

When Virtual Collaboration Prevails and Fails

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What we'll cover

1

The program

OISC 2025: scale, structure, student sample.

2

Argument and framework

Digital COIL must address cultural patterns, not just language. DMIS as our analytical lens.

3

Four findings

English proficiency, cultural communication norms, digital tools, and virtual format limits.

4

Five institutions, five stories

University spotlights from UCU, HSMW, Bunkyo, AIT, applied through DMIS.

5

Implications and discussion

Six design recommendations for differentiated COIL, then Q&A.

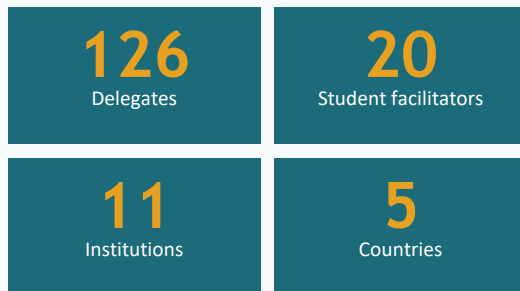
Online International Student Conference: The Program Behind This Study

A student-led, two-day virtual program where undergraduates research a global issue together, then present and discuss across institutions.

Format

- **Dates:** November 8 and December 6, 2025
- **Mode:** Fully online. Zoom plus async tools (Padlet, WhatsApp, Instagram, Google Docs)
- **Day 1:** Icebreaker, cultural exchange, group topic selection
- **Day 2:** Group research presentations and cross-room discussion
- **Website:** <https://oisc.site>

Scale of OISC 2025



*Working in 20 cross-institution groups · Japan · Germany ·
Ukraine · Indonesia · Philippines*

Sample Topics Students Researched

- Climate change and sustainability
- Food security and agriculture
- Mental health awareness
- Gender equality and women's rights
- AI and language barriers
- Social media addiction
- Education access and e-learning
- Renewable energy and green tech
- Human rights and social justice
- Deepfakes and misinformation

For this panel: we analysed N = 44 students from five of the eleven institutions (AIT, DWC, Bunkyo, HSMW, UCU), a subset of the 126 OISC 2025 delegates.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Five Universities. Forty-Four Students. One COIL Program (OISC).

 AIT Japan N = 4	 DWC Japan N = 13	 HSMW Germany N = 11	 UCU Ukraine N = 7	 BU Japan N = 4
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Students collaborated via Zoom, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Google Docs across Japan, Germany, Ukraine, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

44* Total Students	5+ Countries Represented	DMIS Analytical Framework	100% Reported Some Growth
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CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Digital COIL design must address cultural patterns — not just language.



English Proficiency

Universal barrier — but its form varies by culture



Cultural × Digital Intersection

High-context norms clashed with direct digital communication



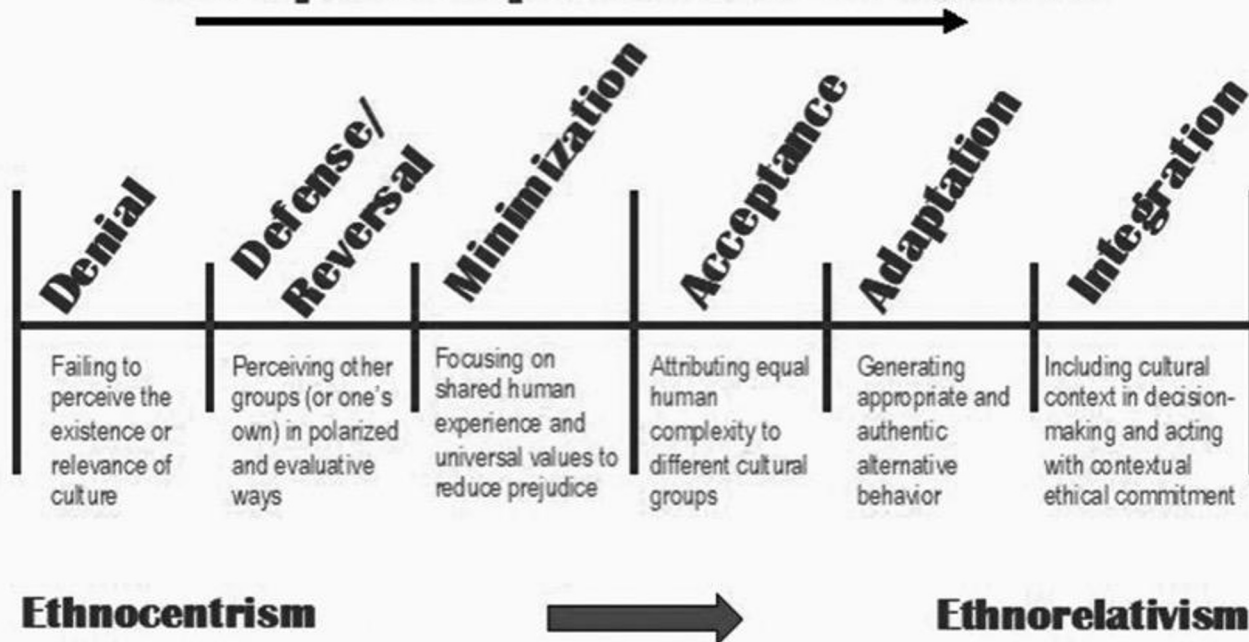
CALL Competence Redefined

Encompasses cultural-technological adaptation, not just language

This study argues digital COIL design must provide differentiated support and platforms, recognizing that CALL competence encompasses cultural-technological adaptation alongside linguistic proficiency.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Perceptual Experience of Difference



The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986)

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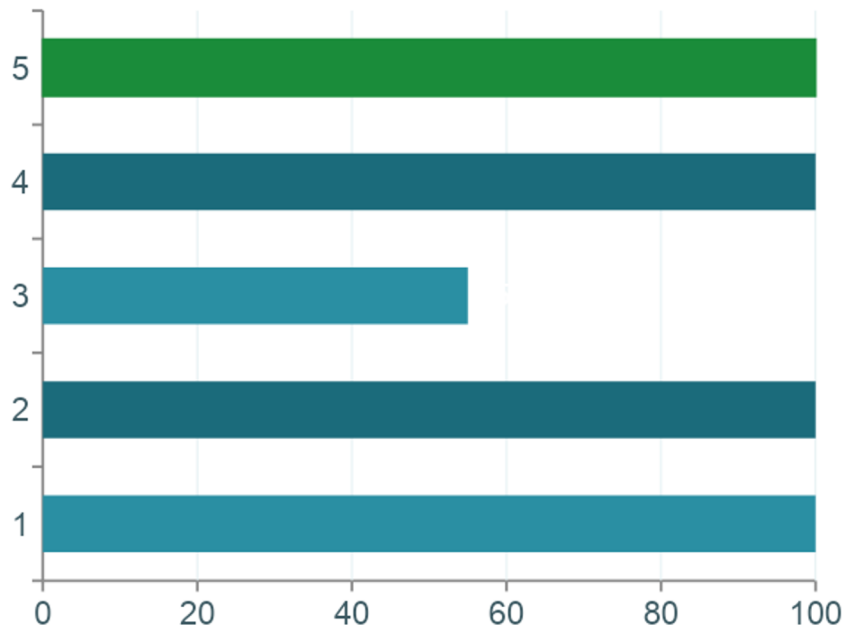
Despite Challenges: Intercultural Growth Was Universal



"I noticed myself moving from the 'minimization' stage, where I underestimated cultural differences, to the 'acceptance' stage, where I recognized and appreciated my partner's different way of speaking and thinking."

— DWC Student #3

English: A Universal Barrier with Different Cultural Faces



"I used the phrase 'not interested.' What I actually meant to convey was that many Japanese people are so preoccupied with their own lives that they lack the 'mental margin'... my phrasing made it sound like Japanese people simply have indifferent personalities."

— DWC Student #11

"One of the biggest things I learned was that it's okay to just start speaking — even if my English isn't perfect. I used to be so nervous about making mistakes, but I realized that the important thing is trying to communicate your ideas."

— UCU Student #5

Japanese High-Context Norms: A Specific COIL Challenge

"Japanese students tend to avoid speaking first or expressing themselves openly in front of others... in my perspective, it can often have a negative impact, particularly in this kind of global situation."

— **DWC Student #7**

"With the exception of the Japanese students, who had to be addressed directly in order to speak, and even then, it took some time for them to respond."

— **HSMW Student #7**

What the Data Shows

- 11/13 DWC students identified Japanese passivity as a barrier
- Students spoke last in discussions — a cultural norm, not disinterest
- Fear of making mistakes in public inhibited engagement
- AIT's: One student explicitly name this pattern and describe overcoming it
- German students naturally filled silences — creating asymmetric dynamics
- BU corroborate: 2/4 reflected on Japanese passivity; #1 noted "On Day 1, I mostly spoke only when someone asked me directly"

Asynchronous Platforms: Where Collaboration Broke Down

AIT

One group chat rescued a project. Another group suffered from unclear coordination and bystander effect.

DWC

8/13 students: WhatsApp barely used. Group chat not set up until 2 weeks in. Tasks incomplete hours before Day 2.

HSMW

Last slide edited at 4 AM, 3 hours before the conference. Cultural diagnosis: WhatsApp isn't standard in Asia.

UCU

War-related power outages and connection failures. Time zone gaps. Infrastructure inequality shaped participation.

BU

Students used digital tools (translation apps, ChatGPT, subtitles) as adaptive comprehension strategies.

"I guess it is why we didn't create a group chat; it was a mistake. We had to make it... Just a few hours before Day 2 started, we hadn't considered our questions yet."

Virtual COIL: What Technology Enabled — and What It Couldn't Replace

✓ What Worked

- ✓ Enabled participation across 5+ countries simultaneously -possibly a good rehearsal for future work conditions
- ✓ WhatsApp/Instagram rescued some groups mid-project
- ✓ Google Docs enabled asynchronous script building
- ✓ Technology lowered travel barriers for Ukrainian students under wartime conditions

X What It Couldn't Replace

- X Emotional connection and team cohesion of in-person
- X Non-verbal cues: nodding, facial expression, presence
- X Proactive spontaneous participation
- X Sense of shared accomplishment at program close

"In an online setting, it was difficult to stay proactive... that feeling was somewhat reduced online."

— DWC Student #5

German Students: Low-Context Communicators Who Adapted

"Normally, I am an introverted person who does not usually start conversations. However, since my group members were even more reserved than I was... I stepped out of my comfort zone and started the conversations."

— HSMW Student #7

"At the beginning of Day 1, I wasn't sure whether a real conversation would develop, as the participants were quite quiet and only spoke when I addressed them individually. Looking back, this might have been related to cultural norms in group communication or simply initial shyness."

— HSMW Student # 11

Key Insights

- 11/11 students reported personal growth — most consistent finding in entire study
- German students defaulted to initiating when partners stayed silent
- Only group to offer a cultural explanation for WhatsApp failures
- HSMW #2: "Despite different countries, we are very alike and often have the same opinions."

Ukrainian Students: Confidence Built Under Wartime Conditions

UCU Ukraine

7/7

Overcame English fear

7/7

Recognized cultural differences

6/7

Want to join again

4/7

Made lasting friendships

"What meant the most to me was being able to share what's happening in Ukraine right now with students from other countries. Having people genuinely listen and engage with our reality felt incredibly important and empowering. It created real understanding and solidarity."

— UCU Student #5

"But I had a really kind team. Even after the project we stay in touch and follow each other on social media. And I'm really happy that I have friends from Japan, the Philippines, Germany and Indonesia."

— UCU Student #4

BU (Japan): Growth Between Day 1 and Day 2

"Compared to Day 1, I spoke up much more on Day 2, and I feel that I was able to share my opinions and ask questions more actively. On Day 1, I mostly spoke only when someone asked me directly, but on Day 2, I was able to speak up on my own... I feel that this was a sign of my growth."

— Bunkyo Student #1

"In comparison with day 1, I was able to facilitate the discussion better and utilize English in an easier and more reasonable way. This experience contributed to the significant growth in myself in terms of self-expression ability and breaking the silence."

— Bunkyo Student #2

Key Insights

- 4/4 students reported growth in English confidence and communication competence
- Students shifted from speaking only when addressed to initiating discussion
- Digital tools (ChatGPT, subtitles, translation apps) used as adaptive compensation strategies
- Shared personal/national knowledge (e.g., SNS in disasters) enabled confident contribution
- Bunkyo #4: "Being able to exchange opinions with people around the world who are in the same generation was extremely meaningful."

AIT (Japan): "AIT (Japan): COIL as Workplace Rehearsal"

"Few people took the initiative to lead the meetings, so it took time to set deadlines for the investigation and compile the information." (So he had to make one by himself)

— AIT Student #2 (on unclear coordination)

"In mechanical design and similar fields, opportunities to speak with factory personnel on-site arise, I believe [OISC] will help ensure smooth progress in planning."

— AIT Student #2 (on future workplace use)

Key Insights

3/3 Reported change | 1/3 Unclear coordination | 1/3 Workplace link | 5,5,2 Collaboration

- **Unclear coordination:** One student mentioned the "bystander effect." Driver was missing lead role.
- **Workplace framing:** Engineering students linked experience to factory-floor/on-site communication.
- **Lower barrier:** Reported as "less resistant to using English," not just improved speaking.
- **Adaptive translation:** "I speak while translating." AI-assisted use as a cross-institution pattern.
- **N=3 variation:** Scores 5, 5, 2 show very different experiences, supporting differentiated design.

IMPLICATIONS

What This Means for COIL Design



Differentiated Language Support

Normalize Diverse English Explicit reassurance helps learners from mistake-stigmatizing cultures feel welcome to communicate.



Platform Diversification

Don't rely on a single asynchronous tool. WhatsApp isn't universal. Build in structured check-in protocols.



Structured Facilitation Training

Facilitators need tools for managing silence and drawing out high-context communicators without creating discomfort.



Pre-COIL Cultural Orientation

Orientation on high/low-context communication could accelerate DMIS movement students only reach mid-program.



Extended Format

A longer timeline allows deeper relationship-building and more complete intercultural development.



Context-Sensitive Design

UCU's wartime context shows COIL must account for infrastructure inequality and emotional weight some carry.

Conclusion

Technology enabled. Culture shaped outcomes.

- English proficiency was a barrier for all 40 students — but how it manifested was culturally specific
- Asynchronous digital platforms consistently underperformed; platform assumptions (WhatsApp) compounded failures
- Japanese high-context norms created observable asymmetries in COIL groups that design must actively address
- Ukrainian students demonstrated transformative growth even under extreme contextual constraints
- Bunkyo University students confirm all major findings: English as universal barrier, Japanese passivity norms, DMIS movement toward Acceptance, and adaptive digital tool use as a coping strategy
- Every participant reported intercultural development — COIL works, but differentiated design makes it work better

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