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Virtual exchange and cyberculture in English language teaching: Identity and the role of Padlet in COIL projects in southern Mexico

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Abstract

This study investigates how the digital platform Padlet influences identity, participation, and language use in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects within southern Mexican English Language Teaching (ELT) programs. Drawing on qualitative data from two virtual exchanges between a Mexican public university and a U.S. college, the research analyzes students' asynchronous, Padlet-mediated transnational communication and intercultural meaning-making. Guided by theories like techno-anthropology, cyberculture, and critical educational technology, the study finds Padlet functions as both a space for inclusion and creativity, and a site where digital inequities and linguistic hierarchies can be reproduced. Students used bilingual practices, emojis, and personal narratives to build digital identities. However, they faced challenges including limited access, lack of confidence in English, and navigating unfamiliar norms. The findings highlight Padlet's dual role as a bridge and a boundary. The article advocates for critically informed, equity-oriented COIL design that centers local contexts, addresses power dynamics, and uses virtual exchange as a transformative pedagogical practice in ELT.

Abstract in Spanish

Este estudio examina cómo la plataforma digital Padlet influye en la construcción de la identidad, la participación y el uso del lenguaje en proyectos de Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) desarrollados en

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programas de Enseñanza del Inglés (ELT) en el sur de México. A partir de datos cualitativos obtenidos en dos intercambios virtuales entre una universidad pública mexicana y un college estadounidense, la investigación analiza la comunicación transnacional asincrónica mediada por Padlet y los procesos de construcción intercultural de significado. Guiado por los enfoques de la tecnoantropología, la cibercultura y la tecnología educativa crítica, el estudio muestra que Padlet funciona simultáneamente como un espacio de inclusión y creatividad, así como un escenario donde pueden reproducirse desigualdades digitales y jerarquías lingüísticas. Los estudiantes recurrieron a prácticas bilingües, emojis y narrativas personales para construir identidades digitales; sin embargo, también enfrentaron desafíos relacionados con el acceso limitado a la tecnología, la falta de confianza en el uso del inglés y la necesidad de desenvolverse dentro de normas comunicativas desconocidas. Los hallazgos evidencian el papel dual de Padlet como puente para la interacción intercultural y, al mismo tiempo, como frontera donde persisten relaciones de poder y exclusión. En consecuencia, el artículo propone el diseño de experiencias COIL fundamentadas en una perspectiva crítica y orientada a la equidad, que reconozca los contextos locales, cuestione las dinámicas de poder y conciba el intercambio virtual como una práctica pedagógica transformadora en la enseñanza del inglés.

Keywords

Collaborative online international learning (COIL); critical educational technology; digital identity; global Englishes; virtual exchange

Editorial note

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1. Purpose and main argument

This article examines the essential, yet often overlooked, complexity of our digital lives, specifically focusing on the hidden role of collaboration tools like Padlet within Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiatives. It is easy to treat these platforms as mere backgrounds, but they are, in fact, active mediators in the learning process. Our focus is not random. It is deliberately set on a critical context in English Language Teaching (ELT) programs nestled right here in the Global South, specifically southern Mexico. This setting matters because it confronts COIL with real-world limitations. COIL has been widely promoted as a form of “internationalization at home” that expands access to intercultural experiences without the need for physical mobility (O’Dowd, 2018). It sounds like a perfect solution, but a fundamental, pressing question remains: when we rely on these commercial, globally

designed technologies, does the platform truly deliver on that promise of justice and equity? We need to look beyond the cost savings and examine what these digital environments actually do to student identity, language, and power.

To truly unpack these critical questions, we conducted a rigorous, close-up case study focused squarely on the front lines of virtual exchange. From August to November 2024, our research tracked three distinct COIL collaborations, giving us rich data across multiple projects. The participants? Eager undergraduates from the Bachelor of Arts in ELT program at a public university in southern Mexico students who interacted with their peers at a U.S. partner college.

This in-depth analysis allowed us to move past broad generalizations and zero in on the core of our investigation, which is threefold and intensely human: How exactly do platforms like Padlet become active stages where students perform the crucial, sometimes stressful, work of identity construction? How are the power dynamics of language use negotiated in these asynchronous, multilingual exchanges, especially when one language (English) holds dominant power? And finally, how does the technology mediate the inevitably messy, complex process of intercultural communication when students are separated by both geography and cultural expectations? This is where the real learning and the real friction happens.

Our central argument is a direct challenge to the comforting, but often misleading notion of technology as a neutral tool. While COIL is promoted and often celebrated as a universally inclusive practice, its real-world implementation, particularly in contexts like southern Mexico, frequently sidesteps a fundamental, critical truth: the very platforms it relies on profoundly influence learning equity and representation.

Take Padlet: it is frequently chosen for its apparent visual simplicity and accessibility, yet it is far more than just a convenient digital corkboard. We argue that it functions as a symbolic arena, an affective space, and even a subtle political stage. In this exposed digital environment, students are essentially compelled to construct, negotiate, and perform their identities and linguistic competence under intense, transnational scrutiny.

The platform's seemingly innocent design choices, including its fixed layouts, its comment boxes, its media integration capabilities, are not passive; they are active agents that shape these power dynamics. They privilege certain forms of expression, elevate specific voices, and actively influence who feels confident enough to step onto the virtual stage. In short, the medium is never the message alone; it is the active context shaping interaction and participation.

This article highlights the need to reconsider how transnational learning is designed. We desperately need to anchor our work in a Latin America-rooted pedagogical approach to COIL, one that is brave enough to challenge the *status quo*. The given perspective must stop treating our incredible students as passive voids, as mere recipients of international content ready to be filled with Northern knowledge. Instead, it must champion, elevate, and celebrate the local linguistic and cultural knowledge they already possess, recognizing it as rich intellectual capital.

Crucially, this critical pedagogy requires us to maintain a laser focus on how digital divides and linguistic hierarchies are reproduced by the technology itself. We have to commit to dissecting the subtle, often invisible, ways platforms like Padlet reinforce old power imbalances and inequities in access, making sure we are not just putting a fresh digital coat of paint on colonial educational structures.

The effort is about far more than just "better teaching" or "better technology." It is about shaking the foundation of structural assumptions that govern global learning. Our goal is to completely redefine internationalization through the transformative, ethical lens of epistemic justice and genuinely reciprocal dialogue, turning virtual exchange into a key mechanism for authentic, equitable, and sustainable collaboration across hemispheres. Virtual exchange initiatives are often framed as inclusive alternatives to study abroad, providing students with opportunities for intercultural engagement regardless of financial or geographical constraints (Guth & Helm, 2010). This is how we ensure our global work truly serves the students, first and foremost.

2. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

To meaningfully analyze the real-world, ground-level use of Padlet in these COIL projects, especially within a context as rich and complex as southern Mexico. We could not rely on simple observation alone. Instead, this article is built upon a powerful constellation of interdisciplinary theories.

Think of these frameworks not as dry academic window dressing, but as essential, high-powered critical tools or lenses. They are necessary for deconstructing the messy, multilayered dynamics of virtual exchange, helping us peel back the layers of technological function, cultural nuance, and linguistic power. They do more than just guide our analysis of what happened; they offer concrete, actionable pathways for rethinking pedagogical design altogether, ensuring our approach to digitally mediated, intercultural settings are ethical, effective, and truly human-centered. COIL initiatives have been positioned as a

means of democratizing access to global learning experiences traditionally associated with study abroad (Rubin, 2017).

2.1. Techno-anthropology: Technology as an active mediator

We commence our theoretical discussion in Techno-anthropology, drawing particularly on the critical insights articulated by Coll (2013). This perspective compels a fundamental departure from conceptualizing educational technologies as benign, neutral delivery systems. Instead, Coll posits that technologies function as active co-constructors of the learning environment itself, fundamentally shaping the pedagogical and social landscape.

In this techno-anthropological view, a platform like Padlet transcends the designation of a mere repository or bulletin board; it is framed as a powerful, non-human mediator that actively sculpts pedagogical relationships and interactional outcomes. The platform's fixed design features such as its column layout, its prescribed reaction options, and its inherent ease of multimedia integration do not simply afford capabilities; they fundamentally guide and prescribe which forms of student participation are actively encouraged, institutionally valued, or structurally rendered invisible. By implicitly privileging certain visual and communicative modalities, Padlet therefore structures the specific parameters of student engagement, dictating the visible distribution of voices and the negotiation of status among peers across transnational boundaries.

2.2. Cyberculture and collective intelligence: Padlet as shared authorship

The conceptual insights derived from the work on Cyberculture and Collective Intelligence developed by Lévy (2007). This framework provides an essential lens for the rigorous valuation of student contributions within the COIL environment. Lévy posits the internet as a dynamic, complex socio-technical space where the production of knowledge is inherently collective and decentralized, rendering shared meaning-making paramount.

Within the specific context of COIL, Lévy's (2007) perspective compels us to reframe student contributions to Padlet: they are understood not as isolated, individual assignments, but as genuine, integrated acts of collaborative knowledge creation. Padlet's fundamental utility lies in its capacity to enable rich multimodal contributions, including textual input alongside images, culturally coded emojis, and synchronous or asynchronous audio notes and images (Kress, 2010).

Lévy's (2007) framework is crucial for analyzing this convergence of media, allowing us to recognize how a student's deliberate choice of a meme or a personal recorded audio reflection functions as a highly nuanced act of shared authorship. This goes beyond merely illustrating individual creativity; it empirically evidences the intricate, iterative process of cultural and linguistic negotiation that is indispensable for successful collective intelligence to be realized across transnational digital divides.

2.3. Global Englishes: The linguistic gatekeeper

The theory of Global Englishes, as powerfully supported by Pennycook (2010), is critical to the analytic core of this study, especially given its focus within the English Language Teaching (ELT) context. Pennycook's seminal work brilliantly interrogates the socio-political function of English in transnational education, framing its existence not as a monolithic force, but as a profound dual function: operating simultaneously as both a connector (a necessary medium for global communication) and a formidable gatekeeper (an exclusionary mechanism).

This framework is indispensable for systematically uncovering the linguistic hierarchies that inevitably emerge in the virtual space of Padlet. The analysis specifically leverages this lens to reveal how differential proficiency in standardized English dramatically and measurably affects student participation outcomes. It influences whose voices are amplified and granted legitimacy, whose are subtly silenced or marginalized, and, ultimately, what specific forms of English are legitimized or deemed appropriate within the exchange. This critical perspective directly informs our central argument: that the platform's constraints and the unspoken pressure to conform often limit the students' full linguistic freedom and genuine agency.

2.4. Critical educational technology: Power, access, and equity

Finally, the field of Critical Educational Technology, advanced by Selwyn (2012), provides the necessary corrective or check on any overly optimistic or celebratory narratives that often surround digital learning initiatives. Selwyn's work forcefully reminds educators that simply adding technology does not automatically equate to progress or equity.

Instead, he urges us to look beyond metrics of technical efficiency or adoption rates and to seriously consider the profound, persistent issues of power, access, and equity inherent in adopting any platform, including a seemingly harmless tool like Padlet. This framework is vital because it informs our in-depth analysis into the broader material conditions that shape COIL implementation in a public university in southern Mexico. It compels us to

move beyond asking what is technologically possible and shift to the more critical questions: for whom is this possibility realized, and, crucially, at what tangible cost in terms of reliable bandwidth, personal device access, and varying levels of digital literacy among the student population? This critical lens anchors our analysis in real-world justice.

Taken together, these four critical frameworks: Techno-anthropology, Cyberculture, Global Englishes, and Critical Educational Technology, allow us to move beyond a simplistic, technology-first assessment of COIL. We can finally stop viewing Padlet as a mere digital tool and recognize it as a social, cultural, and political artifact deeply embedded in global geopolitical realities. This sophisticated interdisciplinary lens peels back the layers to reveal how virtual exchanges are profoundly shaped by deeper, often-unacknowledged currents of culture, language, and power. In embracing these powerful, critically aware frameworks, this study advocates for pedagogical designs that are ethically grounded, moving toward an approach that truly contributes to a more just and context-sensitive global education. This is the necessary work of ensuring that technology serves the equity agenda, rather than inadvertently undermining it.

2.5. Empirical research on COIL and digital mediation

In recent years, a growing body of research has examined the pedagogical and intercultural dimensions of COIL. Studies have highlighted its potential to foster intercultural competence, collaborative learning, and global awareness (e.g., Hackett et al., 2024; O'Dowd, 2018). At the same time, emerging research has begun to explore how digital platforms mediate these interactions, emphasizing that technology is not neutral but shapes participation patterns, communication styles, and access to learning opportunities (Ramírez-Montoya & Rozo-García, 2025).

Within this literature, there is increasing attention to issues of equity, digital divides, and linguistic hierarchies, particularly in Global South contexts. However, there remains a need for more context-specific studies that examine how particular platforms influence student experience in situated educational environments. This study contributes to this gap by focusing on the role of Padlet in mediating interaction within COIL projects in southern Mexico.

2.5.1. COIL and intercultural learning outcomes

A significant body of empirical research has examined the role of COIL in fostering intercultural competence and collaborative learning. For instance, Robert O'Dowd (2018) highlights how structured virtual exchange projects promote the development of intercultural communicative competence by engaging students in sustained interaction with international peers. His work

demonstrates that guided online exchanges can support the negotiation of meaning, cultural awareness, and reflective learning.

Similarly, Hackett et al. (2024) distinguish COIL from broader forms of virtual exchange, emphasizing its structured, curriculum-integrated nature and its focus on collaborative, project-based learning between partner institutions. Together, these studies position COIL as a pedagogical approach that extends learning beyond the classroom and contributes to the development of global competencies.

2.5.2. Digital mediation, participation, and inequality in COIL

More recent research has shifted attention toward the role of digital platforms in shaping interaction within COIL environments. For example, María Soledad Ramírez-Montoya and Héctor Rozo-García (2025) emphasize that digital tools influence not only communication practices but also participation patterns and access to learning opportunities. Their findings suggest that the design and functionality of platforms can either facilitate or constrain student engagement.

In a similar sense, Neil Selwyn (2012) argues that educational technologies are embedded within broader structures of power and inequality, and therefore cannot be understood as neutral tools. From this perspective, issues such as digital access, linguistic hierarchies, and varying levels of digital literacy become central to understanding student participation in virtual exchange. These studies underscore the need to critically examine how specific platforms mediate interaction in context-dependent ways.

3. Methodology

This article is grounded in a qualitative-descriptive case study designed to intricately explore the pedagogical, linguistic, and intercultural dimensions of virtual exchange as mediated by the Padlet platform within Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) contexts. The study's design was purposefully chosen to generate rich, in-depth understanding of the experiences of students operating from a specific geopolitical context: the Global South. The research was conducted at a public university in the southern part of Mexico, spanning the academic period between August and November 2024. During this time, two distinct COIL projects were embedded into undergraduate courses in the BA in English Language Teaching (ELT), with themes purposefully aligned with topics such as intercultural communication, applied linguistics, and Global Englishes. These courses were strategically co-designed with international partners from a U.S. community college, with

Padlet integrated as the primary asynchronous tool for transnational interaction, negotiation, and artifact sharing.

3.1. Participants

The study's primary participant cohort comprised 36 undergraduate students formally enrolled in the BA in English Language Teaching (ELT) program at a Mexican university. Selection for participation was determined solely by their mandated enrolment in the two designated COIL courses, with the majority being in their third or fourth year of professional study. Their international counterparts were undergraduate students drawn from a partnering U.S. community college, who were typically registered in programs related to English studies, TESOL, or bilingual education. While the analytical focus of this research is deliberately centered on the voices and experiential accounts of students in a university located in southern Mexico, their interaction with international peers which constituted a complex, dynamic space for intensive linguistic and cultural negotiation formed the essential, core activity of the virtual exchange.

These Mexican participants represented a significant and valuable diversity of linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds within the broader national context. Although most demonstrated proficiency in both Spanish and English (functioning as bilinguals to varying degrees), a critical factor was the wide spectrum of confidence and demonstrated proficiency in academic English. Consequently, their engagement with Padlet did not present a uniform experience; rather, it provided an exceptionally rich empirical site for scrutinizing critical issues of digital participation, the complex performance of linguistic identity, and the practical, asymmetric challenges inherent in asynchronous intercultural communication. This heterogeneity underscores the need for a critically informed methodology.

This study deliberately centers students from southern Mexico in order to focus Global South perspectives, which remain underrepresented in COIL research.

3.2. Data sources and triangulation

To ensure the utmost depth, validity, and contextual richness in our findings, multiple qualitative data sources were rigorously triangulated:

Padlet Archives (Primary Dataset): Screenshots and comprehensive data exports of the Padlet boards were collected. This included the complete record of student posts, peer-to-peer comments, affective reactions (e.g., likes or emojis), and shared multimedia artifacts (e.g., embedded videos, memes, images, and audio clips). These archives served as the essential dataset for

examining discursive patterns, multimodal expression, and participation frequency.

Student Reflections (Narrative Insight): Following the conclusion of each COIL project, students submitted individual written reflections. These were guided by open-ended prompts designed to elicit authentic insights into their learning process, their perceptions of intercultural interaction, and their critical evaluation of the digital tools' effectiveness and fairness.

Instructor Field Notes (Contextual Depth): The coordinating instructors meticulously documented weekly observations throughout the implementation period. These notes captured the evolution of pedagogical strategies, recorded students' visible affective responses (including motivation, stress, or excitement), and logged unforeseen logistical or technological issues that directly impacted the exchange.

Focus Group Interviews (Agency and Emotion): Semi-structured focus groups were conducted with 12 Mexican students. These participants were strategically selected to represent a full range of engagement levels and linguistic backgrounds. The interviews provided a vital opportunity to delve beyond the digital record, exploring students' subjective experiences with Padlet, the anxiety or confidence associated with their language use, the expression of their identity, and their emotional reactions to the demands of the virtual exchange.

3.3. Data analysis

The collected data were systematically analyzed using the rigorous principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved following a comprehensive, recursive, and interpretive process to identify salient and recurring themes across all datasets. The analysis unfolded across six key stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for broader themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming the final themes, and generating the final report.

Specific coding procedures were applied to different types of multimodal data to enhance analytical transparency. Emojis were coded as indicators of affective stance (e.g., agreement, humor, encouragement), while memes and images were analyzed as multimodal expressions of cultural positioning and identity performance. Written posts were examined for patterns of translanguaging, linguistic complexity, and participation strategies.

Additionally, descriptive attention was given to participation patterns (e.g., frequency of posts, number of responses), not as a quantitative measure, but to contextualize levels of engagement across participants.

These coding decisions allowed for a systematic comparison across data sources, strengthening the interpretive validity of the findings.

Codes were generated through a dual approach: they were deductively informed by our foundational theoretical framework (e.g., searching for evidence of linguistic hierarchies or digital access gaps) and inductively derived from new patterns naturally emerging within the data. The following thematic categories, directly relevant to the core research questions, emerged as central to the final analysis:

- Identity construction and digital presence: Analyzing how students crafted and presented their selves in Padlet posts, including their reliance on personal narratives, the use of emojis and avatars, and the strategic deployment of multimodal resources.
- Language use and linguistic agency: Investigating observed patterns of translanguaging (using multiple languages), the strategies for negotiating meaning, and the decisive role of perceived English proficiency in shaping a student's willingness to participate.
- Technological access and digital literacy: Exploring students' perceived ease or difficulty in navigating Padlet and other digital tools, and how these material and skill-based factors directly constrained or enabled their contributions.
- Pedagogical facilitation and emotional engagement: Examining the perceived role of instructors in guiding the COIL experience and analyzing students' self-reported affective responses, including feelings of motivation, anxiety, curiosity, or frustration.

Crucially, cross-data comparisons were continuously conducted to trace the consistency and variation across all sources, allowing us to validate or challenge initial findings by, for example, comparing what students said in their written reflections versus what they did in their Padlet interactions.

3.4. Ethical consideration

The ethical integrity of this research was rigorously maintained through strict adherence to established ethical guidelines for educational research, ensuring the protection of all participants' autonomy and confidentiality.

Prior to data collection, all participants were fully and transparently informed regarding the specific purpose, procedures, and scope of the study's data usage. This comprehensive disclosure clarified the voluntary nature of participation and the source of data (Padlet posts, written reflections, and interviews). Participants provided informed consent, secured either in written or digital formats, explicitly confirming that their contributions could be

utilized for research purposes exclusively in an anonymized form. This commitment to non-coercion was fundamental, and all students were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without academic penalty.

Comprehensive steps were systematically implemented during the data management and reporting phases to ensure confidentiality and respect for participants' privacy. All personally identifying details including names, specific institutional identifiers, or direct geographic cues were meticulously removed or altered across all reported data, and pseudonyms were consistently applied when utilizing direct quotations. Furthermore, specific methodological care was applied during the analysis of student-generated multimodal content (e.g., images or avatars from Padlet). The research team rigorously focused on preserving the original communicative intent and meaning of the students' output, a crucial step for qualitative validity while simultaneously implementing safeguards to preclude any potential misrepresentation or accidental disclosure of personal information. This dedication to ethical rigor ensures that the findings are both credible and responsibly disseminated.

4. Summary of findings

The thematic analysis, synthesized from the Padlet boards, student reflections, interviews, and instructor field notes, revealed the multifaceted and profoundly contradictory nature of students' experiences in the Padlet-mediated virtual exchanges. Far from being a uniform, seamless experience, the COIL projects were shown to be negotiated spaces marked by both exciting possibilities and structural friction. Four deeply interrelated dimensions emerged from the data, each shedding critical light on the affordances and, more importantly, the limitations of COIL through the lenses of identity, technology, language, and pedagogy.

4.1. Digital identity construction: Curation, visibility, and affective labor

Students engaged in remarkably intentional acts of self-representation (Gee, 2000), actively curating their Padlet posts to build a desired digital presence. For example, one student reflected: *"I was afraid to post because I thought my English was not good enough and others would judge me."* This illustrates how linguistic insecurity shaped students' participation and self-presentation in the digital space.

These were not simple academic submissions but complex performances: students leveraged multimodal strategies, including professional selfies, strategic use of emojis, bilingual expressions, cultural

humor, and rich personal narratives to explore and project identities that were simultaneously personal, academic, and distinctly intercultural. In several instances, students used emojis such as the smiley face and thumbs up as affective markers to signal agreement and reduce communicative risk, particularly when they felt less confident expressing complex ideas in English.

In line with Coll's (2013) notion of technologies as active mediators of social interaction, Padlet served as more than just a tool for communication; it became a crucial symbolic space for negotiating presence, visibility, and a sense of belonging within the transnational collective. However, this same high-stakes digital visibility also acted as a powerful stressor. It triggered profound insecurities, particularly surrounding English language proficiency, anxiety over peer judgment (especially from U.S. partners), and the interpretation of unfamiliar cultural cues clearly demonstrating the significant emotional risks involved in public digital participation.

4.2. Technological frictions and access gaps: Asymmetries of participation

While Padlet was widely praised for being visually engaging and user-friendly, the findings exposed deep-seated infrastructural barriers that created fundamental asymmetries in participation. For some students in southern Mexico, unstable internet connectivity and reliance on shared or low-spec personal devices became a constant source of technological friction. These material constraints were far more than simple logistical hurdles; they translated directly into unequal conditions for engagement, often dictating when, how, and how richly a student could contribute multimedia content. As Selwyn (2012) cautions, the integration of digital platforms must be scrutinized for who is truly empowered by them. In this COIL context, these persistent technological frictions quickly transitioned into severe pedagogical and emotional challenges, undermining students' confidence and creating a stark digital divide within the supposedly equitable exchange.

4.3. Language, power, and agency: The gatekeeper effect

Language emerged as the single most critical axis of inclusion and exclusion in the exchange. While English served its primary function as a necessary shared medium enabling students to connect and co-construct meaning across borders, it simultaneously acted as a powerful gatekeeping mechanism. Consistent with Pennycook's (2010) critique of Global Englishes, the data showed that students with demonstrably higher academic proficiency in English consistently dominated interactions, setting the pace and the linguistic norm. Conversely, students less confident in English reported pervasive hesitation, leading to reduced participation, self-censorship, or the

strategic avoidance of more complex tasks. Furthermore, the absence of explicitly scaffolded translanguaging practices severely constrained opportunities for genuine linguistic agency. This unspoken pressure pushed some students to adopt standardized, often inauthentic, forms of English, diminishing the richness of their linguistic and cultural expression.

4.4. Teacher mediation and affective support: The emotional anchor

The role of the faculty proved essential in stabilizing and shaping the pedagogical climate of the COIL experience. Their labor extended far beyond routine logistical coordination to include modelling intercultural awareness, scaffolding linguistically complex contributions, and actively creating a brave space for reflective dialogue. Through both their visible presence in Padlet comments and ongoing in-class discussions, instructors effectively functioned as cultural brokers and crucial emotional anchors for the students. Their strategic interventions were key to resolving cross-cultural misunderstandings, promoting inclusive participation, and actively attempting to bridge the linguistic and technological gaps that the platform's design could not. In one interaction, an instructor reformulated a student's contribution and invited further responses, which resulted in increased participation from previously less active students. This indispensable role aligns fully with the critical emphasis placed on facilitation as a core pedagogical and emotional practice within international education literature.

The data reveal that Padlet functioned dynamically as both a bridge and a boundary. It indisputably enabled moments of creativity, self-expression, and vital transnational connection. However, it also starkly exposed and, at times, exacerbated structural tensions related to technology, language, and power. While students found compelling opportunities for intercultural learning and identity exploration through multimodal engagement, their experiences were profoundly shaped by unequal access to digital resources, the constant pressure of linguistic hierarchies, and the emotional vulnerability inherent in navigating unfamiliar communicative norms.

These findings decisively underscore the urgent need for a critically informed, equity-oriented approach to COIL design. This approach must move beyond simplistic technical implementation to actively address the underlying social and cultural conditions under which virtual exchange takes place. Recognizing student diversity, anticipating profound asymmetries in participation, and foregrounding facilitation as a committed pedagogical and emotional practice are not optional add-ons; they are essential for fostering truly inclusive and meaningful global learning experiences. COIL projects must

be designed not only with innovation in mind, but with care, reflexivity, and an unwavering commitment to justice. The digital potential of platforms like Padlet is vast, but it is the intentional, critically aware use of such tools driven by both educators and institutions that ultimately determines whether that potential is fully realized or structurally constrained.

5. Implications for practice

The findings of this study, which detail the negotiation of identity, power, and access within a platform-mediated environment require a fundamental re-evaluation of how COIL is implemented. Moving beyond the celebratory narrative of "easy internationalization," these implications offer concrete, actionable steps for practitioners and institutions to align COIL design with principles of equity and epistemic justice, particularly within Latin American contexts. These recommendations are designed to address the material, linguistic, and emotional frictions revealed in the students' experiences.

5.1. Bridging the digital divide: Prioritizing access and confidence

The stark reality of technological friction and access gaps must be the first consideration in COIL design. Institutions must move beyond the assumption of high-speed, uniform connectivity and instead commit to prioritizing accessible tools with robust mobile compatibility and low-bandwidth functionality. This is not a preference but an equity mandate: selecting tools that function reliably on basic smartphones and unstable networks ensures that students from resource-constrained settings are not structurally excluded from the moment the project begins. Furthermore, the anxiety and self-censorship observed around tool usage demand a dedicated pedagogical intervention. It is crucial to integrate specialized digital literacy workshops into the curriculum. These should focus not merely on the mechanics of tools like Padlet, but critically on building digital confidence and awareness, explicitly addressing the affective side of the digital divide and demystifying the norms of transnational digital participation.

5.2. Challenging linguistic and epistemic hierarchies

The study demonstrated how standardized English acted as a powerful gatekeeper, curtailing the participation of less confident students and reinforcing linguistic hierarchies. To counter this, pedagogical design must intentionally promote linguistic agency. This requires explicitly allowing for and scaffolding multilingual practices and translanguaging within tasks, which effectively lowers the linguistic barrier to entry and honors students' full

linguistic and cultural repertoires. When students are permitted to draw on their entire language toolkit, they can express complex ideas more authentically and with greater confidence. This linguistic pivot must be paired with an epistemic shift: tasks must be designed to center local knowledge, storytelling, and cultural comparison rooted firmly in the Latin American context. By requiring students to articulate and share their own regional histories, community issues, and unique perspectives, COIL avoids inadvertently reproducing Eurocentric norms and decisively repositions learners as essential contributors of knowledge, not merely receivers or passive students of foreign content.

5.3. Institutionalizing critical practice: Support and regional models

The success of the COIL projects was heavily reliant on the intensive, multi-faceted labor of the local faculty who served as cultural brokers and emotional anchors. This role is non-negotiable, and thus institutions must commit to providing comprehensive institutional support for faculty. This support must go beyond basic logistical assistance and include protected time, specialized training in critical digital pedagogy, and formal acknowledgment for the significant pedagogical and affective labor involved in sustaining complex intercultural, digitally mediated exchanges. Finally, to truly reflect local pedagogical philosophies and address regional realities, institutions should commit to the long-term goal of developing regionally relevant COIL models. These co-created frameworks, reflective of Latin American pedagogical values, technological realities, and sociocultural complexities, are necessary to ensure that virtual internationalization becomes an organic, situated, and reciprocal practice rather than the mere assimilation of imported methodologies.

These comprehensive recommendations collectively mandate a crucial and ethical shift toward a more just, situated, and reflexive approach to virtual internationalisation. We must recognize that this is not merely an operational necessity or a simple upgrade in technical tools; rather, it represents a deep commitment to systemic, anti-colonial change in educational practice. This new methodology is firmly and unapologetically grounded in the lived realities of Latin American students and educators. It acknowledges their existing material conditions, respects their rich linguistic complexity, and actively validates their cultural and epistemic wealth as the non-negotiable starting point for all global engagement.

By adopting this critical stance, institutions move beyond the performativity of inclusion and commit to continuous reflexivity. This means

constantly turning the mirror inward to actively and critically evaluate how their COIL practices, and the platforms they choose, unintentionally challenge or reproduce global power imbalances and linguistic hierarchies. Implementing these steps is essential to championing true equity in global education, transforming COIL from a promising yet fundamentally flawed technical alternative into a genuinely reciprocal, powerful, and ethically sound driver for social and epistemic justice across borders. This is how we ensure technology serves our human and pedagogical mission, not the other way around.

Ethical approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles applicable to research involving human participants. Participation was always voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of the information collected for research purposes.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests that could have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this paper.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy, confidentiality and ethical considerations concerning the participants of this research. Anonymized data may be made available by corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and institutional requirements.

CRedit author statement

Karina Guadalupe Díaz Pedroza: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing (Original Draft), Writing (Review) and Editing. Project Administration. **Julia Hernández Molina:** Investigation, Data Curation, Writing (Review and Editing). **Maricela Alfaro Merchantd:** Supervision, Investigation, Writing (Review and Editing).

Statement on AI use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors were assisted by ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to contribute to the language editing and proofreading

processes. All research decisions, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and conclusions were conducted by the authors. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted text and retain full responsibility for the content of this research.

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