

FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL AND ELF AWARENESS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS THROUGH VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Panachanok Chanwaiwit^a, Lynsey Mori^b
(^apanachanok_cha@cmru.ac.th, ^bl_mori@kufs.ac.jp)

^a*Chiang Mai Rajabhat University
202 Chang Phueak Rd., Muang, Chiang Mai, Thailand*

^b*Kyoto University of Foreign Studies
569-1142, Kyoto, Ukyoku, 6 Kasame-cho Saiin, Japan*

Abstract: This study examined the impact of a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project on Thai Business English students' awareness of intercultural communication and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), along with their communication challenges and strategies. Data were collected through pre-post rating-scale questionnaires, open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals. The study found that while the virtual exchange did not significantly affect the students' overall intercultural and ELF awareness, it changed their attitudes toward ELF from negative to positive. The students reported increased confidence when communicating and presenting in English with a Thai accent and demonstrated a growing understanding of cultural differences in business communication. Despite this, the students identified several challenges, including language barriers, technical barriers, time zone differences, delayed responses, and non-compliance with established deadlines. To overcome these challenges, the students employed five effective communication strategies: developing cross-cultural communication skills, optimizing virtual meeting experiences, enhancing communication efficiency and collaboration, cultivating effective communication and relationship building, and practicing effective communication and conflict resolution. This study emphasizes the significance of virtual exchange for Business English students, as it enhances their intercultural communication skills and fosters acceptance of ELF, which is crucial for achieving success in today's globalized business landscape.

Keywords: virtual exchange, COIL, Business English, intercultural awareness, ELF awareness

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English has been extensively used as a means of communication between different countries and cultures in the global economy for a long time. However, lacking international cultural competence may negatively affect the business and trade, as well as working in a multinational company (Molinsky & Gundling, 2018; Wild & Wild, 2018). Therefore, recent research emphasizes the need for business English teachers to go beyond imparting language skills and prioritize the development of students' intercultural communicative competence, ensuring their readiness for success in global workplaces (Swartz & Shrivastava, 2022; Phithakphongphan,

2020). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that intercultural awareness serves as a fundamental prerequisite for cultivating intercultural competence (Baker, 2011). By starting with intercultural awareness, individuals can lay a strong foundation for acquiring and applying intercultural competence, ultimately leading to more inclusive and effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration.

Intercultural awareness, as described by Baker (2011), involves consciously understanding how cultural elements influence international communication. It requires adaptability and the ability to apply this understanding effectively in specific contexts. By understanding and embracing this awareness, students can effectively negotiate the complexities and establish shared meaning and communicative practices. Nevertheless, it poses a great challenge for teachers when international communication occurs in the context of lingua franca uses of English, which does not define whose culture students must learn.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) refers to the utilization of English by individuals with varying native languages, encompassing any form of communication in English across linguistic diversity (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). The concept of ELF emerges from the notion that diverse communication in an intercultural context is prevalent, and the English language belongs to every community that uses it (Baker, 2011; Jenkins, 2007, 2009; Nordquist, 2020; Seidlhofer, 2020; Widdowson, 1994). ELF does not represent a specific standardized form of “standard English.” In this regard, ELF shares similarities with the historical development of the English language, where standardized varieties emerged only in the modern era. Nevertheless, this lack of standardization did not hinder the evolution or changes in its lexico-grammatical structures prior to that time. However, standard forms of native English, as classified based on Kachru’s (1985) three concentric circles model of World Englishes, continue to have a strong influence on English language teaching (ELT) (Dewey, 2021), especially in Thailand, where English is taught as a compulsory subject from primary to higher education. It has been observed in the Thai ELT context that most Thai students learn English mainly in class for limited periods. They appear to lack opportunities to use English for communication, both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, most textbooks and teaching materials aim to teach English through the culture of native speakers, especially British and American culture. Apparently, ELT in Thailand does not seem to promote awareness of cultural diversity in communication, leading to students holding inaccurate beliefs about English learning. For instance, many Thai students lack confidence when speaking English with a Thai accent, mistakenly believing that a native speaker accent is necessary for effective communication. This misconception can have negative effects on the development of English communication skills, as highlighted by Kung and Wang (2019) and Seidlhofer (2020).

To deal with the challenges, ELT scholars have suggested that teachers acknowledge the diversity of English language learners in terms of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as well as their individual experiences and identities (Pennycook, 2017). In addition, they should promote three learning processes of perceiving and comprehending new language, developing a deep understanding of it, and engaging in self-assessment (Ur, 2012). They should also encourage students’ critical awareness of language use (McDonough & Christopher, 2013) and foster intercultural competence in English language learners by providing opportunities for them

to interact with speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Holmes, 2003; McKay, 2018; Renandya, 2012).

“Virtual exchange” or “online cultural exchange” is used to describe the involvement of learner groups in intercultural interactions and collaborative projects online, where they engage with partners from different cultural backgrounds or geographic locations (O’Dowd, 2018). With the COVID-19 pandemic making international travel a health risk, virtual exchange has become an even more appealing option as it allows for the continuation of language and cultural learning without the need for physical travel (Chen, 2022). Through the implementation of virtual exchange, students have the opportunity to cultivate intercultural awareness and language proficiency (Vinagre, 2022). Furthermore, as proposed by Gimenez (2023), it is crucial that Business English teachers incorporate various technology-based activities designed to assist students in feeling equipped for the communication requirements of the contemporary workplace. Virtual exchange enables students to enhance their technological skills, referred to as “*langua-technocultural competence*” by O’Dowd et al. (2020). Additionally, virtual exchange can improve intercultural skills by offering students the chance to have real conversations with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). It can also lead to increased tolerance and understanding of cultural differences (de Laat et al., 2014). Besides, virtual exchange can also enhance students’ motivation to learn English and increase their confidence in using the language (Warschauer, 2002). In a study by Ramírez (2020), American students collaborating with their Mexican counterparts in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) reported experiencing enhanced chances for “self-reflection, personalization, and community-building” (p. 450).

However, creating virtual exchange partnerships can be a challenging endeavor due to significant disparities between groups (varying proficiency levels and areas of interest), institutions (diverse goals, expectations, needs, and requirements), and contexts (different time zones and calendars) (Gutiérrez & O’Dowd, 2021). Therefore, as suggested by Kramersch (2014), it is necessary for the program to adopt a proactive and critical pedagogical approach to intercultural communication. In this approach, educators take an explicit role in guiding learners to actively engage with and navigate differences in social, cultural, political, and religious worldviews.

Despite extensive research on virtual exchange in ELT, little attention has been given to its impact on the intercultural awareness of Business English students. While recent research has focused on organizing events to enhance language learners' awareness of foreign cultures (Phithakphongphan, 2020; Rajprasit, 2020; Tural & Cubukcu, 2021; Vinagre, 2022), this study explores students’ communication challenges and effective strategies they employed, offering insights for integrating COIL as a teaching approach in Business English programs. In addition, unlike prior research (Belz & Mueller-Hartmann, 2002; Lewis & Quian, 2021; Ramírez, 2020), which examined participants from diverse backgrounds, this study focused on Thai students and their Japanese counterparts who shared similar sociocultural backgrounds, educational experiences, and English proficiency level. These students were 19 to 23 years old and had lower levels of English proficiency. According to Ur (2012), grouping students with low proficiency together can establish a supportive learning environment that facilitates language skill practice

among peers who share similar proficiency levels. This approach also enhances interaction and collaboration (Lyster, 2007).

This study incorporated a virtual exchange through the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project in a Business English presentation course attended by the Thai and Japanese students. The aim was to investigate the benefits and challenges of using COIL to develop Business English students' intercultural and ELF awareness, and to inform the design of Business English programs that incorporate COIL as a pedagogical tool. Accordingly, the research questions were as follows:

1. How does participation in the COIL project affect Business English students' awareness of intercultural communication and English as a Lingua Franca?
2. What specific communication challenges do Business English students participating in the COIL project encounter, and how do they address them?

METHOD

This research aimed at exploring awareness of intercultural communication, as defined by Baker (2011), within the context of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF). It used qualitative and quantitative methods. The participants were 30 Business English major students from a public university in Chiang Mai, Thailand. They were enrolled in the English for Business Presentation course and voluntarily participated in the COIL project, which was conducted from October to December 2022. These students were six males and twenty-four females, aged 19 - 23 years old with the majority of 20 years old (66.66%). Most of them had never been abroad (93.33%), but many students reported having foreign friends (73.33%). They had studied English for 14-18 years. During the COIL project, the students worked collaboratively in groups of five to six with Japanese counterparts from Japan.

The Japanese students were enrolled in an English study program at a university in Kyoto. Only 16 Japanese students voluntarily chose to participate in the project, resulting in each group containing more Thai students than Japanese students. Both Japanese and Thai students received identical materials and documentation at the start of the course to guide their learning and research activities. These resources included a syllabus, course documentation, assessment rubrics, templates for presentations, voice narration tutorials, and a plan of action for the six sessions.

The project syllabus outlined weekly activities designed to foster student-centered discussions on business-related themes, with a focus on consumer habits and environmental sustainability in Thailand and Japan, through both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Activities included mini-research projects, presentations, reflections, and interactive approaches. Students were required to collaboratively deliver brief two- to three-minute presentations on various topics via Zoom, covering a self-introduction in the first two weeks, popular businesses for young adults in week three, consumer habits in week four, sustainable companies in week five, and consumer influence on business sustainability in week six.

The data collection tools were questionnaires, interviews, and reflective journals. The pre- and post-questionnaire comprises four sections: demographics, intercultural awareness, ELF

awareness, and three open-ended questions asking about the significance of being aware of foreign cultures and using English as a means of communication in business. The semi-structured interview included questions on managing communication difficulties that arose during virtual exchanges where English was used as the primary means of communication. The reflective journal encompassed an instruction that required students to document their communication experiences, describing communication difficulties or challenges encountered and the strategies implemented to overcome them. Students were required to write a minimum of 200 words to ensure sufficient reflection. To minimize any confusion regarding the questions and to enhance the students' confidence in answering them, all the questions were translated into Thai, and the students had the option to answer in either Thai or English based on their preference. The data collection tools were developed by the researchers based on the research framework and then validated by experts and underwent tests of internal consistency to ensure reliability.

Once the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) had approved the research tools, the participant information sheets and a consent form were sent to students through the university's learning management system (LMS). Every student in the class willingly consented to participate in the project. Following the administration of the pre-questionnaire, the students engaged in COIL activities for a duration of six weeks. Upon the conclusion of each weekly group discussion, students composed a reflective journal. After the students completed the final week's activities, they took the post-questionnaire. Subsequently, the researcher conducted an interview with all individual students. The collected quantitative data were subjected to analysis using descriptive statistics, and the mean scores were interpreted according to the following ranges: 4.21-5.00 = strongly agree, 3.41-4.20 = agree, 2.61-3.40 = uncertain, 1.81-2.60 = disagree, and 1.00-1.80 = strongly disagree. The qualitative data underwent open and axial coding (Creswell & Poth, 2013). The interviews, transcribed in Thai, and selected extracts were then translated into English for inclusion in the research article. All information gathered from students is kept confidential, it is used exclusively for research purposes. Once the research is completed, all such information will be securely deleted after two years.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section addresses the first research question by presenting the analysis of students' intercultural and ELF awareness based on the survey conducted before and after their participation in the COIL project. The results from the rating-scale questionnaire are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Additionally, Table 3 provides a visual representation of the open-ended responses, followed by the inclusion of some key responses for further exploration.

Students' Intercultural Awareness

Table 1 presents the results from the pre- and post-project survey, showing how students' intercultural understanding evolved through their engagement in the project.

Table 1. Students' Intercultural Awareness Before and After the COIL Project

Awareness	Before		Meaning	After		Meaning
	\bar{x}	S.D.		\bar{x}	S.D.	
1. Language and culture are always linked.	4.47	0.57	Strongly agree	4.30	0.60	Strongly agree
2. Learning culture is a crucial part of English language learning.	4.40	0.50	Strongly agree	4.53	0.51	Strongly agree
3. Limited exposure to British/American culture can hinder English language learning.	3.80	0.92	Agree	3.50	1.18	Agree
4. Cultural diversity is important for communication with a foreign language.	3.90	0.99	Agree	3.80	0.96	Agree
5. Socializing with people of different nationalities will help you learn English better.	4.57	0.57	Strongly agree	4.57	0.57	Strongly agree
6. To be able to communicate with someone in a foreign language you must understand their culture.	4.10	0.76	Agree	4.03	0.81	Agree
7. Generalization of culture groups has negative effects on intercultural communication. For example, Pimpa is a shy Asian girl, so Asian girls are shy.	3.27	1.55	Uncertain	2.93	1.23	Uncertain
8. In intercultural communication, you must modify your communication with others in different situations.	4.33	0.48	Strongly agree	4.07	0.37	Agree
9. Judging people by the standards of your culture is unfair.	4.20	1.00	Agree	4.10	0.88	Agree
10. It is important to understand your own culture when learning a foreign language.	4.10	0.66	Agree	3.93	0.74	Agree
Overall	3.88	0.92	Agree	3.82	0.86	Agree

Table 1 indicates a positive impact of the COIL project on the students' intercultural awareness. The students strongly agreed that language and culture are linked (item 1), learning culture is a crucial part of English language learning (item 2), and socializing with people of different nationalities helps them to learn English better (item 5). However, students exhibited inconsistency in their agreement regarding the significance of intercultural awareness for English language development. Although they acknowledge its importance, they seem less inclined to adapt their communication in diverse situations (item 8). Moreover, while they recognize the importance of cultural diversity for effective communication in a foreign language (item 4), they believed that limited exposure to British or American culture can hinder English language learning (item 3).

Agreement slightly decreased in several aspects related to cultural diversity and language communication. These include the importance of cultural diversity in foreign language

communication (item 4), the necessity of understanding someone's culture to communicate in a foreign language (item 6), the perception that judging others by one's own cultural standards is unfair (item 9), and the importance of understanding one's own culture when learning a foreign language (item 10). Additionally, uncertainty existed regarding the negative effects of generalizing culture groups on intercultural communication before and after project participation (item 7).

Students' English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Awareness

Table 2 provides a detailed comparison of the students' responses, highlighting changes in their views on native speaker dominance and the diversity of English varieties across the world.

Table 2. Students' ELF Awareness before and after the COIL Project

Awareness	Before		Meaning	After		Meaning
	\bar{x}	S.D.		\bar{x}	S.D.	
<i>Native English speaker dominance</i>	3.10	0.54	Uncertain	2.64	0.64	Uncertain
1. English is owned by the British and Americans.	2.93	1.20	Uncertain	2.30	1.12	Disagree
2. Standard English is spoken only in the UK and the US.	3.30	1.12	Uncertain	2.80	1.06	Uncertain
3. Australian English, Canadian English, and New Zealand English should be counted as standard English.	3.30	0.95	Uncertain	2.77	1.04	Uncertain
4. The English language spoken by people in countries other than the UK, USA, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand is not standardized and has many errors.	2.10	0.99	Disagree	1.93	0.94	Disagree
5. Englishes around the world have the same grammar and rules.	3.60	0.77	Agree	3.77	0.86	Agree
6. Sounding like a native speaker is essential.	3.37	1.1	Uncertain	2.27	0.74	Disagree
<i>English as a means of global communication</i>	3.83	0.60	Agree	4.25	0.40	Strongly Agree
7. English belongs to everyone who uses it.	3.97	1.03	Agree	4.33	0.66	Strongly agree
8. Multiple varieties of English are considered standard.	3.00	1.11	Uncertain	3.77	1.04	Agree
9. Most English speakers speak English as a foreign language.	3.90	0.61	Agree	3.97	0.72	Agree
10. There is an extensive range of English accents.	4.43	0.63	Strongly agree	4.73	0.45	Strongly agree

Table 2 shows ongoing uncertainty in native English speaker dominance, alongside a significant increase in the importance of English as a means of global communication. After participating in the project, the students increasingly agreed that Englishes worldwide adhere to similar grammar and rules (item 5). However, they also increasingly disagreed with the idea that the English language spoken in countries other than the UK, USA, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand lacks standardization and contains numerous errors (item 4). Overall, the data suggests that participating in the virtual exchange has had a positive impact on students' ELF awareness.

Moving on to the results from the open-ended questionnaire, the first question asked “*Do you think having an American/British accent leads to more successful business presentations than speaking Thai English accent? Why?*” Prior to the intervention, 66.66% of the students held the belief that British or American English was crucial for successful business presentations. However, after collaborating with Japanese teammates for six weeks, this percentage decreased significantly to 16.66%. This indicates that 90.00% of the students embraced a range of English accents and recognized that clarity, understanding, and the content of the business presentation are more significant than accent. Notably, 60.00% of the students experienced a positive shift in attitude following their participation in the COIL project. For example, Student 4 stated “*speaking with a British accent gives off an impression of competence and professionalism.*” However, after the project, she valued presentation skills more than a perfect accent, saying “*even if you have a perfect accent, it won’t make up the presentation that is not on point.*” Similarly, before joining the project, Student 17 said that the use of British or American accents could “*convince the audience.*” However, after the project she added a strong opinion about English form, stating that “*everyone can speak multiple accents and English has no standard.*” The COIL project significantly impacted students’ attitudes toward English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). After the project, 60% of students shifted from holding negative views to adopting a positive attitude, reflecting greater acceptance of diverse English varieties. Additionally, 30% of students maintained their initial positive outlook, while 10% still preferred native-speaker accents, such as British or American. This shows that while most students became more open to ELF, a minority remained attached to traditional accent preferences. Overall, the students shared that they experienced a notable increase in their confidence levels when using a Thai accent while communicating and presenting in English. Table 3 shows a comparison of the students’ intercultural and ELF awareness levels before and after participating in the project.

Table 3. Changes in Students’ Intercultural and ELF Awareness before and after the COIL Project

Statements	Before			After			Change			
	Yes	No	Uncertain	Yes	No	Uncertain	Negative to Positive	Uncertain to Positive	Consistent Positive	Consistent Negative
1. Accent impacts success in business presentations.	66.6 6%	33.3 3%	-	16.6 6%	83.33 %	-	60.00 %	-	30.0 0%	10.00 %
2. Cultural awareness is critical for success in international business.	100 %	-	-	100 %	-	-	-	-	100 %	-
3. Intercultural competence is important for global business communication.	86.6 6%	10.0 0%	3.33 %	100 %	-	-	6.66 %	3.3 3%	90.0 0%	-

The second question was “*If you work in international business, do you think it is crucial to be aware of cultural differences? Why?*” All the students answered “yes” to the question in both the pre- and post-questionnaires. Before participating in the COIL project, the students

provided general answers based on their feelings, such as “*different countries have different cultures*” (Student 17), and “*imposing our culture in another country may cause problems*” (Student 30). However, after the project, the students recognized the importance of intercultural awareness in business contexts and provided more valid reasons. They stated that intercultural competence is “*the key to business negotiations*” (Student 16), “*not taking into account other cultures may cause loss of business benefits*” (Student 17), and “*making the slightest mistake about culture can make them (business partners) hate you forever*” (Student 30).

The last open-ended question was “*Do you think intercultural competence is important for global business communication? Why?*” After the project, 90.00% of the students agreed that intercultural competence is crucial for communicating in the global business context. Student 2 explained that intercultural competence helped in building relationships and achieving business success more easily. Student 3 noted that intercultural competence helped people handle international business communication appropriately. Student 7 added that it helped her adapt to achieve business success and growth.

Before the project, three students (10.00%) perceived that intercultural awareness is not important, with one student stating that “*the ability to communicate is sufficient to help us understand each other*” (Student 29). The other two students did not provide reasons for their negation. However, after the project, all three students changed their opinion. Student 29 stated that “*If we know other cultures, we will know how to perform proper manners, country-specific greetings, and the cultural dos and don'ts.*” The other two students explained that intercultural competence enable people to “*communicate with each other and gather information on all aspects*” (Student 24) and create a positive impression that could influence “*customers' willingness to engage in business*” (Student 26).

The next section provides an analysis of the communication challenges that students encountered and effective communication strategies they employed during the COIL project. The primary data source for this analysis was the students' reflective journals, and supplementary information was obtained through interviews. Using open and axial coding techniques, the results of this analysis are presented in detail below.

Communication Challenges and Effective Communication Strategies

The students frequently cited language barriers as their main communication challenge. Many acknowledged that they and their team members had limited English proficiency. For example, Student 3 said, “*Both me and my Japanese student friends are not fluent in English.*” Additionally, Student 4 noted, “*...we have problems in using grammar in writing and talking.*” Student 28 added, “*...they not good English and I not good too*” (Student 28). As a result, the students appeared to develop cross-cultural communication skills from using translation programs such as Google Translate to assist them. They also tried to prepare ahead of time by researching linguistic and intercultural differences before interacting with Japanese friends. Some even created scripts to help them communicate more effectively.

Furthermore, accent issues were also raised by the students, with many finding the Japanese English accent challenging to understand or listen to. For example, Students 5 and 10 noted that it was “*hard to understand,*” and Students 23 and 28 said that it was “*difficult to listen,*” while

Students 30 found it “*unique*.” To address the issue, some students asked for clarification or for the speaker to speak slowly. Student 21 asked for words to be spelled out to help with comprehension. Some students also simplified their language, using easier language to communicate more effectively.

Moreover, the students recognized that cultural differences in communication style could also pose problems. For example, Student 4 noted that some Japanese friends were not as assertive, while Student 9 noted that they seemed to be shy or lack confidence in responding. To overcome these challenges, the students embraced cultural diversity and tried to foster relationship by “*asking the Japanese people questions first*” (Student 4), “*meeting online more often and talking more about personal matters*” (Student 9), “*texting to exchange knowledge and build intimacy*” (Student 14), and “*increasing contact by following each other on Instagram*” (Student 5).

The students also identified inconsistent internet connectivity as a major communication challenge. Student 22 shared that their team often faced issues with lag and screen freezes, making it difficult to hear each other clearly. Similarly, Student 29 noted that poor internet quality resulted in unclear sound from the other party.

The students also expressed difficulties related to time zone differences. Student 4 mentioned challenges in scheduling homework appointments due to these differences. Additionally, it seems that their schedules were constantly mismatched. For instance, Student 13 explained that “*when Japanese students were available, Thai students had to work part-time, but when Thai students had free time, Japanese teammates were in class, or it was too late at night for them.*” To overcome these obstacles, they employed alternative communication methods such as using Line to exchange information when their free time did not match up. Additionally, they divided the workload among themselves to manage the situation effectively.

Another noteworthy issue identified by the students was delayed responses. They noted that their Japanese friends sometimes took longer to respond to messages, leading to a delay in exchanging information. To address this challenge, Student 7 shared that they employed a strategy of setting clear times for conversation and updates, and they sent messages accordingly to ensure timely replies. Student 22 shared that being patient and understanding each other better was key.

The other issue that may have resulted from delayed replies was non-compliance with established deadlines. Student 22 shared that they often had to remind their Japanese teammates to submit their work, and most of the time, it was turned in late. Additionally, clear communication within the team was emphasized, with Student 7 mentioning that they established specific due dates for each member to submit their footage for the video. Student 22 also stated that negotiating a new deadline was another effective strategy, and they tried to be flexible and accommodating to their foreign teammates’ situations. For example, they would postpone appointments or leave questions in the group chat. The identified categories are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Categories of Communication Challenges and Strategies Used by Students

Communication Challenges	Effective Communication Strategies
1. Language barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited English proficiency 	1. Developing cross-cultural communication skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing machine translation • Researching information beforehand
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different accents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requesting clarification • Simplifying language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural differences in communication style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing cultural diversity • Fostering relationships
2. Technological barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistent internet connectivity 	2. Optimizing virtual meeting experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing equipment and connection before meeting • Providing technical support
3. Time zone differences	3. Enhancing communication efficiency and collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using alternative communication methods • Sharing responsibilities and tasks
4. Delayed responses	4. Cultivating effective communication and relationship building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following up • Being patient
5. Non-compliance with established deadlines	5. Effective communication and conflict resolution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating clearly • Negotiating a new deadline

Discussion

This study aimed to address gaps in the literature by exploring the effect of the COIL project on Business English students' awareness of intercultural communication and ELF as well as communication obstacles they faced when they took part in the COIL project and how they tackled them.

The analysis of the questionnaire indicated that the virtual exchange had a positive impact on students' intercultural and ELF awareness. Even though the overall average agreement scores decreased, it was described as slight, which means that the change may not have a major impact on the overall findings of the study. However, the quantitative results may be influenced by how the questions were framed. Derived from common misconceptions among English learners, some questions were negatively phrased, which could have shaped participants' perceptions and responses.

Moreover, students consistently expressed strong beliefs in several areas. These included the close relationship between language and culture, the necessity of learning about culture when learning English, and the importance of interacting with people from diverse backgrounds.

However, the project helped them realize that English language learning is not just about the cultures of native speakers, such as British or American English, that is important for English language learning (Jenkins, 2007, 2009; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011; Nordquist, 2020; Seidlhofer, 2020).

The findings of this study lend support to Warschauer's (2002) acknowledgement of the positive impact of virtual exchange projects on language learners' confidence levels. The results reveal that students gained increased self-assurance in utilizing their own Thai-accented English when they realized that English accents vary among individuals from different countries, and that such variations should not impede their willingness to communicate. However, it appears that students' confidence did not come from the development of their English language skills, contrary to the claims made by Vinagre (2022). This study suggests that a virtual exchange project's effectiveness in developing English language skills depends on the inclusion of essential components such as long immersion, language scaffolding, timely and constructive feedback, as well as students' motivation and engagement.

The persistent uncertainty surrounding native English speaker dominance seems to pose challenges to altering students' attitudes through the COIL project. Certain beliefs may be resistant to change, particularly if they have been reinforced over an extended period (Dewey, 2021). The COIL project, although valuable, may not be sufficient on its own to counteract these deeply rooted attitudes. Additionally, the COIL project had a limited duration, which might not provide enough time for significant attitude change to occur.

The consistent uncertainty in the negative effects of generalizing cultural groups on intercultural communication suggested that the project was not effective in educating students about the significance of avoiding cultural generalizations that could harm communication between people from diverse cultural background. This finding highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and tailored approaches to internationalizing education. It is also worth noting that uncertainty is not necessarily negative; it may indicate that the students are open-minded and willing to consider different perspectives.

Moreover, the students' lower level of agreement on adjusting communication style to suit the circumstances may have been due to inadequate feedback and coaching. A possible explanation is that the number of students participating in the COIL project was quite high with 30 students, supervised by one instructor. Additionally, the students met outside of regular class hours, but their reflective journals appeared to lack sufficient depth in addressing the relevant concerns, thereby hindering the instructor's ability to offer prompt and precise feedback or guidance. This can make it harder for students to identify areas where they need to improve and to receive guidance on how to adjust their communication style to suit their contexts.

The students' ability to provide more valid reasons for the necessity of intercultural awareness to intercultural business suggests that the COIL project could reinforce their understanding of the significance of intercultural awareness in business contexts, rather than significantly altering their views on the topic. The findings suggest that the students recognized the negative consequences of inadequate intercultural awareness as suggested by Molinsky and Gundling (2018) and Wild and Wild (2018). They also demonstrated a critical awareness of language use, as suggested by McDonough and Christopher (2013), through interactions with

co-workers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Holmes, 2003; McKay, 2018; (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021).

As evidenced by the decrease in the students' belief in the necessity of sounding like a native speaker, the finding indicates a clear shift in students' views after the project. Moreover, the increased certainty about the variety of English accents and the fact that most English speakers speak English as a foreign language suggests that the students became more embracing toward diversity in English language use and recognized the value of different accents and varieties. These changes in beliefs suggest that the COIL project allowed students to become more open to the idea of English as a global language with multiple varieties, rather than a language owned by a particular group of people or with a single "correct" form. This can lead to development of English communication skills (Kung & Wang, 2019; Seidlhofer, 2020). These findings also have important implications for ELT in countries where English is taught as a foreign language, like Thailand, as they highlight the need to move away from a focus on native-like proficiency and toward a more inclusive approach that celebrates linguistic diversity.

The main communication challenge faced by the students was language barriers, which they acknowledged as limited English proficiency. To overcome this, they used translation programs and technology and researched linguistic and intercultural differences before interacting with their Japanese friends. The students showed resourcefulness in overcoming this challenge by using technology and preparing ahead of time (O'Dowd et al., 2020). The use of technology such as translation programs and research on linguistic and intercultural differences can be an effective strategy for international students to communicate more effectively with their peers. The finding also highlights the influence of accents on cross-cultural communication, which could create misunderstandings and communication breakdowns between speakers of different languages. Nevertheless, students' awareness of ELF enables them to overcome language barriers through deliberate effort and adaptability. By demonstrating patience and being accommodating towards one another, they can compensate for the absence of shared linguistic foundations.

The findings about challenges related to time zone differences and non-compliance with deadlines highlight the students' ability to schedule and complete tasks in a timely manner. This shows that students can be resourceful when faced with difficult situations and can find effective ways to work together despite the challenges. They also highlight the importance of clear communication and flexibility when working in a cross-cultural team with members in different time zones. It is because missing deadlines can lead to frustration and affect the quality of work produced, so it was the opportunity for the students to develop patience, understanding, and flexibility in accommodating different schedules and situations as de Laat et al. (2014) has pointed out. By doing so, the team can work together effectively and produce quality work while maintaining a positive and respectful work environment. On this basis, autonomy and self-regulation are proposed for successful COIL project implementation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the COIL project, although brief, significantly fostered cultural and linguistic open-mindedness among participants. It serves as an effective pedagogical tool

for developing practical communication skills and promoting a broader cultural perspective among students of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF), which is essential for success in international business settings.

While grouping students with low proficiency together can create a supportive environment where students feel more comfortable practicing language skills with peers of similar ability levels (Ur, 2012), it may also limit communication and hinder their ability to fully express or comprehend ideas. Given the difficulties faced by the students, a proactive and critical pedagogical approach (Kramsch, 2014) should involve anticipating these challenges and preparing both students and instructors to handle them effectively. This could include providing students with training on the digital tools used in the course to minimize technical barriers, incorporating language support mechanisms, establishing clear protocols to manage time zone differences more effectively, and facilitating guided reflections where students discuss not only language barriers but also how these barriers affect their perceptions and interactions with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, maintaining student motivation and active engagement in project activities is a vital factor.

This study offers valuable insights into organizing a COIL project but has several limitations. First, it is focused specifically on a select group of Thai and Japanese undergraduates, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of Thai and Japanese individuals. Second, technical barriers encountered during the virtual exchange might have influenced its effectiveness, potentially affecting the results related to intercultural understanding and ELF awareness. Finally, the framing of questions within the study could impact participant responses. Maintaining a neutral tone is crucial to minimize response bias, and the potential influence of question phrasing on the findings should be considered.

To further our knowledge in this field, future research should explore contextual factors that influence attitude change. Furthermore, investigations into how the broader social, cultural, and institutional environments support or hinder the transformation of attitudes could be valuable.

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