

From Lingua Franca to Multilingual Place-Making: Autonomy and Positioning in Online International Collaboration

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Abstract

This paper examines students' multilingual experiences in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programs. In 2022–2023, the author, as a teacher-researcher, designed and facilitated two COIL programs involving 52 university students from Japan and Malaysia who engaged virtually in group discussions. Participants brought diverse linguistic backgrounds to the interaction, with English serving as the lingua franca. Drawing on three key notions—translingualism, the social construction of learning places, and multilingual identities—the study scrutinizes how learners negotiated their identities and evaluated their language practices, participation, and engagement. Data were collected through seven post-program interviews, complemented by activity logs, online whiteboards, and reflection papers. The interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent, were analyzed using positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) as the analytic framework. The findings highlight the complexity involved in constructing multilingual learning places. Students reported varied evaluations of first-language use, differing levels of appreciation for each language, and a tendency to view competence in a single language as more advantageous for identity negotiation. These insights reveal persistent challenges posed by the monolingual habitus while underscoring the importance of recognizing multilingualism and translingualism as essential conditions for fostering collective autonomy in COIL contexts.

Keywords: COIL, translingualism, positioning theory, multilingual identity

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Introduction

The below reflection from a participant in a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program seems to capture the spirit of intercultural engagement.

Difficulty is always language, but I think it's okay because that's how this program is. Even though we have language barriers, we cannot give up to communicate, and at the end, the ideas we have, we can share even we have, like, language barriers. (An excerpt from interview with M University Student, October 4, 2022)

Despite linguistic challenges, students strive to communicate, collaborate, and co-construct meaning beyond differences by drawing flexibly on multiple language resources for communication and learning. However, even though put in a positive sense as a challenge and joy to overcome, the notion of language as “barriers” held by the participants raised an alert for the author, a teacher-researcher, to revisit and critically look at the participants’ experience around language used during the International Collaborative Learning (ICL) projects.

In this increasingly interconnected world, higher education institutions are expanding international exchange programs. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed international educational practitioners to go online, which diversified both practitioners and participants. As the number of practitioners grows, the aims of ICL programs have diversified. These programs no longer target solely on second/foreign language acquisition but increasingly emphasize learning how to interact productively across cultural and linguistic differences while deepening topical knowledge. The scope has expanded significantly, now addressing a wide range of topics and social issues including immigration, religion, gender roles, and national responses to global crises such as the COVID-19 (O’Dowd, 2021, p. 217).

As the number of participants grows, the linguistic resources they bring to ICL contexts also become increasingly diverse. English often serves as the lingua franca, but students possess differing levels of language proficiency, and there is greater diversity in their first, second, and additional languages. English becomes both a bridge and a barrier, enabling communication while simultaneously creating an uneven degree in students’ participation, causing mixture of feelings. The instructor, therefore, must carefully design activities that are inclusive and scaffolded, ensuring that students with lower proficiency are not marginalized or silenced, while at the same time students with more proficiency also feel satisfied with their engagements.

Although language learning may not be the central focus in such programs, language remains deeply intertwined with learning processes. In multilingual environments, linguistic dynamics become complex, and participants must “be resourceful to enable their interactions” (Naicker et al., 2021, p. 505). Recognizing these multilingual realities urges practitioners to shift how language is conceptualized, not as a barrier to overcome but as a resource that shapes interaction, identity, and learning.

Literature Review

To examine and understand the essence of multilingual ICL context, three concepts are briefly reviewed: 1) Translingualism, 2) Social Construction of Learning Places, and 3) Multilingual Identities.

Translingualism

Translingualism is a notion which challenges the monolingual view of languages. While monolingualism see languages as fixed and separated from one another, Translingualism promotes the fluid use of multiple linguistic resources for meaning making.

The term translingual conceives of language relationships in more dynamic terms. The semiotic resources in one's repertoire or in society interact more closely, become part of an integrated resource, and enhance each other. The languages mesh in transformative ways, generating new meanings and grammars. (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 8)

While Monolingualism grants legitimacy and authority to "native" speakers, translingualism encourages people to reclaim the agency of language.

As participants in ICL bring diverse linguistic backgrounds to their collaborations, they often rely on multiple linguistic resources to co-construct meaning. In such environments, it is important to challenge deficit-oriented perspectives that position non-dominant languages, or less proficient English use, as barriers. By adapting the notion of Translingualism, teachers can encourage learners to strategically draw on their full linguistic repertoires.

Social Construction of Learning Places

Second perspective is understanding of place as social constrictions. In this notion, classroom is a space where actions occur and as actions are performed, space is transformed into a learning place. Kocatepe (2018) argues that autonomous language learners are learners who can "exercise the capacity to transform a classroom into a place for learning by evaluating and shaping social practices and classroom identities in ways that create effective participation in meaning making processes" (p. 146). Furthermore, Lamb and Vodicka (2018) discuss the collective autonomy of language learning as "language communities autonomously finding spaces where they can challenge the monolingual habitus, collectively creating the conditions in which multilingualism can be normalized and interlingual encounters nurtured" (p. 15).

This perspective is particularly relevant in ICL settings, where students must navigate both linguistic and cultural diversity to co-construct productive learning environments. Autonomous learners in ICL contexts are not only responsible for their own learning but must also negotiate shared meanings, practices, and norms with peers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Multilingual Identity

Thirdly, research on language and identity increasingly recognizes that language is not merely a communicative tool but a social practice through which meanings, relationships, and identities are constructed. Norton (2013) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world" (p. 45) and understanding learners' histories and lived experiences is therefore essential for creating learning environments where learners can claim the right to speak (p. 179).

While Norton's framework emerged from second language research, Forbes et al. (2021) extend it to multilingual contexts by introducing the notion of multilingual identity. They argue

that multilingual identity is shaped by learners' experiences with language, their evaluations of different languages, and the emotions associated with multilingual learning (pp. 434–435).

If we understand all ICL participants, though to varying degrees, as language learners engaged in creating a multilingual learning place, this conceptualization of language learning as identity construction aligns closely with the aims of ICL/COIL programs.

The Study

Research Question

In ICL, where English functions as the lingua franca but is not the first language of participants, students regularly move among English, their own languages, and sometimes their partners' languages. How learners evaluate these practices, and how they feel about using their linguistic resources, impacts their identity positions, participation, and engagement, therefore need to be examined to understand multilingual place-making in ICL contexts. Hence, this study investigates students' multilingual experiences in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programs focusing on questions below.

- How did learners negotiate language & identity in COIL?
- How did they transform a space into a place for multilingual learning?

Local Context

In 2022–2023, the author, working as a teacher-researcher, designed and facilitated two COIL programs involving 52 university students from Japan and Malaysia who participated in virtual group discussions. Students were placed into mixed groups consisting of participants from both J University and M University. Each group engaged in a series of collaborative tasks, with topics designed to facilitate interaction, encourage reflective dialogue, and promote the co-construction of knowledge. The themes and the number of participants for each program were as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes and Number of Participants in COIL Programs

Program	Theme	# of participants	
		J University (# interviewed)	M University (# interviewed)
Summer, 2022	Designing a SDGs lifestyle	12 (3)	18 (2)
Spring, 2023	Designing an intercultural learning space	5 (2)	18 (0)

The two programs differed in their group management structures. In the 2022 program, students remained in the same group for the entire duration of the program and were responsible for coordinating their own online meeting times. In the 2023 program, on the other hand, students were assigned to a new group for each topic, and meeting times were pre-determined by the instructor.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and supplementary program artifacts. Semi-structured interviews with seven participants were conducted to elicit the participants' views of the process of learning place transformation with their own words. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis. To complement the interview data, additional artifacts, such as activity logs, online whiteboards, reflection papers, were also collected throughout the programs and these materials were often revisited during and after interviews to deepen contextual understanding and to support interpretive analysis. Interviews with J university students were conducted in Japanese and translated into English by the author. The list of interview participants is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

List of Interview Participants (all names are pseudonyms)

Name	Affiliation	Program	Self-Evaluation of the groupwork
Aisha*	M University	2022	Positive
Lee*	M University	2022	Positive
Rin*	J University	2022	Positive
Haruto	J University	2022	Negative
Takako	J University	2022	Positive
Ami	J University	2023	Positive
Itsuki	J University	2023	Negative

Note. Aisha, Lee and Rin were groupmates in the 2022 program.

Positioning Theory and Identity Negotiation

For analytic framework, the positioning theory was used. Positioning refers to “the assignment of fluid ‘part’ or ‘roles’ to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social act” (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 17). It is a notion based on social constructionism which understand person’s action and identities are constructed/gave meaning in interaction with others. Same utterance or speech act can mean or function differently in each context, and there exist social powers. “Positioning, shaped by power and many factors, is the dynamic construction of personal identities and an essential feature of social interaction. Therefore, analyzing positioning in written and oral discourse is a way of uncovering participants identities” (Kayı-Aydar, 2019, p. 22).

Findings and Discussion

Students draw on language resources, at least, in English, Japanese, and Malay during groupworks. However, the frequency or attitude of using those three languages had certain connotation. In this section, experiences of participants were illustrated under four themes: 1) “Not good at English” or “resourceful” person, 2) Multilingual identity, 3) Transforming a space into a place of multilingual learning, and 4) Complexity of Stereotypes. The interview excerpts demonstrate how they described their feelings and experiences around languages, and how that became places of struggles to claim the right to speak and negotiate their identities in their group works.

“Not Good at English” or “Resourceful” Person

When participants were asked to evaluate their collaboration, the first challenge they consistently mentioned was language. Students from both J University and M University referred to English as a barrier, although they conceptualized “language difficulty” in different ways. For some, it was about linguistic proficiency; for others, it was more about meaning-making, pragmatics, and identity negotiation.

For Itsuki, a J University student, this was his first time participating in an international program. He first vaguely claimed that he was “not good at English” yet then described how he managed his participation and his uncertainty.

I often used chat. In the worst case, I asked for help via chat. I also used screen sharing, showing websites, and translation sites to manage somehow. It’s too bad that I couldn’t rely much on Google, the great teacher. (Itsuki)

Even though he first vaguely claimed that he was “not good at English”, he was still communicating using English, but in written form using the chat functions, or the translation site. As the interview continued, he also mentioned:

I wasn’t sure if what I am thinking was the same as what they were thinking. Even though we use the word ‘internship,’ I didn’t know whether it referred to the same thing, same ‘internships’ commonly understood in Japan or in Japanese. (Itsuki)

This clearly shows that he was aware of cultural differences, he still demonstrated his engagement in using at least two language knowledge despite his lack of the confidence in his understanding. Even though his own evaluation about his language proficiency is “not good at English,” he was still communicating using both Japanese and English resources.

On the other hand, Rin, who had difficult time previously when she participated in another international exchange program, employed similar make-up strategies as Itsuki, felt positive about her contribution to the groupwork as she was able to convey her message.

English skill may have some influence, but I think it’s more about my mentality, that I was able to maintain calm, like it’s ok if they don’t understand my English, I mean using my facial expression and other thing, if I can convey what I want to say, that is good enough. Before, I felt like I must speak English, but in the end, I was not able to say anything, so this time, I tried to focus on expressing my thinking, so I think that is why it was better this time. (Rin)

Her claim is confirmed by her groupmate Lee, who have friends in Japan and had previous experience talking with Japanese students.

At first, we were shocked and then we kept on asking questions and then after she (Rin) realized that there was a misunderstanding, she looked like a bit panicked at the beginning and then she would speak out some of Japanese words and then, after that she would start to try long ways like typing in English or speaking English or showing another proof to strengthen conversation. Mostly they (Japanese students) can write very good in English. (Lee)

Lee did not position Rin as “lacking English ability,” even when a misunderstanding occurs. Instead, she emphasizes Rin’s resourcefulness and ability to clarify using multilingual strategies.

Although, both Itsuki and Rin described not being able to express themselves fully and reliance on non-linguistic tools, their evaluation of their own contribution was different. Translingual practices enabled their participation, yet Itsuki’s understanding of spoken “English” as the legitimate lingua franca continues to shape his negative self-evaluation, while Rin, who consciously accepted translingual practice, was positioned as resourceful person and had positive evaluation about herself.

Multilingual Identity

The way participants described their or their counterpart’s first language had different connotation. Aisha from M university, who had participated in a same program a year before, stated:

Sometimes it's very hard to talk with them because I'm not good at Japanese, but I know basic Japanese things. But if I want to make a conversation, it's very hard for me to...
(Aisha)

Even though Aisha put it in a negative way, she claimed that she possesses Japanese language resource and positioned herself as a multilingual speaker. However, she also mentioned not using Malay, because that creates a need for double translations.

We were not using Malay language, because for me, if you use Malay language and we need to translate it into English, then we need to translate it into Japanese, so you just use the English language... (Aisha)

Lee, who was also a multilingual speaker of Japanese, English, and Malay, shared very similar experience.

We seldom use Malay language because for Malay only Malaysian students understand, so we are more trying to use English. But when they (Japanese students) start in English, we also prompted that ‘you can use Japanese. Maybe we can understand,’ but they are not willing to use Japanese. They really stick to English because they want to learn English. (Lee)

This shows that even she encouraged the use of Japanese, Japanese students tried to use English only and Lee, herself also did not use Malay.

From these descriptions, we can understand, even though participants made effort to normalize translingual practice, both Japanese and Malaysian students limited the use of their first languages, for consideration to their groupmates, or preconceived notion of “English as lingua franca.”

Transforming a Space Into a Multilingual Learning Place

Lee noted the change in her Japanese groupmates attitude as groupwork unfolded, however:

First and second time, the Japanese students, although they are Japanese, but they are from different campus, so they also don't know each other. When they have problems with language, they will not seek help from the Japanese student. They will tend to want to search by themselves. But at the end of the meeting. They will start to ask the Japanese student, the other Japanese students, to help them. And then when they are stuck in language, the other students and also help them to translate into English. (Lee)

Lee recognized the increased use of Japanese language by her Japanese groupmates. Her observation is confirmed by Rin's description; Rin also shared about her experience of using Japanese with her Japanese groupmate for time to time.

While Rin perceived her utilizing her Japanese language resource in positive way, she also noticed not only her own behavioral change but also Malaysian groupmates' behavior.

Well, Malaysian students started to speak slowly, so it became easy to listen, maybe I was also getting used to, and also we were looking at the Streetview while talking so it was easy to understand what we were talking about. (Rin)

These may indicate that, in the process of transforming a space to a place of learning, translanguaging practice could be reinforced.

Complexity of Stereotypes

There were several moments in the interview that students acting or positioned as acting cultural stereotypes, such as the belief that Muslim participants would not even allow others to talk about pork products or that Japanese participants are inherently shy. These assumptions created hesitation and nervousness. However, the influence of such culturally stereotyped images proved significant only in the initial stages of interaction. In contrast, the fixed image of what constitutes "a proper discussion" was more persistent and often led students to negatively evaluate their own language abilities.

Itsuki, Haruto and Takako shared similar view that a good discussion should involve deep synthesis of ideas, yet they felt unable to achieve such discussions. Itsuki and Haruto, who evaluated their own English proficiency negatively, attributed the failure as language problem. The following excerpt from Haruto's interview illustrates this point; he felt that while his group succeeded in generating diverse ideas, they were unable to "consolidate them into one," due to language difficulties.

Haruto: (looking at the group Padlet) This, we wrote this, oh I remember, we didn't write this beforehand, but we wrote down opinions while talking, the members who could not attend the meeting added up later, but I think we wrote this while in the zoom meeting

Kato: while talking

Haruto: shared our opinions and wrote them down, and then we tried consolidate to one, but that was very hard

Kato: is that so, what was difficult about?

Haruto: for example, I think I could do this if it was in Japanese, extract and summarize elements, but it was in English.

On the other hand, Takako, who had lived in the US during her childhood, shared a similar evaluation of her group's discussion outcome, but offered a different explanation for it.

Then I asked each person in their own field of expertise what aspects of the SDGs they were involved with. Since I was sort of the facilitator for Group 2, I made that call, gathered opinions, and then offered my own perspective based on my knowledge, like pointing out other aspects to consider. But honestly, critical opinions didn't really surface, so it ended up feeling more like exchanging ideas not like a proper discussion. [...] Japan seems to be pretty big on this (SDGs), though. I mean, here in Japan, you see SDGs Week or stuff like that covered a lot on TV... But I hear that overseas, it's not really like that. I guess it probably depends on the country. (Takako)

Takako, felt that she managed “to speak and navigate it well” and acted as the facilitator of the group, recognized her group’s difficulty not to language ability but to differences in knowledge or awareness of the theme across their respective societies.

Discussion

Across groups, participants drew on multiple semiotic resources: English, Japanese, Malay, gestures, chat writing, visuals, translation tools, and shared screens. These were not as separate from languages, but as an integrated repertoire of their translanguaging practices. This aligns with translanguaging theory, which conceptualizes communication as the orchestration of available linguistic and semiotic resources rather than switching among discrete languages.

For students with less English proficiency, however, participation required negotiating a balance between their desire to contribute and their perception of limited English proficiency. Their acceptance of a “not-perfect self” functioned as an emotional and identity strategy that enabled translanguaging, at the same time, allowing them to claim their right to speak in the place without striving for monolingual, native-like competence. Rin’s case exemplifies how identity is also socially co-constructed: Despite misunderstandings, her Malaysian peer described her as resourceful rather than limited.

Although participants engaged in fluid translanguaging practices, many continued to evaluate themselves through an “English as Lingua Franca” lens. This revealed a persistent ideological tension. Students frequently attributed communicative difficulties, groupwork challenges, and unsatisfactory outcomes to their lack of English proficiency. Even when Japanese or Malay resources could have supported communication, participants avoided using them out of a belief that English was the “proper” language for international work.

Thirdly, essentialized images of the other, creating hesitation and nervousness, was only constraints for early stages, but internalized fixed image of what constitutes an “academic” discussion, namely deep synthesis of ideas, impacted more persistently. When collaborative outcomes did not meet their expectation, less fluent participants blamed their individual language ability rather than task design or the constraints of online groupwork. Their perceived “failure” reflects the misalignment between their translanguaging practices and institutionalized norms of academic discussion.

ICL space was a space of struggle for identity and ideology. Translanguaging was normalized, yet it did not just happen by bringing people with diverse linguistic resource in one space. Translanguaging norms such as slowed pacing, rephrasing, use of visuals, mutual assistance across languages, gradually emerged, as participants together transformed a space to a place of learning. In doing so, there were always tensions, between translanguaging and monolingualism,

between ideal self and imperfect self, and between ideal image and reality of international collaboration.

Conclusion

The program functioned as an emergent place of translanguaging practices; a site where variety of linguistic resources were mobilized, identities were negotiated, and cultural assumptions were reshaped. Yet learners internalized monolingual norms shaped how they interpreted their own success and participation. These findings point to the need for more intentional pedagogical design that recognizes and supports translanguaging practices.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that ChatGPT 5.1 was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from ChatGPT 5.1, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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