaboration. Rita noted, "I think it was good for strengthening our Spanish/English skills and being able to communicate in our own way, to create something beautiful that combines both American and Ecuadorian cultures." Participants recognized that the richness of Ecuadorian culture is intertwined with its language, and they acknowledged linguistic variations between Ecuadorian Spanish and the Spanish they knew. Santiago observed, "They are people with their own diverse culture, their own, you know, sayings and phrases, so very much its own rich, diverse culture that I learned so much about."

Participants also recognized that the immersive environment motivated them to communicate in the host culture's language, and the supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere at the LAI helped them build confidence in speaking Spanish at their own pace, free from fear of criticism or evaluation. Camila explained, "It occurred to me that it does not have to be perfect because it is never perfect, and you just say whatever, and that people are not laughing when I am trying to speak Spanish. [...] My COIL partner was great about letting me speak Spanish and helping, not really helping, but just listening." Based on

participants' feedback from both reflective essays and semi-structured interviews, the COIL program, combined with an immersive (and supportive) experience, significantly enhanced their communication skills in Spanish and fostered greater confidence in speaking with native speakers.

4.4. Appreciation for Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a dynamic and continuous process, where individuals proactively pursue and engage in ongoing exploration through various educational and instructional resources while cultivating personal and professional growth (Kaplan, 2016). As they worked alongside Ecuadorian students on their COIL project, the participants demonstrated a strong affinity for lifelong learning and valued the opportunity to exchange ideas and expand their knowledge and skills. Through the COIL collaboration, participants gained new perspectives, challenged their assumptions, and developed a deeper understanding of global issues. They also recognized that the experience had a broader impact beyond their academic success. Monica commented, "The creation of the COIL videos is beneficial for me both personally and professionally by developing connections and growing as a person. Throughout this project, I enhanced my technology, teamwork, and listening skills. I hundred percent believe that the skills I have strengthened will be used in my future." At the same time, participants emphasized how this learning experience prepared them for future adaptability and success. As Rosario noted, "This was an experience that will help me in the future because it gave me confidence to know what I'm capable of achieving, especially working with someone from a completely different country." Furthermore, their enthusiasm for learning was reignited, and they began to see the world as a complex yet interconnected web of cultures, ideas, and experiences that could have a positive impact on their future professional career. As Rita reflected, "The COIL project was another impactful part of my experience. [...] I definitely got to develop my teamworking and Spanish communication skills alongside getting to use some creativity. Developing ideas and being a good team player over digital platforms like Zoom is a critical skill in the modern workforce."

The participants' comments revealed the importance of teamwork and the array of skills it entails, such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, which were evident throughout their interactions. For instance, Javier said, "In this project, I practiced skills of teamwork which include active listening, communication, problem-solving, empathy, and leadership [...] Practicing teamwork will help me to be more useful for my family and for the

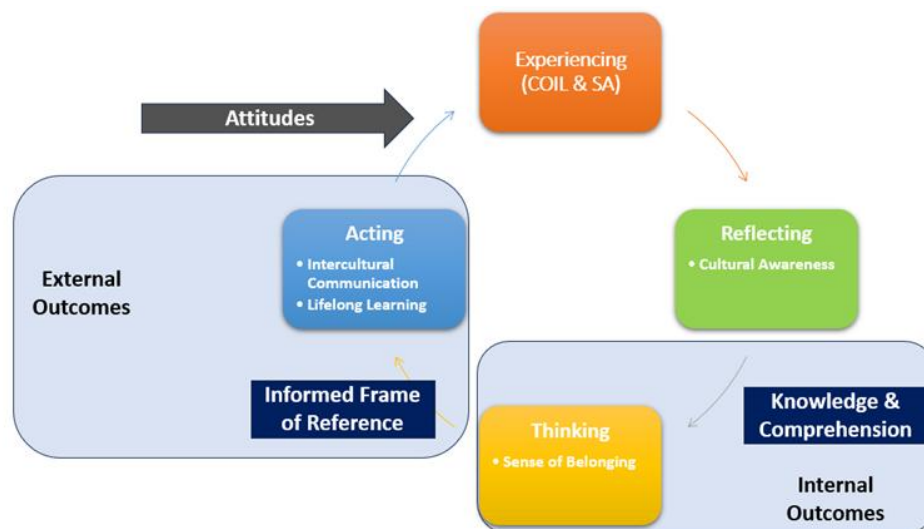
people I work with.” Hence, participants seem to have developed a growth mindset by seeing challenges as opportunities for growth.

5. Discussion

This study was informed by Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model, which emphasizes the importance of concrete experiences and reflective observation in the learning process. Figure 1 integrates Deardorff's (2006) and Kolb's (1984) models to illustrate how COIL enhances the study abroad experience. Through the integration of these frameworks, we illustrate how COIL shapes students' international experiences. These theoretical foundations guided our analysis and interpretation of the data to provide a comprehensive understanding of COIL's impact on the participants' experience abroad.

FIGURE (1)

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING



Participants in this study reported that COIL served as scaffolding to their abroad experience and enabled them to develop intercultural competence. This led to a deeper understanding of the host culture and insight into their own. When exposed to an intercultural situation, intercultural competence plays an important role as it enables effective and appropriate interaction (Barret 2013) Aligned with Deardorff's (2006) Process Orientation Model, individuals' attitudes, such as respect, openness, and curiosity, play a crucial role in developing skills that foster deeper cultural understanding. Participants of this study were eager and enthusiastic to learn about Ecuador's culture; the fact they chose this program among other choices supports their interest and curiosity

about the Ecuadorian culture. Also, pre-departure lessons might have impacted participants' knowledge and awareness about the host culture, providing them with some tools to navigate the intercultural context. This open and receptive attitude guided the interaction with their COIL partners. As participants engaged with the host culture, their preconceived notions and misconceptions about Ecuadorian culture and university life were challenged. In line with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, participants engaged in hands-on experience and reflected on it, and it was through this process that meaningful learning took place. Participants' immersion in a diverse cultural setting sparked introspective comparisons and revealed new perspectives on both the host culture and their own. Following the COIL experience, participants recognized a significant enhancement in their cultural awareness, understanding, and respect for Ecuadorian culture, which resulted in greater empathy and proficiency in navigating cross-cultural interactions and fostering meaningful connections.

As students developed cultural awareness, they not only recognized differences between their own culture and that of their COIL partner and host country but also gained insight into their own cultural background. This resulted in the development of new knowledge, which aligns with Deardorf's (2006) conceptualization of intercultural competence. Moreover, the participants reported that COIL enabled them to adapt to a new cultural context and establish connections that made them feel included. Consistent with Kolb's (1984) model, as the participants engaged with COIL, they actively built knowledge and underwent transformative learning experiences beyond the assigned task. As a result, they showed adaptability in communication styles and behaviors and an appreciation and respect for cultural conventions and practices that differed from their own. Notably, most participants credited the COIL project with providing insight into university life in Ecuador, with less focus on its broader cultural impact. Through the COIL project, participants gained a deeper understanding of university life in Ecuador through the eyes of a local peer. By engaging in dialogue and sharing experiences, participants broadened their perspectives as they gained insight into Ecuador's social dynamics and education system. These interactions encouraged them to engage in reflection and introspection about their experience abroad, which fostered the development of a previously absent sense of global interconnectedness and complemented their concurrent involvement in the program. Participants exhibited curiosity about cultural similarities and differences and expressed satisfaction with the COIL project outcome. This indicated their appreciation for

the opportunity to engage in collaborative learning with an international partner and establish meaningful connections beyond the project's scope.

COIL promotes meaningful dialogue and deepens understanding through the exploration of diverse cultural perspectives (Guth & Rubin, 2015). The effectiveness of dialogue in COIL is determined by several factors, with intercultural communication being a crucial one. Without it, COIL objectives cannot be achieved, as it is vital for collaborative social learning. Participants in this study engaged in an intercultural and interlinguistic experience that encouraged continuous self-monitoring and reflection on their language skills. Initially, some participants felt apprehensive about the potential language barrier. However, since students from both institutions had a certain level of proficiency in the language that was not their own, the barrier diminished during the encounter. Participants also reported employing linguistic negotiation strategies like code-switching and using interlanguage to overcome comprehension challenges. Experiencing language immersion positively impacted language skills and boosted the participants' confidence and comfort in speaking the host culture's language (Borràs & Llanes 2021). This aligns with Kolb's theory, which states that direct experience and reflection enhance experiential learning. Effective communication was also facilitated by participants' receptiveness and pre-encounter virtual communication. Participants noted that prior communication facilitated a smoother transition to in-person interaction, allowing them to assess each other's language proficiency. According to participants, effective communication played a vital role in fostering a deeper understanding of the host culture, consistent with Deardorff's model (2006), which emphasizes the importance of sociolinguistic knowledge in the development of intercultural competence.

Engaging in the COIL project also enabled participants to enhance their communication skills and embody culturally appropriate behaviors with greater ease. Additionally, participants reported that interacting with a COIL peer sparked a desire for continuous learning and personal growth. The participants stated that the COIL project brought to light the significance of developing key skills that would enhance their future employability. The interviews highlighted career-oriented skills and problem-solving abilities as key areas of development, echoing findings from previous studies (House et al., 2022; Muñoz-Escalona et al., 2022) that emphasize the role of COIL in preparing students with career-related knowledge and transferable professional competencies. At the same time, the findings highlight the value of digital

literacy and leadership skills, which are paramount for professional success (Siahaan & Sirait, 2023). Moreover, the data showed that collaborating with a COIL partner from a different major and career path offered the participants the chance to explore innovative ideas and showcase creativity through active engagement while developing leadership abilities, supporting previous arguments that COIL provides fertile ground for interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership development (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020; Swartz et al., 2020; West et al., 2022).

Deardorff (2006) notes that individuals can exhibit external proficiency in intercultural situations and demonstrate appropriate behavior and communication without necessarily having undergone a profound internal transformation in their perspective or frame of reference. However, this study's findings revealed that COIL significantly contributed to closing gaps in the participants' intercultural competence and overall knowledge before and during a study abroad experience. These outcomes reinforce recent studies (Bae & Chong, 2024; Hackett et al., 2023; King de Ramírez, 2021; Naicker et al., 2022) showing that COIL promotes deeper intercultural understanding and positions students to navigate cross-cultural contexts with more confidence. The participants voiced a renewed appreciation for Ecuadorian culture and people, with several expressing a desire to return and even pursue further education in the country. This suggests that the COIL experience in a study abroad program may have a lasting influence on participants' attitudes towards other cultures, aligning with Romero-Rodríguez et al. (2022), who highlight the long-term attitudinal impact of virtual exchange and COIL projects on global citizenship development. Taken together, these findings affirm that COIL not only strengthens intercultural competence but also equips students with the employability and leadership skills required in today's competitive market, underscoring its role in shaping globally competent professionals prepared to thrive across cultural and professional boundaries.

6. Conclusions

This study explored the integration of COIL into a study abroad program. Although both high-impact practices promote internationalization and interculturality, their convergence remains understudied, as researchers typically examine them separately, missing potential insights from exploring their intersection. Hence, this study helps bridge the gap and advances the research on internationalizing curriculum practices by exploring COIL as a

scaffold to enhance study abroad experiences. This study aimed to explore how undergraduate students perceive COIL while participating in a faculty-led study abroad program. Based on participant feedback, we can conclude that integrating COIL into study abroad programs can help boost cultural awareness, intercultural communication skills, and global connection. The study's findings, gathered through observations, reflective essays, and semi-structured interviews, indicate that participants found COIL to be a transformative and enriching experience that significantly enhanced their experience abroad. Participants reported that COIL facilitates immersive experiences as it promotes intercultural and interlinguistic negotiation, reflection, and experiential learning, which deepens understanding of the host culture and one's own. Moreover, connecting COIL to study abroad strengthened participants' appreciation for lifelong learning. This study suggests that both COIL and study abroad, when combined, hold great potential to enhance interculturality and support internationalization efforts in higher education institutions, leading to benefits for students that surpass either approach could achieve independently. Therefore, integrating COIL as a bridge between virtual learning and face-to-face immersion could significantly enhance intercultural competence development, which is the primary goal of internationalization efforts.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research

Despite positive feedback on COIL, some issues arose that should be considered and addressed in future programs. Discrepancies in academic calendars limited virtual interaction, with LAI starting classes two weeks later than UoS. However, a minor time difference (one hour) did not hinder communication among participants. The tight project timeframe caused stress, with only two weeks for partner connection, video exchange, and project discussions. Participants also expressed uncertainty about faculty expectations, as they were new to COIL and unclear about project requirements. Ecuadorian students had a different understanding of the project, which suggested possible discrepancies in instructions. Disparity in media literacy knowledge was also a challenge; LAI students were mainly from film or visual arts majors, while UoS students came from diverse backgrounds. Despite this, most participants found that the COIL experience promoted teamwork. Although participants were initially uncertain about their technical abilities, collaboration with experienced partners helped them realize they could develop skills beneficial for their academic and professional plans.

As the implementation of COIL in higher education continues to grow, future research could explore new directions to build upon this study's findings. Studies with broader participant pools could incorporate students from both participating institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of COIL's impact. Also, future studies could explore the long-term impact of COIL on study abroad programs, including the sustainability of COIL-enhanced programs and the potential of expanded partnerships with international institutions. Furthermore, studies could investigate the effects of COIL on longer study abroad experiences, such as semester-long or year-long programs, to assess its impact on students' academic, cultural, and personal development over an extended period. Given participants' concerns about varying levels of digital literacy between partners, future research could investigate the effectiveness of incorporating a pre-departure workshop or session that addresses these disparities and equips students with the necessary technology skills for successful COIL projects. Another potential avenue for exploration is a study focused on a similar experience but with students in the same discipline, as it could allow them to deepen their knowledge of a familiar field, make comparisons, and exchange ideas. This could provide valuable insights into how COIL enhances disciplinary knowledge and fosters connections among students with shared academic interests. Finally, further investigation could delve into the nuances of COIL's effect on different student populations, including diverse languages and cultural backgrounds.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Marta Ramos holds a doctorate degree in Education concentrating in Curriculum and Teaching of Spanish from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Dr. Ramos joined the faculty of Florida Gulf Coast University in 2010 where she holds the position of Assistant Professor of Spanish. She has designed and taught a variety of courses in language, literature, and culture. Marta's research and teaching interests include language acquisition, community engagement, study abroad, and virtual learning.