



Intercultural sensitivity development among university students engaged in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated changes in the intercultural sensitivity levels of South African university students pre- and post-engagement in a six-week collaborative online international learning (COIL) project with students from a Mexican university. Collaborative online international learning is an educational pedagogy that enables students located across the globe to work together on learning activities through the use of digital technologies. This research paper addresses the paucity of empirical studies focused on the development of intercultural sensitivity among South African tertiary students, specifically in the context of online (virtual) collaboration. The research aimed to explore whether engagement in a COIL project can enhance intercultural sensitivity. Using a small-scale quantitative pre- and post-survey design (n=12), the study adopted Chen and Starosta's (2000) intercultural sensitivity scale to investigate potential changes in five dimensions: interaction attentiveness, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction engagement. The findings indicated statistically significant median differences with regard to the dimensions of respect for cultural differences and interaction enjoyment, whereas the other dimensions revealed no statistically significant changes. The study noted the promise of a COIL initiative within the context of South African higher education, particularly given its multicultural society and transformation agenda, to foster intercultural awareness. The study advocates for a more scaffolded conceptualisation of intercultural sensitivity development concomitant with immersive teaching modalities and increased engagement.

Keywords: Collaborative Online International Learning, Intercultural Sensitivity, University Students

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) today operate within an increasingly globalised educational context, with international partnerships and collaborations playing a critical role in the development of an HEI's internationalisation agenda. Collaborative online international learning (COIL) has emerged as a key player in terms of augmenting internationalisation by fostering new pathways for digitally-enhanced academic partnerships. As an innovative educational pedagogy, COIL facilitates engagement between students and staff across different geographic locations, within varying social, economic,

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political and cultural contexts.¹ Such engagement encourages intercultural communication, collaboration and an awareness of global perspectives.

South Africa's HEI sector continues to experience challenges associated with, for example, access, finance, student accommodation, work readiness, quality issues and transformed curricula.² Additionally, for many South African tertiary students, access through traditional pathways to international exchange programmes is not always possible. In this context, COIL can be viewed as a potential avenue through which students can experience internationalisation. COIL projects allow South African students, the majority of whom continue to face disparities due to historical disadvantages, to participate in global learning without facing the cost barriers associated with international travel.

The International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) and British Council Report provide critical insight into the internationalisation agenda of South African universities.³ The report highlights that "the idea of internationalisation is the integration or the incorporation of the intercultural dimension into teaching and learning." The report mentions intercultural dimensions such as Africa Day celebrations and festivals that promote interculturality by showcasing diverse cultural practices. Internationalisation also focuses on the inclusion of global perspectives in the curriculum, and the report emphasises how this is essential in terms of preparing students for the globalised world, as it encourages "intercultural competence, international engagement, and a sense of global citizenship". COIL is one example through which internationalisation of the curriculum and the development of intercultural collaboration between staff members and students can be fostered. Specifically, COIL provides an opportunity for South African university educators and students to acquire global competencies, including intercultural sensitivity as a core skill.

The inclusion of COIL in the curriculum is also aligned with the strategic goals described in the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) National Policy Framework for Internationalisation.⁴ The strategic goals outlined in the policy include the improvement of South African higher education globally (without compromising national relevance); the development of mutually beneficial international partnerships with a focus on Global South partnerships; the promotion of meaningful international mobility and exchange for both faculty and students; the improvement of international research collaboration and co-creation of knowledge; and an ethical internationalisation approach that reflects and acknowledges South Africa's apartheid history. Within this context of South Africa's focus on internationalisation, the study aimed to provide insight into the importance of COIL (as a mechanism through which internationalisation goals could be achieved) by evaluating the development of intercultural sensitivity amongst South African students pre- and post-COIL engagement.

Wang et al. explain that most research on intercultural competence (cognitive and emotional) and international learning initiatives focuses on documenting whether change has occurred in participants and neglects to examine "who we were in the first place, before we engaged in an internationalised educational experience."⁵ The significance of this study is that it contributes (with empirical evidence) to the potential of a COIL project to improve intercultural sensitivity in the context of South Africa. Furthermore, the study adds to the growing scholarship on COIL as an innovative educational pedagogy, foregrounding the importance of such virtual initiatives.

¹ Robert O'Dowd, *Internationalising Higher Education and the Role of Virtual Exchange* (Routledge, 2023).

² Arthur Reynolds and Vusani Moyo, "Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of South African Higher Education: Towards a Research Agenda," 2024, 152–73, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-630-7_9.

³ Felix, Obey Maringe et al., *British Council Report on Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints* (Pretoria: International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), 2024).

⁴ Department of Higher Education and Training, "Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa," *Department of Higher Education and Training*, 2019.

⁵ Felix Wang et al., "Beliefs, Events and Values Inventory Assessment of Global Identity: Implications and Applications for International, Cross-Cultural and Transformative Learning," in *Cultural Competence and the Higher Education Sector* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 83–113, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5362-2_6.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Sensitivity

Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman define intercultural sensitivity as the “ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences.”⁶ According to Bennett, discrimination, in this context, refers to the ability to distinguish cultural differences that tend to predominantly relate to differences with respect to cultural values and behaviours.⁷ Melle and Ferreira explain that intercultural sensitivity outlines the standard ways in which individuals perceive, interpret and engage across cultural differences.⁸ Intercultural sensitivity begins with recognising and realising authentic cultural differences, which tend to be reflected in how individuals engage and communicate with one another. Chen and Starosta highlight two common misconceptions about intercultural sensitivity: firstly, although intercultural sensitivity is connected to cognition (thinking), affect (emotions), and behaviour (actions), in intercultural conditions, it essentially involves an individual’s emotional reactions – how one feels about cultural differences.⁹ It is not only about thinking and actions – it is primarily about the emotional ability to be receptive (open to) and appreciative of cultural diversity and people from other cultures. To be authentically interculturally sensitive, one must want to engage with people from different cultures in a positive, respectful manner.

Secondly, intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence are often viewed as identical concepts, but Chen and Starosta clarify that although they are related, they remain distinct constructs in that intercultural awareness is an understanding of cultural differences at a cognitive level and forms the basis for the development of intercultural sensitivity, which then proceeds to intercultural competence and the actions of appropriate behaviour across cultural settings. Deardorff adds that intercultural competence considers the broader application of attitudes, behaviours and knowledge in order to develop effective cross-cultural communication.¹⁰

Byram further emphasises this distinction by explaining that whilst sensitivity is a foundational trait, competence, on the other hand, calls for critical cultural awareness and the capacity to navigate between perspectives.¹¹ What is important to note here is the cultivation of the emotional underpinnings of intercultural interaction, which is further argued for by Leask, who states that competence without sensitivity could potentially only mask the dominant cultural assumptions beneath the gloss of polite interactions.¹² These differing understandings highlight a gap regarding the emotional shift that is essential for intercultural development. In terms of a distinct understanding of intercultural sensitivity in relation to the emotive context, Chen and Starosta define the concept as “an individual’s ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behaviour in intercultural communication.”¹³ The essential point of intercultural sensitivity is thus an individual’s aspiration to appreciate cultures that are different from one’s own.

Intercultural sensitivity thus includes open-mindedness, respect and a readiness to acknowledge and question any self-bias and self-prejudice. Given this view, and the context of an increasingly globalised world, the critical importance of intercultural sensitivity cannot be overstated. Without such skills, effective communication can face barriers such as cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. As universities progress towards internationalising of their curricula and developing of global citizenship skills amongst faculty and students, understandings of how students and staff perceive intercultural

⁶ Mitchell R. Hammer, Milton J. Bennett, and Richard Wiseman, “Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity: The Intercultural Development Inventory,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 27, no. 4 (July 2003): 421–43, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(03\)00032-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(03)00032-4).

⁷ Milton J Bennett, “Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity,” *Education for the Intercultural Experience* 2 (1993): 21–71.

⁸ Jonathan Van Melle and Marco Maia Ferreira, “An Essay about Intercultural Sensitivity and Competence in Higher Education,” *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 4, no. 2 (March 31, 2023): 149–55, <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2023.4.2.624>.

⁹ William Starosta, “A Review of the Concept of Intercultural Sensitivity,” 1997.

¹⁰ Darla K. Deardorff, “Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization,” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 241–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>.

¹¹ Michael Byram, *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence (Multilingual Matters)* (Multilingual Matters, 1997).

¹² Betty Leask, *Internationalizing the Curriculum* (Routledge, 2015).

¹³ Guo-Ming Chen and William J Starosta, “The Development and Validation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale,” 2000.

engagement, especially in a virtual context, are thus relevant and important. The main aim of this study is to evaluate whether South African students' participation in a COIL project led to any measurable changes in their intercultural sensitivity levels. The study focus is particularly important given the paucity of research on South African students' intercultural sensitivity development pre- and post a structured COIL engagement.

Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity

There are various models or theoretical perspectives that can be used to measure intercultural sensitivity, with the notable ones identified as Bennet's Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), Bhawuk and Brislin's Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI); Chen and Starosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) and Ang et al's Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS).¹⁴ Bennet's DMIS process proposes that an individual can evolve effectively, cognitively and behaviourally, from ethnocentric stages to ethnorelative stages. Bennet presents six key processes: (i) denial, (ii) defence, (iii) minimisation, (iv) acceptance, (v) adaptation and (vi) integration. Although universally recognised for its contribution to measuring intercultural sensitivity, the process presents some problems in terms of operationalisation (in part due to the lack of a proper instrument or scale) for empirical studies. Bhawuk and Brislin's ICSI model evaluates a person's readiness to adapt and thrive in intercultural contexts and is premised on the individualism-collectivism theoretical perspective.¹⁵ Initially designed for use in expatriate business contexts, the scale has since been used in other contexts, but is limited in terms of evaluating emotional (affective) engagement and transformation. The ICSI model focuses more on one's cultural orientation rather than emotional awareness. Ang et al's CQS is widely used in workplace and professional contexts and includes a partial or moderate affective component, focusing more on the motivational dimension.

Chen and Starosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) measures intercultural sensitivity, focussing on the affective construct and is rooted in intercultural communication theory. The ISS emphasises the affective domain through the conceptualisation of sensitivity as an emotive propensity to engage with different cultures. Intercultural sensitivity, according to Bosuwon is thus an "affective process, whilst intercultural awareness is a cognitive process, and intercultural adroitness is a behavioural process."¹⁶ Any lack of intercultural sensitivity can thus result in ineffective, or even prohibit, intercultural communication. The ISS measures the dimensions of (i) interaction engagement, (ii) interaction confidence, (iii) respect for cultural differences, (iv) interaction enjoyment and (v) interaction attentiveness, which are well-suited for evaluating an individual's emotional and affective readiness to engage in intercultural settings. These five dimensions are aligned to gauge the emotional preparedness of students to participate in a COIL project, and also compare levels of intercultural sensitivity pre- and post-project participation. Kim explains that the interaction confidence dimension assesses an individual's self-confidence and comfort when involved with people from different cultures; interaction engagement is an individual's openness to communicate with people from different cultures; interaction enjoyment refers to an individual's satisfaction derived from intercultural interactions; interaction attentiveness relates to how individuals focus and actively listen to people from different cultural backgrounds and lastly, respect for cultural differences relates to one's appreciation for and positive recognition of diverse cultures.¹⁷

The model's theoretical underpinning and focus on the emotional components mentioned above are thus appropriate and relevant to evaluating the development of intercultural sensitivity (and affective growth) amongst South African university students pre- and post-COIL project engagement. These

¹⁴ Milton J Bennett, "A Developmental Approach to Training for Intercultural Sensitivity," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10, no. 2 (1986): 179–96; Dharm P S Bhawuk and Richard Brislin, "The Measurement of Intercultural Sensitivity Using the Concepts of Individualism and Collectivism," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 16, no. 4 (1992): 413–36; Chen and Starosta, "The Development and Validation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale.,"; Soon Ang et al., "Cultural Intelligence Scale," *PsycTESTS Dataset*, December 9, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1037/t24375-000>.

¹⁵ Bhawuk and Brislin, "The Measurement of Intercultural Sensitivity Using the Concepts of Individualism and Collectivism."

¹⁶ Takwa Bosuwon, "Social Intelligence and Communication Competence: Predictors of Students' Intercultural Sensitivity.," *English Language Teaching* 10, no. 2 (2017): 136–49.

¹⁷ Min-Sun Kim, "World Peace through Intercultural Research: From a Research Culture of War to a Research Culture of Peace," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 36, no. 1 (January 2012): 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.11.009>.

components are not viewed as abstract dimensions, but rather, they evaluate how an individual engages in actual intercultural settings, of which COIL is one example. Consider how, when students collaborate during an online international learning project with students from a different country, an important component highlighted during the exchange is willingness – a willingness to communicate and make an emotional investment during the intercultural engagement. The ISS also measures tangible growth in the students' emotional development and not only in their understanding of intercultural communication.

COIL pedagogy and intercultural sensitivity can therefore be linked through the affective situations developed through formal, structured intercultural engagement. COIL is not only exposure to students from other (different) cultural contexts; rather, it involves collaboration on joint assessments, co-creation of understanding and shared reflection that cross socio-cultural and linguistic borders. These elements that define a COIL project are aligned with the ISS dimensions, as students are encouraged to respect cultural differences, remain attentive, develop their confidence in intercultural engagement, and also enjoy the engagement. As such, a pre- and post- COIL project is conceptually relevant for investigating potential shifts in the affective dimensions linked to intercultural sensitivity.

Fritz et al. documented the reliability and validity of the ISS scale using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with a sample of 541 university students in Germany and noted that the scale bears strong cross-cultural transferability and internal consistency.¹⁸ Soltani used the scale to evaluate the development of intercultural sensitivity amongst Erasmus and non-Erasmus Turkish university students.¹⁹ The study revealed that students who participated in Erasmus programmes scored significantly higher on the scales of interaction engagement, interaction confidence and respect for cultural differences. Zhang and Han adopted the ISS model to compare intercultural sensitivity levels amongst 437 students from two universities (a mid-sized state university and a small private college) in the United States of America.²⁰ The study revealed that students at the mid-sized state university were more interculturally sensitive in the dimensions of respect for cultural differences and interaction confidence than students at the private college. Zhang and Han attribute this to the size of the university – students in the mid-size institution were more exposed to multiculturalism, and this could have contributed to the increased levels of intercultural sensitivity.

Loebel et al. validated and adapted the model with a sample of Chilean tertiary students (n=427) using both confirmatory and exploratory factor analysis.²¹ The study highlighted the strength of the scale in terms of assessing affective (emotional) dimensions and also confirmed the applicability of the model to a different cultural setting. Chen and Hu used the model to evaluate the intercultural sensitivity of university students (n=375) in China.²² The findings showed high levels of intercultural sensitivity amongst students. These studies are noteworthy because they confirm the applicability of the ISS model to different cultural contexts and its strengths in terms of evaluating affective dimensions of intercultural competence. The ISS model is thus an appropriate model to evaluate the students' levels of intercultural sensitivity pre- and post-a virtual intercultural collaboration, such as COIL. In particular, the literature has revealed that most studies on the ISS model are located outside of the African (and South African) context, focusing more on European and Asian contexts. Additionally, there is limited research on the application of the ISS model to measure intercultural sensitivity development within virtual (or online) settings. Although some studies focus on cross-cultural communication and intercultural competence, the focus is more on behavioural and cognitive shifts, rather than on any emotional changes.²³ This study

¹⁸ Wolfgang Fritz, Antje Mollenberg, and Guo-Ming Chen, "Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity in Different Cultural Context.," 2001.

¹⁹ Ali Soltani, "Impact of Ethnic Background on Iranian EFL University Students' Intercultural Sensitivity Level," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 136 (2014): 222–27.

²⁰ Yunying Zhang and Eun-Jeong Han, "Comparative Study of Intercultural Sensitivity of College Students in Two Distinctive Institutions in the U.S.," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 48, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 477–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2019.1662825>.

²¹ Maura Paulina Klenner Loebel, José Luis Gálvez-Nieto, and Juan Carlos Beltrán-Véliz, "Factor Structure of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) in a Sample of University Students from Chile," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 82 (May 2021): 168–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.03.015>.

²² Hong Chen and Bo Hu, "On the Intercultural Sensitivity of University Students in Multicultural Regions: A Case Study in Macao," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (February 23, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1090775>.

²³ Kristin Severinsen Spieler et al., "A Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Experience in Early Childhood Teacher Education," *Education Sciences* 15, no. 4 (April 15, 2025): 494, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040494>; Simone Hackett et al., "The Effectiveness of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) on Intercultural Competence Development in Higher Education,"

attempts to address this research gap by contributing to understandings of intercultural sensitivity (and thus, emotional awareness) development amongst South African students pre- and post-participation in a structured COIL initiative.

Collaborative Online International Learning

The COIL concept was developed in the United States by the State University of New York (SUNY) in 2006. The innovative pedagogical concept spread to Europe and the rest of the world, in part because of the expanding COIL partner networks.²⁴ Although COIL could be viewed as a virtual exchange programme, what sets it apart is the term collaboration, which does not always feature in virtual exchange projects. As cited by Hackett et al., the foundational components of COIL include international collaboration; course co-design and co-facilitation; focus on intercultural learning and issues of the curriculum; assessments that include group reflection and individual responsibility; flexibility in terms of the discipline partnership; timeframe of a course duration of between four and 15 weeks, which includes real-time sessions; participation grades or credits; no participation costs and no international travel requirement for participation in a COIL course. As emphasised by Lowyck and Pöysä, in addition to an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary focus, the courses must include a precise selection of COIL partners, along with careful curriculum construction and course execution.²⁵

In addition to the expanding global reach of COIL, there has been an expansion of COIL research in varied methodologies and contexts. For example, Spieler et al. found that Canadian and Norwegian university students showed more cross-cultural communication abilities, self-confidence, cooperation and higher intercultural awareness after they had engaged in a COIL project.²⁶ The study by Vahed and Rodriguez's study illustrated how South African and American dental technology university students improved their communication skills and grew more culturally sensitive after a COIL experience.²⁷ Both studies indicate developments in terms of intercultural awareness, but do not specifically address an emotional component, nor were there any baseline measures.

Other studies, such as Sasné Grósz et al., used a pre- and post-test methodological approach to track changes in cultural awareness between Hungarian and American (United States) students engaged in a COIL project.²⁸ The study addresses the affective (emotional) domain and notes significant changes thereof. Similarly, Sabadash et al. used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the influence of intercultural communicative competence on Ukrainian and German students before and after a COIL project.²⁹ The findings showed an enhancement of students' intercultural communicative competence through COIL participation and also aligned such development to the promotion of responsible global citizenship. In doing so, the study broadens the potential of a COIL project beyond individual influence to one that speaks to global responsibility.

Hackett et al. evaluated the development of intercultural competence of American and Dutch undergraduate students who engaged in a COIL project through a quasi-experimental approach.³⁰ The study observed that the students showed significant improvement in cultural intelligence in cognitive, behavioural, motivational, and metacognitive areas compared to the control group, which did not show

International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education 20, no. 1 (January 24, 2023): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-022-00373-3>.

²⁴ Jon Rubin, "Embedding Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) at Higher Education Institutions," in *Internationalisation of Higher Education*, 27th ed., vol. 2, 2017; Simone Hackett et al., "Defining Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Distinguishing It from Virtual Exchange," *TechTrends* 68, no. 6 (November 21, 2024): 1078–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-024-01000-w>.

²⁵ J Lowyck and J Pöysä, "Design of Collaborative Learning Environments," *Computers in Human Behavior* 17, no. 5–6 (September 2001): 507–16, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0747-5632\(01\)00017-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0747-5632(01)00017-6).

²⁶ Spieler et al., "A Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Experience in Early Childhood Teacher Education."

²⁷ Anisa Vahed and Krista Rodriguez, "Enriching Students' Engaged Learning Experiences through the Collaborative Online International Learning Project," *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 58, no. 5 (September 3, 2021): 596–605, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2020.1792331>.

²⁸ Annamária Sasné Grósz, Dávid Máté Hargitai, and Barbara Zsuzsanna Varga-Dani, "International Collaborative Online Marketing Course in Practice," *The Hungarian Journal of Marketing and Management* 58, no. 2 (2024): 51–60.

²⁹ Diana Sabadash, Silke Riegler, and Nataliia Kuravska, "Integrating Intercultural Communicative Competence into Tertiary Education for Sustainable Development: A Coil Project-Based Perspective," *Journal of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University* 12, no. 3 (2025): 186–206.

³⁰ Hackett et al., "Defining Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Distinguishing It from Virtual Exchange."

significant improvement in these areas. Gustine et al. also focused on how COIL develops intercultural competence among Indonesian and Japanese students, noting that students showed growth in the areas of attitudes, skills and knowledge.³¹ In terms of South African COIL research, Garizurieta-Bernabe and Prakaschandra investigated a COIL project among South African and Mexican university students and found that upon completing the project, South African and Mexican students indicated improvement concerning digital literacy and communication ability, as well as intercultural sensitivity.³² These studies point to the potential of COIL projects to change the overall intercultural competence and awareness, of which intercultural sensitivity is a dimension. The literature highlights a gap in COIL studies from the African context – and thus South Africa – as well as the paucity of research focusing on instruments such as ISS to measure shifts in the affective domain, further emphasising the significance of (and need for) the present study. Additionally, the pre- and post-survey design (which is not widely evident in COIL studies) enables an assessment of any change over a period of time.

South Africa-México COIL Project

Postgraduate diploma students at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa engaged in a COIL project with undergraduate students from the Universidad Veracruzana in México. Thirteen students from México and fifteen students from South Africa participated in a six-week project. The project provided students with an opportunity to develop cross-cultural understanding and collaboration skills in an online learning environment by exploring aspects such as the academic, social, and cultural dimensions of student life in México and South Africa. The project used a synchronous and asynchronous teaching design structured to promote intercultural communication and participation. In the first week, students participated in a synchronous Zoom session, during which brief introductions were shared, and the project was discussed. Then they were placed in mixed-country groups and jointly completed a cultural quiz to gain a deeper understanding of their respective cultural contexts. In weeks two and three, each group compared and contrasted similarities and differences as a university student in their respective country. This included uncovering aspects of university life such as daily routines, social dynamics, academic approaches, and extracurricular involvement. Weeks four and five involved group discussions on how universities and students can help promote cross-cultural diversity and global citizenship, with each group proposing three recommendations. In week six, students participated in a virtual gift exchange activity and reflected on their COIL experience.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a quantitative methodological approach, adopting Chen and Starosta's intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) to evaluate potential variances across two time points (pre- and post-COIL engagement).³³ The instrument is a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with 24 items that assess intercultural sensitivity in terms of five dimensions: (i) interaction engagement, (ii) interaction confidence, (iii) respect for cultural differences, (iv) interaction enjoyment and (v) interaction attentiveness. No modifications were made to the survey (see Appendix one). The survey was administered at two stages – prior to engagement in the COIL project and directly post-COIL engagement to evaluate potential changes in students' intercultural sensitivity levels. Due to ethical considerations, the study only focused on the potential development of intercultural sensitivity levels amongst the South African students. The South African students were invited to participate in the study through oral discussions during lecture sessions and by e-mail communication. Ultimately, twelve out of the fifteen cohort students volunteered to participate in the research, achieving a participation rate of 80%. The participation rate is appropriate for a study of this nature, which focuses on small-scale educational research.

³¹ Gin Gustine et al., "Developing Efl Students' Intercultural Competence And Communication Through The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) APPROACH," *TEFLIN Journal - A Publication on the Teaching and Learning of English* 36, no. 1 (July 16, 2025): 61–76, <https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v36i1/61-76>.

³² Jessica Garizurieta-Bernabe and Rosaley Prakaschandra, "Using the COIL Pedagogy as a Strategy for Improving the Virtual International Educational Experiences of Students: North-South Hemisphere Case Study," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 26, no. 2 (July 28, 2025): 397–411, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14697874241256620>.

³³ Chen and Starosta, "The Development and Validation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale."

Students who engaged in the COIL project with the Mexican students were purposively selected to participate in the study. Each student signed a consent form, which included key information about the study, at the pre- and post-survey stages. The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the university to conduct the study. Using an established research instrument (which has been peer-reviewed and tested for cross-cultural applicability as discussed in the literature review section of this paper) enhanced the construct validity of the study. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with the benchmark for acceptable reliability set at 0,70. Reliability was maintained through a systematic and consistent approach in administering the pre- and post-surveys and adopting the instrument without any modifications. The design of the study is specific to evaluate potential within-group variability in relation to the COIL participation. The combined use of an established research instrument, the high participation rate, validity and reliability measures and the ethical procedures followed ensured that the findings of the study are credible, trustworthy and valuable from a contextual perspective.

Given the small sample size, the Shapiro-Wilk test was treated as the primary normality test for the difference scores. The research design did not include a control group, but rather relied on the responses received from the students pre- and post-COIL engagement. This limitation was considered when interpreting the results, especially in instances of modest statistically significant changes or where construct reality was weak. Paired t-tests were used in cases where the assumption of normality was not violated and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to analyse and compare pre- and post-COIL engagement medians. To evaluate internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct at the pre- and post-test intervals. These results are cautiously interpreted as in small samples, reliability results are not always stable.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Of the 12 South African students, eight were female (66.7%), and four were male (33.3%). Six students (50%) were aged 25-29, five students were aged 35-39 (41.7%) and one student (8.3%) was aged 30-34 years. Home language was collected as a demographic variable, with three students indicating English as their home language, seven indicating isiZulu, one indicating isiXhosa and one indicating Setswana. Some linguistic diversity is present; however, given the small sample size and uneven distribution, home language was viewed as a descriptive contextual variable and not used for any comparative analysis. This can be viewed as a limitation given that one's home language can influence one's baseline intercultural sensitivity. The construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. To estimate Cronbach's alpha, negatively worded items were reverse coded to align with the other items under the same construct. Table 1 below shows the items that were recorded under each construct at the pre- and post-COIL stages.

Table 1: ISS constructs, Item composition and Reverse-coded items

Construct	Items included in construct	Reverse-coded Items
Interaction engagement	1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, 24	22
Respect for cultural differences	2, 7, 8, 16, 18, 20	2, 7, 18, 20
Interaction confidence	3, 4, 5, 6, 10	4
Interaction enjoyment	9, 12, 15	9, 12, 15
Interaction attentiveness	14, 17, 19	None

The constructs and the corresponding Cronbach's alpha values are depicted in Table 2 below. The constructs interaction engagement and respect for cultural differences have acceptable values (reliability threshold of 0,70 at both time points) pre- and post-undertaking the COIL project. Interaction confidence pre-COIL project has an acceptable consistency value (0,846) but a weak internal consistency after the project (0,506). The interaction confidence post-COIL project (0,506), interaction attentiveness pre- (0,64) and post-(0,195) the COIL project have poor Cronbach's alpha values. This indicates the inability of the items to adequately converge to explain the respective constructs. These findings should therefore be interpreted as more exploratory rather than as strong evidence of stable change at the construct level.

Table 2: Cronbach's alpha values

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	
		Pre	Post
Interaction engagement	7	0,737	0,735
Respect for cultural differences	6	0,856	0,791
Interaction confidence	5	0,846	0,506
Interaction enjoyment	3	-0,271	0,439
Interaction attentiveness	3	0,64	0,195

Table 3 below shows the descriptive statistics of the corresponding constructs after aggregation of the respective items. The minimum level of interaction engagement was 3,29, with a maximum of 4,11 and a mean value of 4,11 before the COIL project. However, after the COIL project, the minimum increased to 3,43 with a mean value of 4,26. The level of interaction confidence of the students had the smallest mean measure among the other measures, with a mean of 3,83 prior to the COIL project. However, this increased to 3,93 after participating in the COIL project. Interestingly, the mean difference in the level of interaction attentiveness is the same pre- and post-COIL project, remaining unchanged at 4,28. On the other hand, the maximum score remained unchanged (at 5) pre- and post-COIL participation. In terms of the respect for other cultures dimension, both the mean (4,51 to 4,64) and minimum (3,67 to 4,51) scores increased pre- and post-COIL engagement. Interestingly, the maximum score remained unchanged at 5. For the interaction enjoyment dimension, the minimum (3,67 to 4) and mean (4,31 to 4,58) scores showed a significant increase pre- and post-COIL participation. The maximum score remained unchanged (at 5) pre- and post-COIL participation.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the constructs

Statistic	Interaction engagement		Respect		Interaction confidence		Interaction attentiveness		Interaction enjoyment	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Minimum	3,29	3,43	3,67	3,83	2,6	3,2	3	3,33	3,67	4
Maximum	5	4,86	5	5	4,6	4,4	5	5	5	5
Mean	4,11	4,26	4,51	4,64	3,83	3,93	4,28	4,28	4,31	4,58
Median	4,07	4,14	4,75	4,83	4	4	4,33	4,33	4,33	4,67
Std. Deviation	0,44	0,41	0,47	0,39	0,63	0,37	0,53	0,51	0,36	0,38

The Shapiro-Wilk test for normality of the differences of the measures pre- and post-COIL participation was conducted (see table 4 below), which is considered more reliable for a sample size of $n=12$. The results indicate that the null hypothesis of the differences are normally distributed is rejected at the 5% level of significance for respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, and interaction enjoyment. However, it is not rejected for interaction engagement and interaction attentiveness.

Table 4: Test for normality of the differences between the variables, pre- and post-COIL project

Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Difference respect for cultural differences	0,330	12	0,001	0,648	12	0,000
Difference interaction engagement	0,257	12	0,028	0,901	12	0,166
Difference interaction confidence	0,197	12	0,200*	0,831	12	0,022

Difference interaction attentiveness	0,167	12	0,200*	0,924	12	0,321
Difference interaction enjoyment	0,291	12	0,006	0,802	12	0,010

Table 5 shows the results of the paired t-test to assess if there was a significant difference in the mean interaction engagement of the students pre- and post-COIL project. The mean difference in the level of interaction engagement pre- and post-COIL project is -0.15. This is not statistically significant (t – statistic = 0,81, p -value = 0,44) at the 5% level of significance. Therefore, although the mean level of interaction engagement was lower before the COIL project (4,11), it is not statistically different from the mean level of interaction engagement post the COIL project (4,26).

Table 5: Paired t-test for interaction engagement pre- and post-COIL project

	Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
				Lower r	Upper				
Pre-interaction engagement-Post interaction engagement	-0,15476	0,66298	0,19139	-0,576	0,26648	-0,809	11	0,218	0,436

There is a statistical insignificant difference (t -statistic = 0, p – value = 1) in the level of interaction attentiveness pre- and post- COIL project as described in table 6 below, with the mean level estimated at 4,28 in table 3.

Table 6: Paired t-test for interaction attentiveness pre- and post-COIL project

Table 6: Paired t test for interaction attentiveness pre- and post-COVID project									
	Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
				Lower	Upper				
Pre-interaction attentiveness - Post-interaction attentiveness	0	0,739	0,213	-0,469	0,469	0	11	0,500	1,000

Considering that the null hypothesis of normality is rejected at the 5% level of significance for respect to cultural differences, interaction confidence, and interaction enjoyment, the non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was carried out to assess if there was any significant difference in the level of respect for cultural differences (differences in medians). The results in Table 7 show that the null

hypothesis of equality of the level of respect for cultural differences pre and post the COIL project is rejected at the 5% level of significance (t-statistic = 21, p-value = 0,02). Therefore, there is a difference in the level of respect for cultural differences with the mean level of 4,51 and median of 4,75 prior and a mean of 4,64 and median of 4,833 post the COIL project. The increase in median level of interaction with respect from 4,75 and 4,833 is statistically significant the increase is modest and should be interpreted in relation to the small sample size.

Table 7: Wilcoxon signed-rank test for respect for cultural differences pre- and post-COIL project

Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Summary	
Total N	12
Test Statistic	21,000
Standard Error	4,500
Standardised Test Statistic	2,333
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	0,020

Similarly, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was carried out to assess if there was any significant difference in the level of interaction confidence. The results in Table 8 show that the null hypothesis of the median of differences of the level of interaction confidence prior and post the COIL project being equal to 0 is not rejected at the 5% level of significance (test statistic = 33,000, p – value =1,000). This is expected as the median level of interaction confidence pre and post the COIL project was 4, with the mean level of 3,38 pre the COIL project and a mean of 3,93 post the COIL project. This means that the differences in the levels of interaction confidence amongst students are not statistically significant pre and post COIL engagement.

Table 8: Wilcoxon signed-rank test for interaction confidence pre- and post-COIL project

Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Summary	
Total N	12
Test Statistic	33,000
Standard Error	11,079
Standardised Test Statistic	0,000
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	1,000

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test in table 9 shows that the null hypothesis of the median of differences between pre-interaction enjoyment and post interaction enjoyment equals 0 is rejected at the 5% level of significance (t-statistic=21,000, p-value=0,026). The median level of interaction enjoyment prior to the COIL project was 4,33, while the median level of interaction enjoyment post the COIL project was 4,67, and this difference is statistically significant at the 5% level of significance. The result is cautiously interpreted given the weak reliability co-efficient for the construct.

Table 9: Wilcoxon signed-rank test for interaction enjoyment pre- and post-COIL project

Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Summary	
Total N	12
Test Statistic	21,000
Standard Error	4,704
Standardised Test Statistic	2,232
Asymptotic Sig. (2-sided test)	0,026

DISCUSSION

This study evaluated whether participation in a COIL project resulted in any changes in the intercultural sensitivity levels of a selected group of South African students. The research design allowed for the comparison of intercultural sensitivity levels at the pre- and post-COIL participation stages. The Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed statistically significant median increases for the dimensions of respect for cultural difference and interaction enjoyment ($p = 0,020$ for respect; $p = 0,026$ for interaction enjoyment). The descriptive statistics and follow-up tests showed a modest positive change in the sensitivity levels of students in both these dimensions. The small increases in the mean values (respect for cultural differences: 4,51 to 4,64 and enjoyment: 4,31 to 4,58) reflect an upward trend with regard to respect for other cultures and intercultural enjoyment. These findings should be read with caution as the mean variations were modest (respect: 4,51 to 4,64; interaction enjoyment: 4,31 to 4,58) and the sample was very small.

The standard deviation for the respect dimension decreased from 0,47 to 0,39, which points to a more consistent and uniform appreciation amongst the students and indicates a possible convergence of students' attitudes and perspectives on cultural differences. The dimension showed a robust baseline respect for cultural differences, indicating a pre-existing respect for cultural differences which reflects South Africa's multicultural and diverse context. This is confirmed by Pastena et al.³⁴ They state that high levels of intercultural sensitivity, such as the dimension of respect for cultural differences, are related to multicultural societies where cultural diversity is appreciated. Another element to consider is that of age. Given that all participants in the study were between 25 and 34 years old, this suggests a level of maturity and higher levels of intercultural experiences and interactions, again reflecting South Africa's diverse multicultural society in which students co-exist.

There was a statistically significant increase in the sensitivity levels regarding the dimension of interaction enjoyment pre- and post-COIL participation. The median scores increased from 4,33 to 4,67, which implies openness with regard to the COIL experience. Interaction enjoyment amongst the students was high (mean = 4,31 and median = 4,33) prior to participation in the COIL project, and increased slightly (respectively: 4,58 and 4,67), suggesting that overall, students' sensitivity levels with respect to the dimension showed growth. Such an increase has also been documented by Hackett et al. They noted a growth in the motivation (which evaluates interaction enjoyment with people from different cultures) dimension in students from the United States and the Netherlands who participated in a COIL initiative. Hackett et al. regard enjoyment as part of the intercultural motivation and as a precursor to more meaningful engagement.³⁵ These results indicate a modest post-COIL improvement in interaction enjoyment and respect for cultural diversity. The increase in both dimensions also suggests that an educational initiative such as COIL that is premised on intercultural communication can be viewed as playing an important role in fostering respect and interaction enjoyment for cultural diversity.

³⁴ Andreana Pastena, Albert Sesé, and Mireia Trenchs-Parera, "Impact of Plurilingualism and Previous Intercultural Experience on Undergraduates' Intercultural Sensitivity at the Start of University Studies," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 45, no. 5 (May 27, 2024): 1662–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.2013854>.

³⁵ Hackett et al., "Defining Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Distinguishing It from Virtual Exchange."

In relation to the South African higher education context, such increases are particularly important given that the sector continues to face transformation challenges and struggles with inequalities shaped by structural, historical and socio-political factors.³⁶ The increases in the dimensions of respect for cultural differences and interaction enjoyment following participation in the COIL project may suggest that structured, formal virtual interaction can strengthen selected affective dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. However, the development of intercultural sensitivity, which falls under the broader category of intercultural competence, is a gradual and ongoing process. It does not develop naturally, but rather is an evolutionary process of personal learning and growth.³⁷ Therefore, a COIL project over a limited time frame can be viewed as one initiative that contributes to further intercultural maturation.

The dimensions of interaction confidence, interaction attentiveness and interaction engagement did not show statistically significant gains. The mean score for interaction confidence increased minimally (3,83 to 3,93), but this was not statistically significant. Interestingly, the Cronbach's alpha decreased from acceptable (0,846) to poor (0,506). Interaction attentiveness also demonstrated weak construct reliability. This is surprising considering that the ISS model has been tested and shown to demonstrate reliability across various cultural contexts. For example, a study conducted by Chen and Hu documented that the Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs were above 0,70.³⁸ The difference between Chen and Hu's study and the current study is the sample size – Chen and Hu collected 375 surveys for analysis, whilst this study had a small sample size (n=12). Therefore, the findings should be interpreted cautiously and specifically in relation to this sample, rather than as conclusive evidence of the stability of the intercultural sensitivity scale in the South African COIL context. The poor Cronbach's alpha results for the constructs of interaction attentiveness, interaction confidence and interaction engagement in the present study could thus possibly be attributed to the small sample size (n=12), differences in cultural interpretation and/or the possibility that the items did not function as a cohesive construct in the selected sample.

Although the interaction engagement levels showed a modest mean increase (4,11 to 4,26), the t-test result ($p = 0,44$) indicates that the change was not statistically significant. The pre-COIL participation mean and median (4,11 and 4,07 respectively) scores show that although the students already demonstrated relatively high levels of engagement, participation in the project did not result in a statistically significant increase. Furthermore, the non-significant results for interaction confidence and interaction attentiveness should not be treated as evidence that participation in a COIL project does not affect these dimensions. Rather, measurement stability limits conclusive interpretations.

The interaction attentiveness dimension remained unchanged; the mean value was stable at 4,28 pre- and post-COIL engagement and was not statistically significant ($p = 1,00$). The lack of significant results may also be explained by the duration of the intervention and possible ceiling effects. Interaction attentiveness and engagement had relatively high scores pre-COIL participation, which may have limited any measurable growth over the six-week project duration. These results therefore call for a cautious interpretation although COIL participation may serve as a starting point for developing affective openness, deeper confidence, engagement and sustained attentiveness need more deliberate scaffolding and time in developing meaningful intercultural connections.

Another key factor to consider is that of language. The Méxican students spoke Spanish and had some English language proficiency. The South African students did not speak Spanish and were fluent in English. Students used translation applications during the project to improve communication and facilitate collaboration whilst working on project activities. However, these were not always effective due to limitations in translation accuracy and delayed communication. The linguistic mismatch between the cohort of students could have possibly constrained the depth, spontaneity and clarity of engagement. This is confirmed by Kramsch, who explains that language not only represents but also actively

³⁶ Bonginkosi Hardy Mutongoza, "Nothing but Noise: Challenges Impeding the Transformation of Higher Education in South Africa," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research* 7, no. 1 (March 7, 2025): a06, <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.1.06>.

³⁷ Nerrolyn Ramstrand et al., "Interventions and Evaluation of Intercultural Competence of Students Enrolled in Higher Education – a Scoping Review," *Education Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2026): 212–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2024.2344871>.

³⁸ Chen and Hu, "On the Intercultural Sensitivity of University Students in Multicultural Regions: A Case Study in Macao."

constructs one's social and cultural reality when interacting with others.³⁹ Without shared language fluency, the potential for cultural immersion is therefore diminished. This language barrier may have affected cognitive focus (attentiveness), lowered students' willingness to participate (engagement), and impacted their sense of competence (confidence).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the South African higher education context, marked by diversity, multiculturalism and ongoing transformation, COIL is a promising pedagogical initiative. However, the successful implementation of such initiatives should not only be determined by statistical significance, but by meaningful, long-term intercultural trust building, attentiveness, and mutual understanding. The study thus recommends a more scaffolded conceptualisation of intercultural sensitivity development that allows for longer (more than six weeks) COIL engagement based on the understanding that intercultural competencies are gradually developed. Additionally, the inclusion of reflective tasks during strategic phases of the COIL project is recommended to encourage students' self-awareness of intercultural sensitivity. To address language barriers, encourage the use of multimodal communication tools such as shared whiteboards and documents, infographics and slide decks to facilitate communication. Future research would greatly benefit from larger samples, control groups and a mixed-method research design.

CONCLUSION

The study suggests that a short-term COIL intervention can bring about modest affective attitude change in the dimensions of respect for cultural differences and interaction enjoyment among a small sample of South African university students. The absence of statistically significant change in the dimensions of interaction confidence, interaction attentiveness and interaction engagement indicates that the development of intercultural sensitivity is a gradual process and cannot automatically be guaranteed following a short-term intercultural engagement (such as a COIL project). Taking into account the small sample size and the weak reliability coefficients for some constructs, the findings of this research should be read as exploratory and not as generalisable. Within the South African context, it is important to note that some students may start a COIL project with relatively high levels of openness and respect because of their lived experience in a multicultural society. Deeper levels of engagement, confidence and attentiveness, however, require more purposively driven and scaffolded pedagogic conceptualisation that includes immersive teaching modalities and reflective tasks. COIL does hold promise, but any related contribution to the development of intercultural sensitivity is likely to depend on the duration, quality and depth of the project design itself.

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³⁹ Claire Kramsch, "Third Culture and Language," *Contemporary Applied Linguistics* 1 (2009): 233–54.

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