

6 OIL for English for business: the intercultural product pitch

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Abstract

The Intercultural Product Pitch OIL (Online International Learning) Project set out to broaden the international experience for a small cohort of undergraduate students by enabling them to collaborate on a series of activities that would raise intercultural awareness and improve key communication skills. The project involved collaboration between International Business and Marketing students based in the UK and students from institutions in Belgium and Finland. This paper describes the key stages of this OIL project, highlighting how it can enhance students' global learning experience.

Keywords: online international learning, intercultural competence, virtual mobility, virtual learning environment.

1. Introduction

Internationalising the curriculum has become a key objective in Higher Education (HE) in the UK with many institutions in recent years focusing on different strategies to “prepare graduates to live in and contribute responsibly to a globally interconnected society” (Higher Education Academy, 2016, n.p.).

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A crucial component of the internationalisation agenda in HE is the development of intercultural competence as defined by a group of intercultural scholars in the Delphi study (Deardorff, 2004, cited in Deardorff, 2006) as: “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 247-248).

Increasing student mobility to develop intercultural awareness is recognised as a core element of internationalisation strategy, but it is not always possible for large numbers of students to travel abroad. Therefore, creating opportunities for learners to engage in online communication with their peers in different parts of the world has become more commonplace. The benefits of OIL projects are outlined by Villar and Rajpal (2016): “[v]irtual mobility initiatives such as OIL are one of the most flexible, versatile and inclusive approaches in the provision of experiential learning opportunities aimed at facilitating students’ intercultural competence development” (p. 81).

Many recent studies have pointed out other positive features that collaborative online learning can offer. Marcillo-Gomez and Desilus (2016) placed an emphasis on the “unique experience” (p. 34) that Mexican and American students took from an online collaboration focusing on the similarities and differences in their cultures. In the student-driven MexCo Project (Orsini-Jones et al., 2015), it was noted that the Mexican and British participants created “a sense of ownership in the knowledge-sharing process” (p. 225).

It has been pointed out, however, that initiating and offering virtual exchanges is not always a straightforward process. O’Dowd (2013) investigated the extent to which barriers to the integration of telecollaboration in HE still exist and found that the most significant obstacles were the time needed to set up and run exchanges and the problems encountered with assessment in relation to institutional requirements. Some strategies were put forward on how to overcome these obstacles, such as building reliable partnerships and adapting to the local institution’s needs. Other studies by Stier (2006) and Castro, Woodlin, Lundgren, and Byram (2016) have focused on the wider dimensions of internationalisation and student mobility.

Even though there are challenges when setting up and running virtual mobility exchanges, this paper aims to illustrate how OIL projects can offer rewarding outcomes through careful planning, focused objectives, and collaboration.

2. Method

The overall framework was based on three basic requirements for OIL projects set out by Villar and Rajpal (2016) and summarised below:

- Students engage with international peers on discipline-related content.
- Collaborative activities must have internationalised learning outcomes.
- There must be a reflective component based on the intercultural interaction.

In this OIL project, Malaysian, Chinese, and Indonesian International Business students in the UK established links with their Belgian or Finnish peers online using a tailor-made Moodle platform, then delivered a product pitch presentation before responding to another group's output. Cooperating with their peers in other countries on this collaborative online project would broaden these students' international experiences and aimed to address the research questions specified below:

- How can online international exchanges develop and raise intercultural awareness?
- What key communication skills for the workplace can be enhanced by online international exchanges?

Participation in the process would also provide useful opportunities for critical reflection and enhance individual employability profiles.

The different stages and participant tasks of the OIL project are outlined below:

Stage 1: Establish contact

- Build relationship/find out about different cultural contexts

Stage 2: Task: online simulation scenario

- Pitch a product/service from your country to a new global market

Stage 3: Feedback

- Respond to other presentations
- Feedback provided by subject experts

Stage 4: Reflection

- Reflect on feedback and experience

More details on each stage will be provided in the following section.

3. Results and discussion

The participants communicated via Open Moodle, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), or OneDrive (used in the second iteration), platforms which allow students to post questions and comments as well as being a repository for the video presentations. In the first stage of the project, the students introduced themselves by creating and uploading presentations about their courses, learning contexts, and interests. This generated initial interactions containing a variety of cultural content, for example:

Finnish student (Fs): “Can you tell us something about student free time activities in Malaysia?”.

Malaysian student (Ms): “In my city Kuala Lumpur, local students’ free time is usually spent hanging out in mamak stalls (a 24 hour restaurant)

where the foods are cheap... What local Finnish dishes would you recommend to foreigners?”.

(Fs): “My favourite Finnish food is ‘rye bread’ or a candy called ‘salmiak’”.

In the second version of the project, students used Skype™, giving a synchronous and more natural element to the interaction illustrated by the exchange below:

Belgian student (Bs): “Can you give us a rare fact about your home country?”.

Indonesian student (Is): Probably our traffic jams... it’s really bad so if you come to our country you’ll be like, what’s going on, it’s traffic jams everywhere... and also we have lots of islands... maybe thousands, if you know Bali..?”.

Bs: “Have you been to Bali?”.

Is: “Yeah... numerous times”.

Bs: “I’m jealous [laughter]”.

The main communicative task in this OIL project involved the students pitching a product from their own country to a new global market, allowing them to draw on their own culture but also encouraging research into a different cultural context. This task would add a different dimension to the students’ learning experience as it would help prepare them for professional contexts via activities involving meaningful, practical engagement. This echoes the sentiments voiced by [Evans \(2013\)](#) and “the need for a simulation-based approach” (p. 291), as suggested in his study of task design for workplace communication.

For the OIL task, the Malaysian cohort pitched a tea product to the Finnish group who decided to promote a lunchtime dining service. The Chinese group

launched a traditional body treatment product (‘fire cupping’) on the Belgian market, whilst the Belgian students put forward a launderette-café specifically targeting Chinese students. After conversing with their peers, the Indonesian students noted that “it seems most of students in Belgium study hard and party hard...”, and decided to pitch a herbal remedy for hangovers and other ailments.

The pitches were varied in format – some were standard PowerPoint presentations, others incorporated humorous and creative visual elements. After uploading the presentations to the VLE, the students responded to the pitches which resulted in some interesting interactions. For instance, it was pointed out to the Belgians that promotion via well-known social media sites would not be possible in China due to restricted internet access. Other exchanges demonstrated constructive intercultural communication, as in the response to the fire cupping pitch:

Bs: “Perhaps there is an extra product you could sell (like an additional oil treatment) to rehydrate the skin? This solution could end up increasing profits”.

Chinese student (Cs): “We found your advice very thoughtful. We think it would be great to cooperate with skin care brand to promote new product bundles”.

Another group responded favourably to the herbal remedy pitch by the Indonesian group as they felt it filled a gap in the market:

Bs: “This original product does not exist in Belgium yet... and we think this could be very popular with students”.

A distinctive feature of the project was that feedback on the pitches was provided by tutors with expertise in different areas – cultural, business, and language/delivery. It was felt that insights from three perspectives would be beneficial for the students. Sample comments are shown below:

Intercultural: “Particularly impressive was the research you did on tea products in Finland which shows a higher understanding of why intercultural awareness is a key quality in business pitching”.

Business/marketing: “The target market that you suggested is rather broad and only defined in terms of demographic characteristics”.

Language/delivery: “Consider other ways to engage the audience in a pitch, e.g. product ‘demo’, alternatives to the ‘traditional’ PPT presentation”.

4. Evaluation and outcomes

Qualitative data on the participants’ reflections on the OIL project was collected using questionnaires, online forums, and semi-structured interviews. Staff coordinators’ evaluations of their students’ involvement and the benefits of the project were also gathered. Many comments indicated that participants felt that business communication skills had been advanced and the project was perceived to have a relevance to future employment:

Ms: “The most useful part in this project is presentation... because it helps me to improve confidence in a professional context which I will face in my further career”.

The target of raising intercultural awareness was emphasised and some of the unique elements offered by the project were also highlighted:

Bs: “It provided an exclusive opportunity for us to interact with students from another country and cultural background. It definitely raised my cultural awareness and the differences between others”.

Feedback from the different partner coordinators also illustrated a range of positive elements in the exchanges:

“Giving them the insight that language-learning is effective and satisfying once you can apply the skill in real life”.

“This online contact makes the learners more conscious than just reading and studying about cultural differences”.

“The project topic itself required them [Finnish students] to think with a more global view and to communicate with other students online, which allowed them to interact without feeling embarrassed”.

“Presenting a strong domestic product or service and thus increasing some pride of a community/company you are part of”.

The feedback given by staff and student participants emphasises that the OIL project offers many opportunities and benefits, meeting key individual and institutional requirements, as summarised below:

- Interaction with peers from other countries to raise intercultural awareness.
- Integration of business/marketing knowledge and English language skills.
- Development of key communication skills, teamwork, and critical reflection.
- Engagement in digitalised learning: video editing and online exchanges.
- Enhancement of employability profiles.

Collaborations involving different international partners and contexts do present challenges in terms of timings and staging (holidays and exam periods, for example), so developing a more closely structured timescale is an area to work on. The use of an intercultural sensitivity scale (pre-/post-project) would allow a more systematic analysis of key data. It is also important to keep up with

fast-moving advances in technology and worth considering the latest digital platforms and digital indicators of accomplishment, such as Open Badges. There are also plans to enlarge the scale of the OIL project to incorporate a wider global and cultural span.

5. Conclusions

Although there are considerable challenges and complexities in setting up and implementing virtual mobility collaborations, the positive feedback on this OIL project clearly supports the development of an innovative internationalised curriculum that allows students to engage in digitalised learning in order to improve business communication skills and enhance intercultural competence.

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Flipping the blend through MOOCs, MALL and OIL – new directions in CALL
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