

*Fostering Intercultural Competence Through an Italian-Japanese Business  
Language Course*

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**Abstract**

Developing intercultural competence is an important goal of world language courses. One of the curriculum designs to foster intercultural competence includes collaborative online international learning (COIL). Although the benefits of COIL have been documented, finding international partners can be a challenge. The present study addresses this issue by partnering students of two different languages, Italian and Japanese, at Emory University. We developed a business language course consisting of learners of Italian and Japanese to enhance students' intercultural competence through collaborative work. The class met twice a week, once together in English to discover the business culture of Italy and Japan, and another time separately to learn business language skills in Italian or Japanese. Language lessons employed a task-based language teaching (TBLT) pedagogical approach and community-engaged activities so that students could work on real-life tasks. Tasks in our course were centered around Business Night preparation and execution. Business Night is an event in which students engage with representatives from Italian and Japanese companies in the local community. Seven students of Italian and nine students of Japanese participated in the study. Students' learning reflective essays were the main data source which were analyzed qualitatively to identify emerging themes. Results showed that students gained intercultural competence through collaboration with students of the other language. Furthermore, students gained intercultural competence through observation of two faculty of different cultural backgrounds collaboratively teaching a course.

Keywords: COIL, Business Language Course, Intercultural Competence

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## **Introduction**

In an era of increasing globalization, effective communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries is essential for success in international business. This paper examines the development and implementation of the course Business Communication in the Globalized World: The Case of Japan and Italy, co-designed and co-taught by the authors of this paper. Offered for the first time in Spring 2024, this course aims to help students develop essential business-related vocabulary, best practices in professional communication and etiquette, collaborative communication skills, and intercultural competence.

The course design integrates multiple instructional approaches, including lectures conducted in English, language-specific lessons in Italian or Japanese, task-based and community-engaged learning activities. Utilizing the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) framework, the course fosters collaboration and intercultural exchange, enabling students to engage meaningfully with global perspectives in business communication.

A key feature of the course is its community-engaged learning experience, in which students conceptualized, organized, and executed the Italian and Japanese Business Night. This event served as a conference and networking opportunity, allowing students to interact directly with local business professionals from Italy and Japan, thereby applying theoretical concepts in real-world settings.

The following section provides a literature review on three foundational concepts of our pedagogical approach: COIL, intercultural competence, and community-engaged learning.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Framework and Its Implementation***

The COIL pedagogical framework facilitates virtual intercultural collaboration between students and faculty from different institutions worldwide. By integrating online communication technologies into coursework, COIL provides students with meaningful global learning experiences fostering the development of intercultural competencies and cross-cultural communication skills (Guth & Helm, 2010). Through structured collaboration with peers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, students engage in project-based learning that enhances their ability to navigate professional interactions in an international business environment.

While COIL offers significant benefits for intercultural learning, its implementation presents several challenges. One of the most prominent difficulties is time zone coordination, which can hinder synchronous communication and require scheduling flexibility. Additionally, curriculum alignment between collaborating institutions can be complex as courses often have distinct learning objectives, academic calendars, and assessment methodologies. Another common challenge is partner engagement as maintaining motivation and active participation across institutions requires sustained facilitation and institutional support (O'Dowd, 2023).

To address these challenges, we adapted the COIL model to our needs by partnering an Italian course with a Japanese course within the same institution instead of finding an

international partner. This approach eliminated time zone constraints, as both courses were scheduled during regular class hours. Additionally, operating within the same institutional framework facilitated seamless curriculum alignment, allowing faculty to closely collaborate in designing shared objectives and activities. The in-person component further enhanced student engagement, fostering a more cohesive and interactive learning environment, while maintaining the intercultural and collaborative benefits of COIL.

### ***Structured Implementation of COIL in Our Course***

Our adaptation of COIL follows the four key stages outlined by the SUNY COIL Center, ensuring a structured and immersive learning experience:

- (1) Icebreakers and Team Building – Students participated in interactive activities (i.e. self-introductions, games, storytelling) designed to develop a sense of community across language groups and increase engagement for effective collaboration.
- (2) Comparative Discussion and Cultural Analysis – Students engaged in discussions comparing business communication practices in Italy and Japan. These discussions deepened their intercultural knowledge and facilitated critical reflection on cultural differences in professional settings.
- (3) Collaborative Project Work and Problem-Solving – The project in question was the Business Night event. Working in teams, students applied their knowledge to real-world business challenges, engaging in joint event preparation that required cross-cultural communication and collaborative decision-making.
- (4) Reflection and Conclusion – Students participated in debriefing discussions to reflect on their learning and what their peers learned, critically assessing their intercultural growth and considering the professional applications of their newly acquired skills.

This structured approach allowed students to progress through increasing levels of intercultural interaction, culminating in a transformative learning experience. By implementing COIL within a single institution, while maintaining its core principles of intercultural collaboration, we successfully mitigated logistical challenges while providing students with globalized business communication experiences.

### ***Intercultural Competence***

As previously mentioned, the central objective of this course is to develop intercultural competence. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in a manner that is respectful, inclusive, and equitable. It extends beyond merely recognizing cultural differences; it involves fostering shared points of reference and demonstrating adaptability in both language and communication. Hammer (2015) defines intercultural competence as “the capability to shift one’s cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities” (p. 483). This dynamic skill set enables individuals to navigate cross-cultural interactions with sensitivity and awareness, essential for fostering meaningful global engagement.

Intercultural competence is a critical skill in today’s globalized business environment, where effective communication across cultural boundaries is essential for success. In the context of our course, which focuses on Italian and Japanese business communication, developing intercultural competence means equipping students with the ability to navigate professional interactions in culturally diverse settings. This involves not only linguistic proficiency but

also a deep understanding of cultural norms, values, and business etiquette. Both Italian and Japanese business cultures place a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships, but they differ significantly in communication styles, decision-making processes, and professional etiquette. Teaching business communication in these two languages requires not only linguistic training but also an emphasis on intercultural competence to help students navigate these differences successfully.

Developing intercultural competence in the context of teaching Italian and Japanese for business communication is essential for preparing students to navigate the complexities of international business interactions. By integrating language learning with cultural awareness and professional etiquette, our course ensures that students are not only linguistically proficient but also culturally adept, fostering their ability to communicate effectively and build relationships in diverse business environments.

### ***Community-Engaged Learning***

We integrated a community-engaged component into the course to provide students with meaningful opportunities to apply their learning in real-world contexts. This experiential approach enhances their understanding of business communication in intercultural settings, strengthens critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and fosters a sense of responsibility. Moreover, community-engaged learning creates a dynamic educational environment where students move beyond theoretical discussions and actively participate in professional and social exchanges. Through direct interactions with Italian and Japanese business professionals, students develop a deeper appreciation for cultural nuances in business communication, etiquette, and negotiation styles. These experiences not only reinforce linguistic and professional competencies but also cultivate adaptability and intercultural sensitivity—critical skills for success in today’s global economy.

Furthermore, community engagement encourages students to recognize the reciprocal nature of learning. While they gain valuable professional insights from industry experts, they also contribute fresh perspectives, demonstrating how academic knowledge can be applied in diverse, real-world scenarios. As Hartfield-Méndez (2013) asserts, “community-engaged learning can better prepare students for their future careers and their development as global citizens,” by actively participating in structured experiential learning, students become more culturally aware, socially responsible, and better equipped to navigate professional environments that require collaboration across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

### **Methodology**

During the semester, we conducted action research to further our understanding of the value of our innovative course design that incorporated a modified COIL method and community-engaged learning activities into business language courses.

### ***Research Questions***

Our exploratory qualitative study was guided by the following two research questions.

- (1) Can we produce COIL benefits such as fostering intercultural competence by combining two groups of students of different languages, instead of combining students from different institutions in two countries?

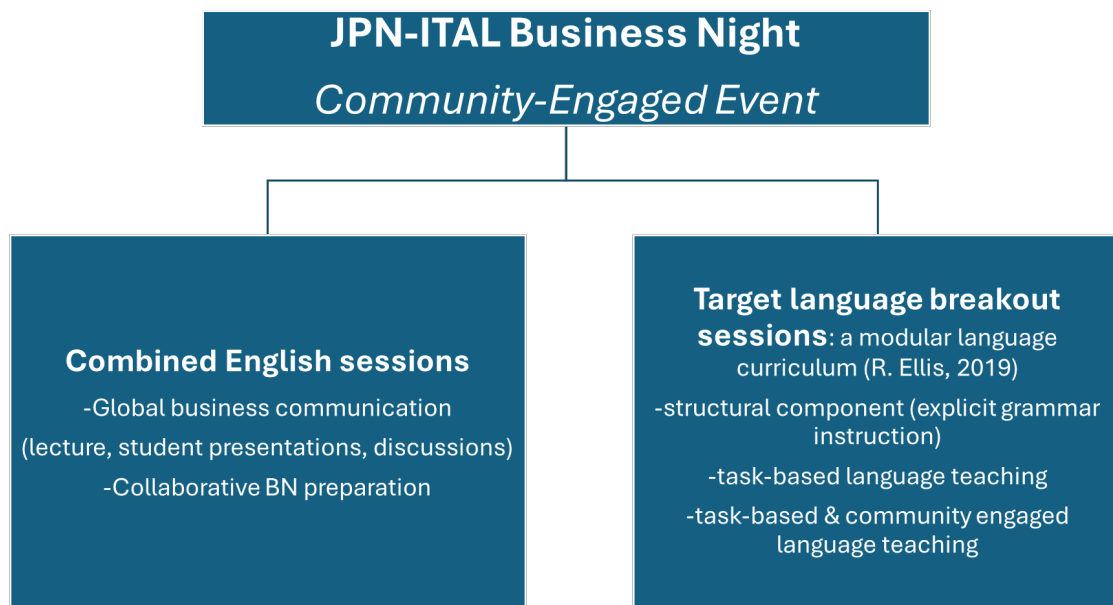
- (2) Through community-engaged learning, do students perceive improvements in their language skills or increased confidence in using the target language?

### ***Course Design***

Figure 1 below summarizes our course design, which incorporated community-engaged learning, task-based language teaching, and a COIL-like method in order to foster intercultural competence and second language development.

The class met twice a week, once together in English to discover the business culture of Italy and Japan, and another time separately to learn business language skills in Italian or Japanese. For our language classes, we created a modular curriculum following the work of Rod Ellis (2019). The curriculum was based on creating real world needs for students through community-engaged tasks, culminating with the main attraction of the course the “Business Night” event, a business networking event that brings together Italian and Japanese businesspeople, and students. Our language lessons employed a task-based language teaching (TBLT) pedagogical approach with a structural component to give grammar instruction related to business Japanese or Italian.

Figure 1: Course Design



### ***Participants***

Our study lasted for one semester. Seven undergraduate students of Italian and nine undergraduate students of Japanese participated in this study. Table 1 shown below presents the demographic information of our students. The majority, 11 out of 16 participants, were domestic students. Among them, there were two Japanese heritage speakers and five Italian heritage speakers. Students' proficiency levels ranged from intermediate to advanced. In the Japanese group, participants had completed second-, third-, or fourth-year Japanese courses, while the Italian group included students who had completed first-, second-, third-, or fourth-year Italian courses. Additionally, four students had previously studied abroad in Japan or Italy for a few months.

Table 1: Student Demographic Information Table

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Participant ID	Target language	Domestic/ international	Heritage	Courses completed
AF	Japanese	domestic	JPN	402
AP	Italian	domestic	N/A	102
BC	Japanese	domestic	N/A	302
CN	Italian	international	N/A	470
JC	Italian	domestic	ITAL	301
JM	Japanese	domestic	JPN	301
MC	Japanese	domestic	N/A	402
MK	Japanese	domestic	N/A	301
MW	Italian	domestic	ITAL	470
NE	Italian	international	ITAL	470
PV	Japanese	domestic	N/A	202
RS	Japanese	international	N/A	402
RSH	Italian	international	ITAL	302
SD	Italian	domestic	ITAL	201
TL	Japanese	domestic	N/A	302
WJ	Japanese	international	N/A	402

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## ***Data Analysis***

Our main data source was students' reflective essay of what they learned in this course. We conducted a qualitative content analysis using the software called NVivo to capture themes that emerged from the essays.

## **Results and Discussion**

Our study was guided by two research questions which we answered by qualitatively analyzing students' reflective essays.

Research Question 1 asked: *Can we produce COIL benefits, such as fostering intercultural competence, by combining two groups of students of different languages instead of combining students from different institutions in two countries?*

The findings suggest an affirmative answer. Instructor collaboration emerged as a significant factor in modeling intercultural communication. For instance, one Japanese language student reflected:

I think what provided the best learning about intercultural communication and business was not from the textbook ... or the business night speakers, but from seeing the two of you develop your working relationship and get more and more comfortable teaching together. Y'all exemplified both the differences that can exist at the beginning and how to work through those things. I find that genuinely very impressive, and even though it does not particularly pertain to business, it does take a lot of effort, and I think I would be wise to take some of the observations I made in class into future pursuits that have an intercultural focus. (Japanese student)

This reflection underscores the potential to teach students the skills necessary for collaborating with individuals from different cultural backgrounds without requiring engagement with someone residing abroad. By observing the instructors navigate and reconcile cultural differences in real time, students gained practical insights into intercultural competence that extended beyond theoretical knowledge.

These findings suggest that collaboration between faculty members within the same institution can effectively create opportunities for students to develop intercultural communication skills. Such intra-institutional collaborations provide a viable alternative to traditional COIL models that rely on partnerships across borders. This approach has the added benefit of circumventing logistical challenges associated with international collaborations, such as time zone differences and scheduling conflicts, while still fostering meaningful intercultural learning experiences.

Students also experienced meaningful intercultural competence development through their collaboration with peers and community business professionals. For example, a Japanese language student reflected, "[...], while we had been taught that Italians often carry a more relaxed, flexible attitude toward punctuality compared to the Japanese's stringent organization, watching the Business Night drag on ten or twenty minutes beyond the scheduled time was shocking" (Japanese student).

Collaborating with students from another language course provided valuable opportunities to understand what it means to work with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Many Japanese language students found it challenging to collaborate with Italian students, particularly in situations where punctuality was important. While discussions about cultural differences in punctuality between Japanese and Italian cultures were met with open-mindedness, students' reactions shifted when they encountered these differences firsthand during a collaborative event. This finding aligns with existing COIL studies, which emphasize the importance of experiential collaboration in fostering intercultural competence.

Similarly, a comment from an Italian language student highlights the value of working with peers from another language course in developing intercultural competence, "[...] The juxtaposition of these two distinct cultures enabled me to identify commonalities, appreciate differences, and develop a heightened sense of cultural sensitivity" (Italian student).

We also had an unexpected finding in this study. Interestingly, we observed that many students, despite being American, displayed behaviors aligned with the cultural norms of Japan or Italy during their interactions. Based on these observations, we conclude that collaboration between students from two different language classes within the same institution can provide intercultural competence learning opportunities comparable to those offered by COIL.

Research Question 2 asked: *Through community-engaged learning, do students perceive improvements in their language skills or increased confidence in using the target language?*

The findings indicate that the answer is yes.

One Japanese language student reflected on the value of interacting with a local Japanese business professional, stating, "There were many challenges that arose from these interactions, but getting out of my comfort zone was essential to grow my communication skills."

Another Japanese language student noted that combining practice with classmates and interactions with local Japanese business professionals significantly contributed to the development of their language skills. A student wrote, "We were able to learn and practice the use of business Japanese with classmates as well as invited guests which greatly helped my ability to listen to and use Japanese in a formal way."

The differing experiences between these students appear to be influenced by their proficiency levels. Lower-proficiency learners likely benefited from the gradual progression of practicing with classmates before engaging with real business professionals. In contrast, higher-proficiency students found that the direct challenge of communicating independently with Japanese business professionals was a key factor in their language development.

Similarly, many Italian language students felt that their interactions with local Italian business professionals significantly contributed to their language development. For example, one student wrote:

I do have to say that the interactions I had with the Italian businesspeople (both in person and over email) were *incredibly* useful to learning the formal way of speaking.



I believe this practical side is a strong point of the course, that should be emphasized and expanded in future versions of it.

We also found that students perceived language development through both spoken and written interactions with local Italian or Japanese business professionals. Another comment from a Japanese language student highlights the importance of written communication in acquiring business Japanese skills:

The assignment of composing business emails in Japanese to company professionals provided invaluable practical application of *keigo* (honorific and humble polite forms) concepts from our textbook. Though not as spontaneous as verbal communication, this exercise encouraged deliberate thought and precision in expression, serving as an essential initial step toward fluency.

The excerpts presented here are representative of the feedback we received from our students. Overall, students highly valued the real-life tasks of communicating with local business professionals in their target languages, recognizing these interactions as meaningful opportunities for language learning and skill development.

In summary, the findings from Research Question 1 affirm that combining students from different language courses within the same institution can effectively foster intercultural competence, similar to traditional COIL experiences. Students gained valuable insights not only through structured discussions but also by observing and experiencing cultural differences in collaboration, such as varying approaches to punctuality. Additionally, instructor collaboration served as a powerful model of intercultural communication, demonstrating how cultural differences can be navigated in professional and academic settings. An unexpected yet significant outcome was the observation that many students, despite being American, exhibited behaviors aligned with the cultural norms of the language they were studying, further reinforcing the depth of their intercultural engagement. These findings suggest that intra-institutional collaborations offer a meaningful and accessible alternative to the COIL model, equipping students with the skills necessary for cross-cultural communication and collaboration in diverse professional and social contexts.

The findings from Research Question 2 confirm that community-engaged learning significantly enhances students' perceptions of language learning by providing authentic, real-world communication experiences. Students recognized the value of both spoken and written interactions with local business professionals, which allowed them to develop formal language skills and gain confidence in using their target language in professional settings. The varying experiences of lower- and higher-proficiency students highlight the importance of scaffolding these interactions to support different learning needs. Moreover, students appreciated the opportunity to apply textbook knowledge in meaningful contexts, reinforcing the practical benefits of experiential learning. These results align with Hartfield-Méndez' (2013) insights on the role of community engagement in language acquisition, emphasizing that direct interaction with native speakers fosters linguistic competence and cultural awareness in ways that traditional classroom instruction alone cannot achieve.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this case study addressed two research questions: the first examined the impact of collaboration between two different target language classes on the development of

intercultural competence, while the second investigated the impact of community-engaged learning on learners' perceptions of their language learning. The findings indicated affirmative answers to both questions.

The significance of this study lies in its innovative approach to fostering intercultural competence through collaboration between two different target language classes within the same institution, which is a practice that has received limited attention in existing research. While we recognize the value of COIL and international online collaboration, we believe our curriculum design offers a more practical alternative for certain educational contexts. Unlike COIL courses, our approach eliminates challenges such as time zone differences and the difficulty of finding equally committed international partners.

In addition to cross-language collaboration, our course incorporated community-engaged learning, enabling students to interact with local Japanese or Italian business professionals. This component provided students with opportunities to engage in real-life tasks in a business context, which they perceived as enhancing their language learning experience.

It is important to note that the findings of this qualitative case study are not generalizable. However, we believe the results are transferable to similar contexts where instructors are originally from the countries of the target culture. Further studies would be needed to understand if similar results can be obtained in a context in which instructors are not originally from the target culture. We hope this study inspires world language educators to collaborate with colleagues teaching different languages within the same institution to promote intercultural development in their courses.

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