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Original Research

Relational, professional, and power-aware intercultural reflection in English-mediated South–South COIL

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Research on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) groups interpersonal, cultural, professional and critical reflection as intercultural competence, leaving their evidential basis unclear. This qualitative case study examined forms of reflection among 146 pre-service teachers in Mexico and Chile and educational meanings attributed to a four-month English-mediated South–South COIL project. Data comprised 51 voluntary midpoint essays and four final-panel transcripts from the full cohort. A codebook-based thematic analysis classified non-exclusive relational, descriptive, professional and power-aware reflection and recorded English-use and participation conditions separately. Cultural comparison (67%), interpersonal rapport (61%) and regional or national identification (51%) were most prevalent in the essays. Panel prevalence was highest for interpersonal rapport (51%), cultural comparison (39%), explicit references to structural inequality or unequal authority (37%) and anticipated diversity-related classroom application (36%). Accounts of English referred to anxiety, peer assistance, Spanish clarification and assessed participation. Power-aware passages addressed Anglophone educational authority, social-class inequality, professional devaluation and unequal educational conditions. English was a communicative medium, a participation condition and a subject of power-aware reflection. South–South contact accounts included regional affiliation, unequal global educational relations and future teaching. The classification reserves criticality for explicit references to hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality or unequal authority, increasing precision in claims about intercultural reflection. The findings supply Latin American evidence that COIL permits joint examination of language use, intercultural relations, professional intention and inequality. Dataset differences in timing, prompts, format and participation preclude inference about participant-level development or classroom enactment.

Keywords: *Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), virtual exchange, pre-service teachers, critical interculturality, South–South internationalisation, English as an Additional Language (EAL), Latin America*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education in Latin America is situated within culturally and linguistically diverse societies that include Indigenous-language, bilingual, multilingual and Spanish-dominant educational settings (López, 2021; Köster & Dietz, 2020). Because pre-service teachers will work with pupils whose linguistic backgrounds, cultural identities and material conditions differ, teacher preparation requires sustained contact with educational perspectives outside students' immediate institutional settings.

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Internationalisation can provide such contact through communication with students and educators in other national contexts (Deardorff & Jones, 2022). Study-abroad participation is socially selective, with students' socioeconomic resources and institutional opportunities associated with access (Entrich et al., 2024). Curriculum-based international contact permits international engagement from students' home institutions.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) provides one response to this need through the integration of international collaboration into regular coursework. In COIL, students from different national or institutional settings complete jointly designed online tasks under the supervision of teachers from the participating institutions (Hackett et al., 2024; Rubin & Guth, 2023). Studies of COIL and related digital exchanges have reported intercultural-competence development, increased willingness to communicate, stronger language-learning motivation and opportunities for communicative practice (Aladini & Gheisari, 2025; Avgousti, 2018; Hackett et al., 2023; O'Dowd, 2021). Research in teacher education has also documented exchanges of pedagogical knowledge, discussion of national education systems and reflection on future teaching practice (Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Kopish & Öztürk, 2024; Spieler et al., 2025). These findings establish COIL as a relevant setting for intercultural teacher education and lead to a further question concerning the forms of intercultural reflection expressed during such projects.

This question becomes especially important when communication takes place through English as an additional language. English permits communication between students who study the language as part of their degree programmes, and differences in proficiency can affect participants' ability to express complex ideas during synchronous discussion (Callies et al., 2021; Canagarajah, 2012). Latin American language policies commonly associate English with socioeconomic opportunity, and differences in the provision and quality of instruction can reproduce existing class inequalities (Sayer, 2018). When Spanish-speaking students from two Latin American countries communicate through English, language use therefore forms part of the intercultural experience under study. This dual status of English requires explicit attention to participants' accounts of communication, participation and unequal educational authority.

Walsh's (2012) account of interculturality provides the analytical distinction required for this purpose. Relational interculturality refers to contact, communication and exchange between people from different cultural settings. It includes interpersonal connection, cultural comparison, empathy and mutual recognition. Critical interculturality refers to explicit examination of power, inequality, coloniality and institutional structures that may influence relations between cultural groups. In Martin and Pirbhai-Illich's (2016) account, intercultural understanding in teacher education includes examination of colonial assumptions and unequal knowledge relations. Patel (2017) also links socially responsive international higher education with attention to inequality and institutional conditions. These definitions establish explicit engagement with power or structural inequality as the evidential criterion for classifying a participant statement as critical intercultural reflection.

Systematic reviews of virtual exchange in language and teacher education organise reported learning under categories such as intercultural competence, communication, pedagogical knowledge and professional development (O'Dowd, 2021; Wu, 2023). Because these headings can include empathy, cultural comparison, professional intention and explicit engagement with inequality, they combine forms of reflection with different evidential implications. Interpersonal connection supports a claim about relational engagement, descriptions of cultural practices support a claim about cultural knowledge, statements about future teaching support a claim about anticipated professional application, and references to power or institutional inequality support a claim about critical content. Explicit classification is therefore needed to make the evidential basis of each claim verifiable.

This need is especially relevant in Latin American teacher education, where internationalisation scholarship calls for attention to local educational conditions, South—South cooperation and unequal global knowledge relations (Leal et al., 2024). An English-mediated exchange between Latin American institutions brings these concerns into one setting: English enables international communication, differences in proficiency may affect participation, and the language may become a subject of reflection on Anglophone educational authority (Canagarajah, 2012; Callies et al., 2021). Research is therefore needed to distinguish relational, descriptive, professional and power-aware reflection within such exchanges and to examine participants' accounts of English use under these regional conditions.

The present study addresses this gap in a COIL project involving pre-service teachers in Mexico and Chile. It aims to clarify which participant statements express relational engagement, cultural description, professional intention or explicit attention to unequal relations. It also examines how participants describe English use, South—South intercultural contact and anticipated professional application within the project.

These aims yield two research questions:

1. Which relational, descriptive, professional and power-aware forms of reflection are expressed in pre-service teachers' accounts of an English-mediated South—South COIL project?

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2. What educational meanings do participants attribute to English-mediated South—South contact in relation to communication, regional affiliation, unequal educational relations and future teaching?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research design

This study used a qualitative single-case design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The case was one four-month English-mediated COIL project conducted between a teacher-education institution in Mexico and a teacher-education institution in Chile. The study aimed to identify and describe relational, descriptive, professional and power-aware forms of reflection expressed by pre-service teachers. It also aimed to document participants' accounts of English use, intercultural contact and anticipated professional application.

Two qualitative data sources were collected at different times: individual reflective essays at the project midpoint and synchronous semi-structured group discussions at the project end. Essay analysis informed the panel questions. The datasets differed in task instructions, communication mode, participation and collection time. Participant identifiers needed to match an essay author with the same person's panel contribution were unavailable. Each dataset was analysed separately before the findings were considered together at case level. The design supports dataset-specific description and case-level thematic synthesis. Individual developmental trajectories, causal effects of COIL participation and independent effects of data-collection format remain untested.

The manuscript was prepared with reference to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O'Brien et al., 2014). The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007) were used for the reporting of participant selection, researcher-participant relationships, panel procedures, recording, transcription and analysis.

2.2. Participants and project setting

The COIL project cohort comprised 146 pre-service teachers enrolled at two undergraduate teacher-education institutions. The rural Mexican institution contributed 96 participants: 84 students enrolled in a Bachelor of Primary Education programme and 12 students enrolled in a Bachelor of Preschool Education programme. The urban Chilean institution contributed 50 students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education and English Teaching programme. Table 1 presents the three participant groups and their curricular settings.

Table 1
Participant groups and curricular context

PARTICIPANT GROUP	INSTITUTIONAL SETTING	DEGREE PROGRAMME	N = 146	ENGLISH PROFICIENCY	PARTICIPATING MODULE(S)
Mexico – Primary Education	Rural teacher-education institution	Bachelor of Primary Education	84	A2–B1 (course-level estimate)	English as an Additional Language; Interculturality and Citizenship
Mexico – Preschool Education	Rural teacher-education institution	Bachelor of Preschool Education	12	A2–B1 (course-level estimate)	English as an Additional Language; Interculturality and Citizenship
Chile – English Teaching	Urban teacher-education institution	Bachelor of Education and English Teaching	50	Upper-Intermediate to Advanced (course-level estimate)	Literature and Culture

Institutional case selection was based on existing access and curricular compatibility. Both institutions offered undergraduate education degrees and included English in the participating curricula. Within the selected case, eligibility consisted of enrolment in one of the participating modules. All enrolled students participated in the curricular COIL project. Inclusion of essays and panel contributions in the research dataset also required the consent described in Section 2.3.

Spanish was the first language reported for all participants. English was designated as the principal language for project communication. The Mexican participants were enrolled in an English as an Additional Language module and in the Spanish-medium module *Interculturality and Citizenship*. Project tasks associated with the latter module permitted English and Spanish. The Chilean participants were enrolled in *Literature and Culture* as part of their English-teacher education programme.

Table 1 reports the course-level English proficiency estimates provided for the participating groups.

The project had three instructional objectives:

1. Intercultural reflection: provide structured tasks concerning cultural practices, equity, empathy, and respect.

2. English communication: provide structured opportunities for English use with international peers.

3. Professional reflection: require participants to relate intercultural experience to anticipated teaching practice.

These statements describe the instructional objectives of the project. Direct measures of change in English proficiency, intercultural competence and classroom practice were outside the study design.

Students were assigned to 27 international teams. Each team comprised three or four Mexican participants and one or two Chilean participants. The four-month project contained three curricular phases: (i) Getting to know my environment; (ii) Me in relation to the other; and (iii) Intercultural manifestations in education. Tasks included synchronous meetings and asynchronous work. Appendix A provides the task sequence and digital platforms.

Project planning occurred during the three months preceding delivery. Four faculty members, two from each institution, planned and facilitated the project. The first author was one of these faculty members and was the course instructor for the Mexican cohort.

2.3. Data collection

The study used two sources of participant accounts: individual reflective essays collected at the project midpoint and recordings of synchronous group panels conducted at the end of the project. The essay and panel tasks differed in timing, prompt content, communication mode and participation. The collection procedures for each source are specified below.

2.3.1. Midpoint reflective essays

At the project midpoint, all 146 participants were eligible to submit an individual reflective essay associated with Activity 7 in Appendix A. The prompt asked participants to discuss their encounters with COIL peers, including perceived cultural similarities and differences, assumptions, social behaviours and values. Teams were asked to submit at least two essays. Contribution of an essay to the research dataset was voluntary and had no effect on course assessment. Fifty-one individually authored essays were submitted, equivalent to 35% of the 146-student cohort. Fifty essays were written in English and one in Spanish. The essays were anonymised before analysis. Identifiers permitting linkage between an essay author and the same participant's panel contribution were unavailable. The two datasets were therefore analysed separately and subsequently synthesised at case level. Participant-level trajectories could not be examined.

2.3.2. Final group panels

At the end of the project, four synchronous semi-structured group panels were conducted through Google Meet. All 146 participants attended one panel.

Panel 1 included 24 Mexican and 12 Chilean participants, Panel 2 included 25 Mexican and 13 Chilean participants, Panel 3 included 29 Mexican and 13 Chilean participants, and Panel 4 included 18 Mexican and 12 Chilean participants. These figures total 96 Mexican and 50 Chilean participants. Each panel lasted approximately 90—120 minutes, and no repeat sessions were conducted. Attendance was restricted to the participants and the two authors, who moderated the panels.

The panels used the questions reproduced in Appendix B. The questions concerned participants' project experiences and challenges; the perceived personal and professional relevance of the project, intercultural competence and diversity; and possible applications of interculturral practice in their future teaching. Some questions asked participants to assess perceived personal or professional change. Their responses provide self-reported assessments of change. The study included no independent measures of linguistic, intercultural or professional development.

2.3.3. Researcher-participant relationships, consent and institutional authorisation

The first author was a project facilitator and the course instructor for the Mexican cohort. The second author had no previous contact with participants. At the start of the COIL project, all 146 participants received information about the study and provided informed consent for research use of their written and oral contributions, including publication of de-identified quotations. Research participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that withholding or withdrawing their contributions from the research would have no effect on their course grades. Curricular assessment was kept separate from the research analysis.

The academic directorates of both participating institutions authorised the study under the bilateral institutional cooperation agreements. Participant numbers were used in the transcripts and publications to protect participants' identities.

2.3.4. Language, recording, transcription and translation

English was designated as the principal language of the panels, although participants could also use Spanish. Fourteen Mexican participants used Spanish or mixed English—Spanish speech more extensively in their codeable contributions. All four panel sessions were video-recorded with participant consent and transcribed using MAXQDA.

The first author, a native Spanish speaker, checked the transcripts against the recordings and corrected the transcription and English translation of Spanish and mixed-language contributions. The second author, also a native Spanish speaker, independently reviewed all

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transcripts for transcription and translation accuracy. The final corrected transcripts were used in the thematic analysis. This procedure followed the multilingual research principles discussed by Holmes et al. (2013).

Participants did not review the transcripts or findings because the academic term had ended and the anonymised datasets no longer contained contact identifiers.

2.4. Data analysis

The study used qualitative thematic analysis with a structured codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Initial codes arose from the participants' accounts, and the subsequent grouping of codes used the distinctions between relational, descriptive, professional and power-aware reflection specified in the research questions. The analysis therefore combined inductive initial coding with theory-informed categorisation.

The analysis followed the chronology of data collection. The first author first read and provisionally coded the 51 midpoint essays. The provisional essay codes informed the topics included in the final panel questions. The essay and panel datasets were therefore analytically connected because the initial essay analysis influenced the content of the later data-collection instrument. Following completion of the panels, the first author read the four transcripts and reconsidered the preliminary codes in relation to the complete corpus. This process produced a draft codebook containing parent themes, subthemes, coding definitions, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria and illustrative extracts.

The first author applied the draft codebook to all 51 essays and four panel transcripts in MAXQDA. The second author reviewed all coded passages and their assigned codes. Both authors discussed proposed additions, removals and category assignments and reached agreement on the final coding. The audit trail comprised dated versions of the coding tree, coding memos and written consensus notes from the joint review meetings. This procedure constituted consensus review of the full coded dataset.

Coding was conducted in English. The first author, a native Spanish speaker, translated the Spanish essay and the Spanish or mixed-language panel passages before coding. The second author, also a native Spanish speaker, checked the translated passages during the review of the coded dataset. The original Spanish passages were consulted when translation accuracy required verification.

The unit of analysis for the essay dataset was one submitted essay. A coded category was recorded once for an essay when at least one passage met its assignment criteria. The denominator for each essay percentage was therefore 51. Multiple passages assigned to the same coded category within one essay did not increase the essay-level count.

The unit of analysis for the panel dataset was one panel participant. Participant identifiers connected each recorded contribution to one speaker within a panel transcript. A coded category was counted once for a participant when at least one contribution met its assignment criteria. The denominator for each panel percentage was 146, the total number of panel participants.

A panel contribution received a thematic code when it contained information relevant to one or more codebook categories. Greetings, brief agreement statements, task-management remarks and general evaluations without category-relevant information received no thematic code. All 146 panel participants remained in the denominator, including participants who made no codeable contribution.

The coded categories were non-exclusive, so one essay or participant could receive more than one category. Frequencies represent unique essays or unique panel participants assigned to each coded category. Percentages were calculated as the number of coded units divided by the applicable dataset denominator and were rounded to the nearest whole percentage. The counts are descriptive. The analysis included no inferential statistical tests. Differences between the essay and panel columns describe the two datasets at their respective collection points. Participant change, effects of collection format and associations with institution or English proficiency remain untested.

Appendix C gives the category definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and illustrative extracts, and Appendix D gives the complete coding hierarchy. The final codebook contained four parent themes:

1. Participation constraints and communication strategies. This parent theme included statements about English-language anxiety, perceived differences in proficiency or confidence, curricular restrictions, assessed participation, use of Spanish, peer assistance and other responses to communication difficulties.

2. *Relational and descriptive intercultural reflection.* This parent theme included interpersonal connection, empathy, trust, curiosity, cultural similarities and differences, Latin American or national identification, and appreciation of cultural contact. Statements assigned to this parent theme could describe cultural relations without explicit reference to social hierarchy, institutional inequality, coloniality or unequal authority.

3. *Professional intentions and pedagogical reflection.* This parent theme included statements about professional networking, anticipated classroom practice, attention to pupil diversity, inclusive teaching intentions and possible future use of virtual exchange. These statements report participants' intentions and reflections; classroom implementation was outside the study.

4. *Power-aware socio-structural reflection.* Assignment to this parent theme required an explicit statement about unequal authority, social hierarchy, coloniality, Global North dominance, institutional inequality, devaluation of teachers, exclusion, or the participant's own position within such relations. References to identity, empathy, cultural

difference diversity, or stereotype rejection without an explicit unequal relation did not meet this criterion. Analyst inference alone did not qualify a passage for this parent theme.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The analytical problem addressed concerns the forms of intercultural reflection expressed by pre-service teachers during an English-mediated South—South virtual exchange. Research on virtual exchange has documented participant reports concerning language practice, interpersonal contact, intercultural learning, digital collaboration and professional learning (Hackett et al., 2023; O'Dowd, 2021). Greater analytical precision is required to distinguish statements about interpersonal relations, descriptions of cultural difference, anticipated teaching practice and explicit attention to unequal social relations. These forms have different educational and political meanings. Their distinction is especially pertinent in a project where English connected two Spanish-speaking cohorts whose degree programmes and reported proficiency levels differed. This section places the study within research on South—South internationalisation, multilingual communication and intercultural teacher education, and then defines the four forms of reflection used in the analysis.

3.1. South—South internationalisation

Internationalisation in higher education has long been associated with student mobility, institutional prestige, competition for educational markets and the circulation of dominant academic languages. Critical studies of internationalisation examine how these practices can reproduce colonial knowledge hierarchies, unequal access and institutional dependence (Stein, 2021). Scholarship centred on the Global South consequently calls for forms of international cooperation grounded in local educational priorities, reciprocal institutional relations and recognition of knowledge produced in formerly colonised societies (Leal et al., 2024). Patel (2017) places the social value of international higher education in institutional responsibility and collective action concerning inequality.

These arguments establish demanding criteria for claims about South—South exchange. The participation of institutions from Mexico and Chile establishes a regional relationship. Equity, reciprocity and decoloniality require separate empirical evidence concerning participation, authority, knowledge and institutional practice. A South—South partnership may provide access to educational experiences produced within related regional histories, yet it remains situated within global systems that distribute linguistic and academic authority unequally. Regional location therefore supplies the context for examining horizontality, but does not establish that horizontality has been achieved.

International contact can influence how pre-service teachers discuss cultural diversity, education systems and anticipated classroom practice (Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Kopish & Öztürk, 2024). Participant statements about inclusive teaching, professional exchange or future use of virtual collaboration constitute professional reflection. Demonstrated professional competence requires direct evidence from teaching activity, and sustained pedagogical application requires subsequent observation. A study based on reflective accounts can therefore establish what participants considered relevant to their future teaching and how they described that relevance.

3.2. English-mediated participation and multilingual communication

Intercultural approaches to English language education connect language learning with cultural meanings and communicative practices (Byram, 1989; Corbett, 2022; Hossain, 2024). English has two analytically relevant functions in this case. First, it is a curricular medium through which participants can practise communication with international peers. Second, it is a globally privileged language associated with academic mobility, institutional prestige, scientific publication and knowledge produced in Anglophone centres (Holliday, 2009; Jones, 2020). English-language scientific discourse also includes conventions through which research relevance and scholarly identity are established (Malyuga, 2019). A case report on an international research journal further connects the selection of English with international readership and Scopus indexation (Malyuga & Grishechko, 2021). Qualitative research in Moroccan higher education similarly found that students associated English with academic and professional mobility and requested preservation of local languages through multilingual policy (Razkane et al., 2025). These functions can coexist within one exchange because English can provide communicative access while differences in proficiency, confidence and institutional preparation can distribute speaking opportunities unequally.

Canagarajah's (2012) account of translingual practice understands multilingual communication as negotiation among the linguistic resources available to participants. Multilingual speakers combine resources from their repertoires, adapt them to local purposes and produce communicative norms during interaction. This account supports examination of Spanish use as a communicative resource within an English-designated project. Spanish use may assist comprehension, participation or interpersonal support. Evidence that it challenged linguistic hierarchy would require explicit participant statements or documented changes in project policy.

Language choice also has political significance. The international authority of English can influence which speakers and forms of knowledge receive legitimacy in

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educational settings (Callies et al., 2021; Canagarajah, 2012; Gritsenko, 2026). An English-mediated exchange between Spanish-speaking Latin American cohorts can therefore be examined through three separate questions: who participated orally, which linguistic resources participants used, and whether participants explicitly discussed linguistic hierarchy. The first question concerns access to participation, the second concerns communicative strategy, and the third concerns power-aware reflection. Complexity of expression cannot serve as a proxy for proficiency unless verified individual proficiency data are available.

This distinction sets an evidential boundary for later claims about English. Reports of language anxiety or restricted participation can support an account of English as a perceived communication constraint. Reports of communicative practice can support an account of English as a curricular resource. Statements that explicitly connect English with Global North authority, institutional prestige or unequal legitimacy can support an account of linguistic power. The coexistence of these forms within one project is theoretically plausible, and their prevalence remains an empirical question.

3.3. Relational, functional, critical interculturality

Walsh (2012) distinguishes relational, functional and critical perspectives on interculturality. Relational interculturality refers to contact and exchange among people, practices, knowledge, values and traditions. Such contact can occur under equitable or inequitable conditions. Its presence therefore establishes interaction and mutual reference without establishing examination of domination or coloniality.

Functional interculturality recognises cultural diversity and promotes dialogue, tolerance and inclusion within the existing social order. It accommodates cultural difference without examining the structural causes of racialisation, marginalisation or unequal authority. This perspective is relevant to statements that celebrate diversity, advocate inclusion or describe cultural enrichment while leaving institutional and historical relations unexamined. In the present study, such statements are classified according to their expressed content as relational, descriptive or professional reflection. The functional perspective supplies theoretical context for understanding why positive reference to diversity does not itself provide evidence of structural critique.

Critical interculturality begins from the colonial and racial organisation of inequality. Walsh (2012) presents it as a political, ethical and epistemic project directed toward transformation of the social and institutional relations that produce inferiorisation and exclusion. Critical interculturality therefore concerns more than individual awareness. It includes collective praxis and structural change. Since the present data consist of essays and panel speech, participant statements can establish discursive recognition of power, coloniality or inequality. They cannot establish transformation of institutions or educational practice.

These distinctions establish the evidential boundary used in this study. Cultural curiosity, empathy, rapport, regional or national affiliation and affective connection provide evidence of relational reflection. Statements describing or comparing customs, values, cultural practices, similarities or differences, including appreciation of cultural diversity, provide evidence of descriptive reflection. Explicit reference to coloniality, social hierarchy, institutional inequality, linguistic hegemony, unequal authority or professional devaluation provides evidence of power-aware reflection. Power-aware reflection is therefore the empirical category associated with the theoretical concerns of critical interculturality. Claims of critical praxis would require evidence of action directed toward structural change.

Martin and Pirbhai-Illich (2016) add an important teacher-education perspective to this distinction. Their account connects intercultural education with the relations through which teachers and learners understand themselves and others. Educational contact can reproduce Othering when cultural difference is approached as a fixed object and when colonial assumptions remain unexamined. A critical relational pedagogy therefore connects interpersonal relations with the socio-historical and geopolitical positions in which those relations occur (Killick & Foster, 2021).

This account explains why relational and power-aware reflection can coexist within the same participant statement. Rapport, empathy or mutual recognition concerns the interpersonal relation. Reference to colonial histories or unequal authority concerns the political content of that relation. Neither form establishes a stage through which participants must pass. Duration of contact and familiarity also provide no sufficient criterion for critical classification. The criterion used here is explicit engagement with unequal social or institutional relations.

3.4. Intercultural reflection

Studies of virtual exchange in language and teacher education report participant learning in communication, intercultural awareness, digital practice, collaboration and professional preparation (O'Dowd, 2021; Sevilla-Pavón, 2019; Wu, 2023). Some controlled studies have also reported change in measured intercultural competence following COIL participation (Hackett et al., 2023). Dervin and Hahl (2015) note that intercultural competence has multiple definitions and requires explicit learning and assessment criteria. The evidential meaning of these findings depends on the research design. Pre—post measurement can estimate change under its stated conditions. Qualitative

reflective accounts establish the meanings and experiences participants report. The present study belongs to the second category.

Research in English-language teacher education also shows that the content of virtual-exchange reflection is related to task design. Bilki et al. (2023) identified participant reflections concerning self-expression, interpersonal connection, inclusion and socio-political context. Their study also reported that social-justice discussion was limited when project tasks did not request sustained attention to such issues. Critical discussion in virtual exchange therefore cannot be assumed from the presence of international contact. Topic selection, prompts, facilitation and opportunities for participant response affect which matters are discussed.

This qualification is particularly important when different forms of data collection are considered together. Individual writing and synchronous group discussion provide different conditions for expression. Writing permits a participant to compose a self-paced account, whereas group discussion permits response, elaboration, agreement and disagreement among speakers. Prompt content and speaking opportunity also differ. These properties justify separate analysis of written and spoken data. Differences between the datasets cannot establish individual development or an independent effect of communication format when participants cannot be linked and the prompts are non-equivalent.

The same qualification applies to claims concerning dialogue and power-aware reflection. Critical relational pedagogy provides a reason to investigate whether interpersonal connection and attention to inequality appear together (Martin & Pirbhai-Illich, 2016). It supplies no basis for designating rapport as a necessary precursor to structural critique. Some accounts may contain both forms, some may contain one form, and some may remain descriptive. Empirical co-occurrence must therefore be demonstrated from the coded passages.

Professional reflection requires a further distinction. Virtual exchange can give pre-service teachers material for discussing curriculum, classroom diversity, educational systems and professional relationships (Bilki et al., 2023; Dooly & Villanueva, 2006). Statements concerning future teaching establish anticipated professional application. They do not establish implementation, pedagogical effectiveness or sustained professional development. This boundary permits analysis of participants' pedagogical reasoning while preserving the distinction between stated intention and observed practice.

3.5. Analytical categories and evidential scope

The theoretical distinctions above specify four forms of intercultural reflection examined in this study: relational, descriptive, professional and power-aware reflection. The categories classify the content expressed in each account and permit simultaneous assignment when one passage contains more than one form of reflection.

Relational reflection refers to statements about interpersonal connection, rapport, empathy, trust, mutual assistance, curiosity, negotiation, regional or national affiliation, or affective connection within the participant group. It records how participants described interpersonal relations and identity-based affiliation within the exchange. Its assignment makes no claim about equality, structural critique or subsequent change.

Descriptive reflection refers to statements identifying or comparing cultural practices, similarities, differences, customs, values or visible cultural markers. Such statements may be personally significant and may contribute to intercultural knowledge. Their classification records the content expressed and the absence of an explicit account of power or structural inequality.

Professional reflection refers to statements concerning professional exchange, future teaching, classroom diversity, inclusive pedagogical intentions or possible use of virtual collaboration in educational practice. This category records anticipated application. Evidence of classroom enactment was outside the study.

Power-aware reflection refers to explicit statements concerning unequal authority, coloniality, racialisation, social hierarchy, institutional inequality, Global North dominance, linguistic hegemony, exclusion or devaluation of the teaching profession. Assignment requires explicit textual evidence. Identity, cultural pride, empathy, stereotypes or diversity qualify when the participant connects them directly to an unequal social, historical or institutional relation. Analyst inference alone is insufficient.

These categories contain no developmental ordering. Relational and power-aware codes may occur in the same account, and professional reflection may occur with either. Descriptive reflection may also coexist with rapport or professional intention. The analytical scheme therefore permits examination of coexisting forms without proposing a universal sequence from cultural contact to critical awareness.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Dataset composition

The analysis included all 51 midpoint reflective essays and transcripts from four final group panels attended by 146 participants. The essay percentages use 51 as their denominator, and the panel percentages use 146. The unit of analysis was one essay for the written dataset and one panel participant for the spoken dataset. A unit was counted once within a category when at least one passage met its coding criteria. The categories were non-exclusive, so one unit could receive more than one category. Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole percentage.

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Table 2 reports the textual criterion for each coded category together with the number and percentage of source units assigned to that category. The essay and panel columns refer to separate datasets collected through different tasks, formats and prompts.

Within the essay dataset, comparison of cultural markers was coded in 34 essays (67%), interpersonal rapport and awareness in 31 (61%), and regional or national identity in 26 (51%). Within the panel dataset, interpersonal rapport and awareness was coded for 75 participants (51%), comparison of cultural markers for 57 (39%), and explicit reference to structural inequality or unequal authority for 54 (37%).

4.2. English use and participation conditions

Linguistic or curricular constraints and communication strategies were coded in 23 essays (45%) and in contributions from 46 panel participants (32%). Passages assigned to this category referred to difficulty expressing

Table 2
Assignment criteria and prevalence of coded categories in the midpoint essays and final panels

RESEARCH AREA	CODED CATEGORY	TEXTUAL CRITERION FOR ASSIGNMENT	MIDPOINT ESSAYS, N/N (%)	PANEL PARTICIPANTS, N/N (%)
English use and participation conditions	Linguistic and curricular constraints and communication strategies	Reported difficulty expressing ideas in English, language anxiety, perceived differences in proficiency or confidence, peer assistance, Spanish clarification, requests for repetition or paraphrasing, reported confidence or motivation associated with English practice, or pressure associated with assessed participation	23/51 (45%)	46/146 (32%)
Relational reflection	Interpersonal rapport and awareness	Reported interpersonal connection, rapport, empathy, trust, mutual assistance, curiosity, cooperation or negotiation within the participant group	31/51 (61%)	75/146 (51%)
	Regional or national identity and affective connection	Reported Latin American, Hispanic, Indigenous, national or regional identity, cultural pride, regional similarity or affective connection	26/51 (51%)	18/146 (12%)
Descriptive reflection	Comparison of cultural markers	Identification or comparison of cultural practices, similarities, differences, customs, values or visible cultural markers	34/51 (67%)	57/146 (39%)
Professional reflection	Professional networking and strategy	Reference to curricula, education systems, teaching strategies, technological resources, professional exchange or continued contact with international peers	10/51 (20%)	28/146 (19%)
	Anticipated classroom application concerning diversity	Reference to future teaching, classroom diversity, inclusive pedagogical intentions or possible use of virtual collaboration in educational practice	13/51 (25%)	53/146 (36%)
Power-aware reflection	Self-positioning concerning stereotypes or inequality	A participant's own assumptions or social position connected explicitly to unequal relations involving stereotypes, social hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality or unequal authority	12/51 (24%)	45/146 (31%)
	Explicit reference to structural inequality or unequal authority	Explicit reference to Global North dominance, unequal attention to Anglophone countries, social-class inequality, institutional educational conditions, employment conditions or devaluation of the teaching profession	12/51 (24%)	54/146 (37%)

Note. Categories were non-exclusive. Each essay or panel participant was counted once within a category when at least one passage met the stated criterion. Percentages use 51 essays and 146 panel participants as their respective denominators and were rounded to the nearest whole percentage. The columns provide descriptive results for non-equivalent datasets; they provide no statistical comparison or participant-level estimate of change. Professional-reflection counts refer to reported intentions, and classroom enactment remained unassessed. Power-aware assignment required an explicit reference to an unequal social, historical or institutional relation.

ideas in English, anxiety concerning spoken communication, perceived differences in proficiency or confidence, assistance from peers, use of Spanish for clarification, requests for repetition or paraphrasing, reported confidence or motivation associated with English practice, and pressure associated with assessed participation.

One Mexican essay participant described difficulty with English and assistance from peers: *'Although I limit my English a little, it is helping me to practice it with classmates who are preparing to be English teachers'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

A panel participant described a sequence in which Spanish was used for clarification before communication continued in English: *'Sometimes I didn't understand, so my partner explained in Spanish, and then we continued in English. That helped me a lot to feel more confident and to keep practicing'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: Spanish).

Another participant described anxiety and assistance from team members: *'At the beginning I was very shy, because I felt my English was terrible, but my teammates were very supportive when I didn't understand, or when I couldn't express myself in English, they looked for the way we could communicate, this gave me a lot of confidence to use English'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

One panel participant reported a perceived difference in fluency and confidence: *'At the end [of the project] I felt more fluent and confident to speak in English, because I had more chance to practice it with my teammates and I felt motivated to learn it'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

Assessment requirements were also mentioned. In one of the essays, a participant described restrictions associated with the assigned discussion topics: *'The main drawback that I found from this experience was the inability to speak about more personal topics. Given that this project was marked and monitored, it felt at times that we were unable to go into topics that interested us, instead we had to follow the discussions the worksheets gave us. Not only that, but the fact also that it was marked made me feel like I was being pressured to make a connection with them'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

4.3. Relational reflection

4.3.1. Interpersonal rapport and awareness

Interpersonal rapport and awareness were coded in 31 of the 51 essays (61%) and in contributions from 75 of the 146 panel participants (51%). The coded passages included references to empathy, respect, trust, curiosity, tolerance, cooperation, punctuality and agreement within the participant groups.

One essay referred to tolerance, curiosity and empathy: *'Through these scenarios, we acquire exposure to others' ideas and cultures to practise our tolerance and develop an open mindset, curiosity, and empathy to people who experience the world through another lens'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English).

Another participant referred to discussion of personal experience: *'We had the opportunity to discuss, to share information, to share experiences, which I think is the most powerful tool that anyone has because it's what you live and you can share that from your reality from your perspective'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

A Mexican participant described reduced anxiety concerning communication with people from another country: *'We are more similar than different [...] we don't have to be afraid or nervous about sharing with other people'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: Spanish).

4.3.2. Regional or national identity and affective connection

Regional or national identity and affective connection were coded in 26 of the 51 essays (51%) and in contributions from 18 of the 146 panel participants (12%). The passages referred to Latin American, Hispanic, Indigenous, national or regional affiliation, cultural pride, regional similarity, affective connection and personal values connected to national or regional identity.

One panel participant referred to learning about national identity: *'[The COIL encounters] allowed us to learn from other cultures from different countries but also from classmates living in the same country. I learned also from my own country and developed a sense of identity'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

Other participants referred to Latin American identity: *'We have the same roots, we are Latino brothers, we share the Latino culture'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English). *'Chile and Mexico are sister countries sharing the Hispanic and indigenous culture'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

4.4. Descriptive reflection

Comparison of cultural markers was coded in 34 of the 51 essays (67%) and in contributions from 57 of the 146 panel participants (39%). Coded passages named food, schedules, greetings, language use, religion, customs, personal preferences, cultural similarities and cultural differences.

One essay participant listed cultural practices: *'I can interpret simple schedules... I can identify how, what and why people eat... social practices such as greeting'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

Several participants placed emphasis on similarities: *'We are not so different as people, we have the same values'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English). *'Similarities are more than the differences... it was much easier to find the things that exist in common'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

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Another participant referred to the presence of multiple customs and preferences: *'The interaction... is a matter of knowing the difference and similarity of others and realising that our culture is not the only one, but that there are many customs, traditions, tastes [and] dislikes'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English).

One panel contribution referred to national stereotypes and rejected their universal application: *'We discussed about stereotypes that characterise us as a country... we discover that for example, of Mexico it is said that we are good for eating spicy food, while in Chile it is said that everyone is a thief according to our classmates, but this is not totally true'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

4.5. Professional reflection

4.5.1. Professional networking and strategy

Professional networking and strategy were coded in 10 of the 51 essays (20%) and in contributions from 28 of the 146 panel participants (19%). The coded passages referred to teaching strategies, curricula, education systems, professional feedback, technological resources and continued contact with international peers.

One essay participant referred to educational knowledge and curricula: *'[Throughout the COIL project I could] exchange knowledge about education to learn the teaching strategies of other countries, their curricula and how the government handles education'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

A panel participant referred to continued professional contact: *'I created good relationships with my peers and I hope we continue in touch to keep sharing strategies and learning once we are in front of the classroom'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: Spanish).

Other participants stated an intention to use what they had discussed: *'The greatest learning I had... in the future will serve me to put into practice'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English). *'Apply all those skills and values within my profession'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

4.5.2. Anticipated classroom application concerning diversity

Anticipated classroom application concerning diversity was coded in 13 of the 51 essays (25%) and in contributions from 53 of the 146 panel participants (36%). The coded passages referred to cultural diversity in classrooms, Indigenous and immigrant pupils, inclusive teaching intentions and future use of intercultural activities.

One participant referred to cultural differences in future classrooms: *'A COIL project contributes positively to pre-service teachers' professional experience because we are having our first contact with school students, so we need to be aware of the cultural differences that we can find inside of a classroom'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

An essay participant connected knowledge of communities with future teaching: *'It is important for us as teachers to know other backgrounds, other cultures and from that to develop a new way to teach, being aware of what is happening in their countries or communities and nurturing our way of teaching'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: Spanish).

Two further passages stated intended application to pupils: *'This project broadened our vision, and at the moment of being professional teachers, we can broaden our students' perspectives too'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: English). *'As a teacher in training, it is clear to me the relevance of showing children through social practices the meaning of cultural diversity and interculturality, in order to form empathetic citizens'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English).

4.6. Power-aware reflection

4.6.1. Self-positioning concerning stereotypes or inequality

Self-positioning concerning stereotypes or inequality was coded in 12 of the 51 essays (24%) and in contributions from 45 of the 146 panel participants (31%). The coded passages connected participants' own assumptions or social positions with explicit references to stereotypes, social hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality or unequal authority.

One essay participant referred directly to social-class inequality: *'I have been very aware of is knowing what society is like between Mexico and Chile, it is evident that they share the same inequality between the different social classes'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: Spanish).

Passages that referred only to cultural difference, changed expectations or rejection of stereotypes were included under descriptive reflection.

4.6.2. Explicit reference to structural inequality or unequal authority

Explicit reference to structural inequality or unequal authority was coded in 12 of the 51 essays (24%) and in contributions from 54 of the 146 panel participants (37%). The coded passages referred to Global North dominance, unequal attention to Anglophone countries, social-class inequality, institutional educational conditions, employment conditions and devaluation of the teaching profession.

One Chilean participant referred to the dominance of the United States and United Kingdom in English teacher education: *'As I am an EFL pre-service teacher, I am very connected to dominant cultures like the US and the UK, and sometimes I tend to forget about the connection we can build with other cultures that we have more things in common, like Mexico in this case this was a great opportunity for me to grow from that mindset'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

A Mexican participant also referred to the concentration of international attention on the United States and Europe: *'We always focus on the big countries like the United States, England, and Europe, but we forget about our Latin-American brothers'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

Another coded passage referred to employment conditions in teaching: *'Likewise, it is an opportunity to get closer to how society sees teachers in both countries... it is a devalued, poorly paid profession...'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English).

Participants also referred to difficulty combining university study, paid employment and personal responsibilities, limitations in practicum schools, access to teaching positions and educational conditions in Mexico and Chile.

5. DISCUSSION

Participant accounts from this English-mediated South—South COIL project contained four distinguishable forms of intercultural reflection. Relational reflection concerned interpersonal connection, mutual assistance and regional or national affiliation; descriptive reflection concerned cultural practices, similarities and differences; professional reflection concerned teaching and anticipated classroom application; and power-aware reflection contained explicit references to hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality or unequal authority. Under this classification, evidence of criticality resides in the expressed content of a passage. Statements concerning participation, diversity and rapport were assigned to relational or descriptive categories according to their expressed content. Assignment to the power-aware category requires an explicit account of unequal social or institutional relations.

The project accounts included substantial relational and descriptive content, together with statements about Anglophone dominance, social-class inequality and the material conditions of teaching. English formed part of the activity and part of its political subject matter. Professional reflection connected intercultural contact with culturally diverse classrooms and with the social position of teachers. In these accounts, English, regional identification and anticipated teaching appeared within relational, descriptive, professional and power-aware reflection, with no developmental order assigned.

5.1. Locating critical content within intercultural reflection

Relational and descriptive reflection formed the most prevalent content in the midpoint essays. Interpersonal rapport and awareness appeared in 61% of the essays, regional or national identity in 51%, and comparison of cultural markers in 67%. The same categories appeared in the panel dataset, where rapport was recorded for 51% of participants, regional or national identity for 12%, and cultural comparison for 39%. Participants described empathy, trust, curiosity, mutual assistance, reduced anxiety and Latin American affiliation. These statements correspond to Walsh's (2012) relational perspective because they document contact and mutual reference among participants from different national settings. Statements concerning food, schedules, greetings, customs, values and national stereotypes were classified as descriptive reflection.

Walsh's (2012) functional perspective helps explain the educational meaning of statements concerning tolerance, respect, inclusion and appreciation of diversity. Such statements recognise cultural difference within existing social relations. They remain valuable evidence of interpersonal and cultural learning, and their content supplies no automatic evidence of structural critique. Reviews of virtual exchange commonly combine empathy, curiosity, openness, cultural knowledge and professional learning under general accounts of intercultural competence or awareness (O'Dowd, 2021; Wu, 2023). The present study assigns interpersonal and cultural learning to relational or descriptive categories. Passages that name unequal relations receive power-aware coding.

Power-aware statements appeared in both datasets. Self-positioning concerning stereotypes or inequality appeared in 24% of the essays and contributions from 31% of panel participants. Explicit reference to structural inequality or unequal authority appeared in 24% and 37%, respectively. The coded material addressed social class, coloniality, institutional educational conditions, restricted access to teaching positions, low pay, professional devaluation and the concentration of international attention on Anglophone countries. Walsh (2012) associates critical interculturality with colonial and institutional relations that produce inequality. The passages coded as power-aware referred explicitly to such relations.

Relational and power-aware content appeared in both datasets, with no temporal sequence established between them. Each category identifies the subject and level of analysis expressed in a passage. Martin and Pirbhai-Illich (2016) place interpersonal relations in teacher education within socio-historical and geopolitical positions; the present data show how these forms can appear within one educational case. The connection is clearest where participants linked regional affiliation with unequal global attention, or connected professional exchange with the devaluation of teachers. Criticality in this study therefore concerns explicit engagement with the conditions under which cultural and professional relations occur.

5.2. Regional identification and English in a South—South exchange

The Mexico—Chile pairing was discussed through commonality and difference. Intercultural education research commonly centres contact between culturally

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distinct groups and the knowledge gained from comparison (O'Dowd, 2021; Walsh, 2012). Participants in this project also referred to common Latin American, Hispanic and Indigenous identifications, describing Mexico and Chile as sister countries and their peers as Latin American brothers. Regional identification alone remained relational. Several power-aware statements connected regional affiliation with social inequality and the concentration of attention on the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe.

The geographical pairing established a Latin American exchange, and participant statements connected that setting with Anglophone concentration, social-class inequality and professional conditions. Some participants questioned why English education directed sustained attention toward the United States and United Kingdom and gave less attention to Latin American neighbours. Others identified similar social-class inequalities or professional conditions in Mexico and Chile. Stein's (2021) analysis of colonial knowledge hierarchies helps place these statements within critical internationalisation research. Leal et al. (2024) call for cooperation responsive to Global South educational priorities, and Patel (2017) associates socially responsible international education with institutional attention to inequality. Regional affiliation and unequal global attention consequently appeared as linked subjects in participant reflection.

Participants' accounts connected English with three aspects of the project: communication, participation and unequal educational authority. Linguistic or curricular constraints and communication strategies appeared in 45% of the essays and contributions from 32% of panel participants. Participants reported difficulty expressing ideas, anxiety during synchronous discussion, requests for repetition, peer assistance and Spanish used for clarification. Other statements reported greater confidence, fluency or motivation after communication with peers. These reports associate English use with communicative practice and participants' ease of contribution; the power-aware passages also connect it with unequal educational relations.

Participants' use of Spanish placed multilingual communication within the English-designated project. Canagarajah's (2012) account of translingual practice understands communication as use of the linguistic resources available to speakers. In the present case, participants described Spanish explanation followed by continued communication in English. Spanish therefore supported comprehension and continuity within an English-designated project. The data supply evidence of communicative assistance; a claim concerning deliberate resistance to English-language hierarchy would require an explicit statement of that purpose.

The power-aware statements concerning Anglophone dominance connect the communicative and political aspects of English. Callies et al. (2021) and Canagarajah (2012) associate English with unequal academic authority and legitimacy. Participants' references to dominant US and UK cultures gave this issue a case-specific empirical expression. Language consequently formed part of both the educational activity and the content under discussion. Participants reported English as an opportunity for communication, a source of unequal ease of participation and a point of reference in discussion of global educational authority.

5.3. Professional reflection and the social conditions of teaching

Professional reflection connected the intercultural exchange with the participants' preparation for teaching. Professional networking and strategy appeared in 20% of the essays and contributions from 19% of panel participants. Respondents discussed curricula, education systems, teaching strategies, technological resources, professional feedback and continued contact with international peers. Anticipated classroom application concerning diversity appeared in 25% of the essays and 36% of panel participants. These statements referred to Indigenous and immigrant pupils, cultural difference in classrooms, inclusive teaching intentions and possible use of intercultural activities.

Research on virtual teacher education has established that international online exchange can provide material for discussion of curriculum, technology, cultural diversity and future educational practice (Bilki et al., 2023; Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Kopish & Öztürk, 2024). Within this Latin American case, professional reflection addressed intended pedagogy and the institutional conditions of teaching. Participants connected awareness of cultural difference with possible classroom decisions; other passages discussed low pay, professional devaluation, practicum limitations, access to teaching positions and the combination of study with paid employment.

Intercultural preparation for teachers concerns pupils' cultural and linguistic diversity and occurs within education systems that distribute professional status, employment and resources unequally. The coded accounts placed future inclusive teaching and the social position of teachers within the same case. Statements about future classroom inclusion concerned intended pedagogy, and statements about low pay or institutional restrictions concerned the conditions under which such pedagogy would be practised.

Professional reflection therefore included anticipated classroom application and reflection on professional conditions. Teaching competence and classroom enactment require evidence from practicum activity or later professional practice, which remained outside the present study.

5.4. Data-source conditions and evidential scope

Category distributions differed between the essay and panel datasets. Cultural comparison, regional identity and rapport occupied larger proportions of the essay corpus.

Anticipated classroom application and both power-aware categories occupied larger proportions of the panel dataset. These differences occurred within data sources that varied in timing, prompt content, communication mode and participation. The essays provided voluntary individual writing at the project midpoint. The panels occurred at the project end, involved group discussion and asked directly about diversity, professional relevance and future teaching. Preliminary analysis of the essays also informed the panel questions.

The profile of qualitative findings is therefore connected with the conditions under which participants were asked to respond. Bilki et al. (2023) similarly found that task content affected the presence of social-justice discussion in virtual exchange. In the present study, the panel prompts gave explicit attention to professional and intercultural questions, and the group setting permitted response to other speakers. The essay prompt concentrated on encounters, similarities, differences, assumptions, social behaviour and values. These differences help explain why each source contained a different distribution of coded subjects. The design cannot isolate the independent contribution of prompt content, collection timing, communication mode or interaction among participants to the distribution of coded categories.

Participant identifiers could not connect an essay author with the same person's panel contribution. The percentages consequently describe two datasets and provide no estimate of individual development. The voluntary essay sample represented 35% of the cohort and is susceptible to self-selection; its category frequencies therefore describe contributors and cannot be generalised to the full cohort.. The panels included the full cohort. Group discussion permits unequal speaking opportunities. The authors moderated the panels, and the first author taught the Mexican cohort; these relationships may have affected participation and disclosure. The findings also derive from self-reported accounts within one project involving two institutions. Population prevalence, longitudinal development, classroom enactment and institutional transformation remain outside their evidential scope.

The four-category classification separates relational contact, cultural description, professional intention and power-aware reflection through explicit criteria. Within this case, the corpus contained statements linking Latin American regional affiliation with unequal attention to Anglophone countries; accounts of English as communication practice, participation condition and political subject; and professional reflections connecting anticipated classroom inclusion with the material conditions of teaching. The categories have no temporal ordering and permit comparison with forms of reflection reported under other curricular and institutional conditions when studies use equivalent category definitions and units of analysis.

6. CONCLUSION

Latin American teacher education requires accessible forms of international engagement that address regional linguistic, cultural and educational conditions. The Mexico—Chile COIL project examined here places international contact within a South—South relationship mediated through English. The exchange formed part of the participants' regular degree programmes and required no physical mobility. Participant accounts connected Latin American affiliation with Anglophone educational authority, social inequality and the material conditions of teaching. This case supplies empirical evidence of how regional affiliation and unequal global educational relations can become subjects of reflection within the same exchange.

Within this regional setting, interpersonal relation, cultural description, anticipated professional application and explicit engagement with unequal relations appeared as distinct forms of reflection. The classification specifies a verifiable criterion for criticality: power-aware coding requires an explicit reference to hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality or unequal authority. Rapport and cultural comparison retain separate analytical status, and their presence alone makes no claim about structural critique. This distinction increases precision in COIL research that groups empathy, cultural knowledge, professional learning and criticality under broad accounts of intercultural competence.

English connected the study's two research aims. Participants described it as a medium for intercultural contact, a condition affecting ease of contribution and a subject of discussion about Anglophone authority. The corpus contained anticipated inclusive teaching alongside statements about professional devaluation, employment conditions and unequal educational resources. These connections show that language and professional preparation are part of the institutional relations participants discuss when accounting for intercultural experience.

The category profiles in the essays and panels occurred under different prompts, communication modes and participation conditions. Source-level differences provide no estimate of within-person development and require contextual reporting. COIL projects seeking power-aware reflection should provide multilingual means of participation and explicit opportunities to discuss linguistic, institutional and professional inequality. The conclusions concern expressed reflection; competence development, classroom enactment and lasting professional change require evidence from longitudinal records or subsequent practice.

Within this scope, the study provides an empirical basis for examining South—South COIL as a curricular setting in which Latin American pre-service teachers articulate intercultural relations, language use, professional intention and inequality.

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Appendix A. COIL project phases, aims and activities

Table A1
Instructional phases and activities in the COIL project

COMPONENT	AIM	ACTIVITIES
Getting to know my environment	To examine participants' local social and cultural contexts and compare them with those described by their peers.	1. Reflective essay on socio-demographic indicators in participants' locality. 2. Individual video of cultural and individual context. 3. Shared video on a collaborative canvas for further group analysis. 4. Synchronous ice-breaking meeting on a group video call. 5. Contrast reflection of the cultural findings identified in group peers'
Me in relation to the other	To discuss values, identities and educational experiences through reciprocal exchange among participants.	6. Synchronous interview to interchange perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of their own local and academic context through group-designed guiding questions to explore each other's values, emotions, and perceptions. 7. Individual critical essay on relational encounters to question biased assumptions, social behaviours, and values in different cultural contexts. 8. Asynchronous forum integrating the 27 Padlet sites into a single website available to all teams to explore and interact through comments, reflections and insights.

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COMPONENT	AIM	ACTIVITIES
Intercultural manifestations in education	To design, revise and apply intercultural teaching strategies in participants' practicum settings.	9. Individual design of intercultural teaching strategy to apply in their practicum, aiming to promote intercultural awareness in their students. 10. Share strategies in Padlet and asynchronous revision and feedback from team peers through Google Docs. 11. Additional input and strategies co-construction through a team video call. 12. Adjustment and individual application of strategies in practice school visits. 13. Communication of the results, reflections, and drawbacks by asynchronous chat.

Appendix B. Final panel discussion questions

My intercultural experience: challenges, self-performance analysis, peer relationships, and relevant activities of the project.

1. What are the main challenges you had to face during the COIL project?

2. How do you evaluate your own performance during the COIL project?

3. What are some strengths/weaknesses you could identify?

4. What has been your personal experience? You can mention a specific activity and why you found it relevant, innovative, or interesting in terms of interculturality.

5. How do you see this project as a medium of creating friendships or professional networking?

Generic competencies based on intercultural practice: analysing personal and professional impact, understanding interculturality and self-perception of diversity.

1. To what extent did the COIL experience have an impact on your personal/professional growth?

2. Which components of intercultural competences could be developed through a COIL project?

3. In which way can interaction with international students impact your intercultural competences?

4. How has it changed your perspective towards diversity?

Professional competencies in intercultural practice: participants' preparation as pre-service teachers, the pedagogical relevance of their project experience, and possible applications in future teaching, including the use of international learning scenarios to support pupils' intercultural competence.

1. How can a COIL project promote intercultural competences in pre-service teachers?

2. Do you consider it important to bring these collaborative international learning scenarios to your own teaching level? Why?

3. How would you promote intercultural competencies in your own students?

Appendix C. Final coding framework

The coding framework contained four parent themes and eight non-exclusive coded categories. Definitions specify the meaning assigned to each category. Inclusion and exclusion criteria state the textual evidence required for assignment. The extracts illustrate category assignment and do not constitute additional criteria.

Parent theme 1: Participation constraints and communication strategies. Contains statements about conditions affecting participation and responses to communication difficulty. Includes reported experience of English use, Spanish clarification, peer assistance, curricular restrictions and assessed participation. The study did not independently assess language development.

Table C1
Coding criteria for participation constraints and communication strategies

CODED	DEFINITION	ASSIGNMENT CRITERIA	ILLUSTRATIVE EXTRACTS
Linguistic and curricular constraints and communication strategies	Reported conditions that facilitated or restricted participation, together with actions participants used to maintain communication.	Include: Difficulty expressing ideas in English; anxiety concerning spoken communication; perceived differences in English proficiency or confidence; peer assistance; use of Spanish for clarification; requests for repetition or paraphrasing; reported confidence or motivation associated with English practice; pressure or restrictions associated with assessed tasks. Exclude: General evaluations containing no reference to language, communication, participation or curricular conditions; claims of measured language development unsupported by an independent assessment.	1. *'Sometimes I didn't understand, so my partner explained in Spanish, and then we continued in English. That helped me a lot to feel more confident and to keep practicing'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: Spanish). 2. *'Given that this project was marked and monitored, it felt at times that we were unable to go into topics that interested us […] the fact also that it was marked made me feel like I was being pressured to make a connection with them'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

Parent theme 2: Relational and descriptive intercultural reflection. Statements about interpersonal relations, regional or national affiliation, and identification or comparison of cultural practices. References to hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality or unequal authority received an additional power-aware code when they met the relevant criteria.

Table C2
Coding criteria for relational and descriptive intercultural reflection

CODED CATEGORY	DEFINITION	ASSIGNMENT CRITERIA	ILLUSTRATIVE EXTRACTS
Interpersonal rapport and awareness	Reported interpersonal connection, empathy, trust, curiosity, cooperation or negotiation within the participant group.	Include: Empathy; respect; tolerance; curiosity about peers; trust; friendship; mutual assistance; cooperation; commitment; punctuality; group negotiation; interpersonal rapport during online interaction. Exclude: Lists or comparisons of cultural practices without interpersonal reference; professional intentions without interpersonal content; general project evaluations containing no identifiable relational content.	1. *'Through these scenarios, we acquire exposure to others' ideas and cultures to practise our tolerance and develop an open mindset, curiosity, and empathy to people who experience the world through another lens'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English). 2. *'We had the opportunity to discuss, to share information, to share experiences, which I think is the most powerful tool that anyone has because it's what you live and you can share that from your reality from your perspective'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).
Regional or national identity and affective connection	Reported Latin American, Hispanic, Indigenous, national or regional identity, cultural pride, regional similarity or affective connection.	Include: Latin American, Hispanic or Indigenous affiliation; national identity; national belonging; cultural pride; perceived regional similarity; references to sister countries or regional affiliation; personal values explicitly connected to national or regional identity or affiliation. Exclude: Cultural markers with no reference to identity or affiliation; friendship without regional or national reference; future teaching intentions.	1. *'[The COIL encounters] allowed us to learn from other cultures from different countries but also from classmates living in the same country. I learned also from my own country and developed a sense of identity'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English). 2. *'We have the same roots, we are Latino brothers, we share the Latino culture'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).
Comparison of cultural markers	Identification or comparison of cultural practices, similarities, differences, customs, values or visible cultural markers.	Include: Food; festivals; schedules; greetings; language use; religion; customs; personal preferences; cultural similarities or differences; appreciation of cultural diversity; rejection of a stereotype without explicit reference to unequal relations. Exclude: Statements containing no identifiable cultural practice, similarity or difference; statements limited to interpersonal rapport or future teaching. Analyst inference from cultural difference to social inequality was insufficient for a power-aware code.	1. *'I can interpret simple schedules... I can identify how, what and why people eat... social practices such as greeting'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English). 2. *'Similarities are more than the differences... it was much easier to find the things that exist in common'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English).

Parent theme 3: Professional intentions and pedagogical reflection. Contains statements about professional exchange, educational knowledge and anticipated teaching practice. These statements report participants' intentions and reflections. Classroom implementation and professional competence were outside the study.

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Table C3
Coding criteria for professional intentions and pedagogical reflection

CODED CATEGORY	DEFINITION	ASSIGNMENT CRITERIA	ILLUSTRATIVE EXTRACTS
Professional networking and strategy	Reference to professional exchange, educational knowledge, teaching resources or continued professional contact with international peers.	Include: Curricula; education systems; teaching strategies; technological resources; reciprocal professional feedback; exchange of professional experience; possible future use of COIL; continued professional contact. Exclude: Friendship without an educational or professional purpose; general interpersonal rapport; future classroom application centred specifically on pupil diversity or inclusive teaching.	1. *'[Throughout the COIL project I could] exchange knowledge about education to learn the teaching strategies of other countries, their curricula and how the government handles education'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: English). 2. *'I created good relationships with my peers, and I hope we continue in touch to keep sharing strategies and learning once we are in front of the classroom'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: Spanish).
Anticipated classroom application concerning diversity	Reference to possible future teaching practice concerning cultural diversity, inclusion, intercultural activity or virtual collaboration.	Include: Cultural diversity in future classrooms; Indigenous or immigrant pupils; teacher responsibility for inclusive practice; intended use of intercultural activities; attention to pupils' cultural backgrounds or communities; possible use of virtual collaboration in teaching. Exclude: Professional contact without reference to classroom application; personal development with no connection to teaching; claims that classroom competence or implementation had been demonstrated.	1. *'A COIL project contributes positively to pre-service teachers' professional experience because we are having our first contact with school students, so we need to be aware of the cultural differences that we can find inside of a classroom'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English). 2. *'As a teacher in training, it is clear to me the relevance of showing children through social practices the meaning of cultural diversity and interculturality, in order to form empathetic citizens'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English).

Parent theme 4: Power-aware socio-structural reflection. Assignment to this parent theme required explicit reference to unequal authority, social hierarchy, coloniality, Global North dominance, institutional inequality, devaluation of teachers, exclusion, or the participant's position within such relations. References to identity, diversity, empathy, cultural difference or stereotype rejection without such content did not meet the assignment criterion.

Table C4
Coding criteria for power-aware socio-structural reflection

CODED CATEGORY	DEFINITION	ASSIGNMENT CRITERIA	ILLUSTRATIVE EXTRACTS
Self-positioning concerning stereotypes or inequality	A participant connects personal assumptions, identity, or social or professional position explicitly with unequal relations involving stereotypes, social hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality or unequal authority.	Include: First-person examination of assumptions or position combined with explicit reference to national stereotypes and unequal relations, social-class inequality, coloniality, institutional inequality, Global North dominance or unequal professional conditions. Exclude: Rejection of a stereotype without reference to inequality or unequal authority; general structural statements containing no personal self-positioning; references to identity or cultural difference alone.	1. *'I have been very aware of is knowing what society is like between Mexico and Chile, it is evident that they share the same inequality between the different social classes'* (Mexican participant, Essay, Original: Spanish). 2. *'As I am an EFL pre-service teacher, I am very connected to dominant cultures like the US and the UK, and sometimes I tend to forget about the connection we can build with other cultures that we have more things in common, like Mexico in this case this was a great opportunity for me to grow from that mindset'* (Chilean participant, Panel discussion, Original: English).

CODED CATEGORY	DEFINITION	ASSIGNMENT CRITERIA	ILLUSTRATIVE EXTRACTS
Explicit reference to structural inequality or unequal authority	An explicit statement about unequal social, educational, linguistic, institutional or professional relations. Personal self-positioning was not required for this category.	Include: Global North dominance; unequal attention to Anglophone countries; social-class inequality; colonial or postcolonial inequality; unequal institutional or educational conditions; restricted access to education or employment; low pay or devaluation of teachers; South–South cooperation discussed in connection with unequal international authority. Exclude: General statements about respect, openness, empathy or diversity; cultural comparison without reference to unequal relations; personal or curricular difficulty without explicit reference to structural inequality.	1. *'We always focus on the big countries like the United States, England, and Europe, but we forget about our Latin-American brothers'* (Mexican participant, Panel discussion, Original: English). 2. *'Likewise, it is an opportunity to get closer to how society sees teachers in both countries... it is a devalued, poorly paid profession...'* (Chilean participant, Essay, Original: English).

Appendix D. Complete coding hierarchy

Table D1
Parent themes, coded categories and lower-level codes

PARENT THEME	CODED CATEGORY	LOWER-LEVEL CODES
1. Participation constraints and communication strategies	Linguistic and curricular constraints and communication strategies	– English-language anxiety and limited participation. – Peer assistance with comprehension or expression. – Use of Spanish for clarification and continued participation. – Reported confidence or motivation associated with English practice. – Pressure associated with assessed or monitored participation.
2. Relational and descriptive intercultural reflection	Interpersonal rapport and awareness	– General statements of openness to cultural difference. – Curiosity about peers and their cultural practices. – Empathy and tolerance toward different viewpoints. – Group organisation, commitment and punctuality. – Agreement through group negotiation. – Friendship and mutual trust. – Rapport during online interaction.
	Regional or national identity and affective connection	– Latin American, Hispanic or Indigenous affiliation. – National belonging and cultural pride. – Perceived regional similarity and affective connection. – Personal values or life plans explicitly connected to national or regional identity or affiliation.
	Comparison of cultural markers	– Identification or comparison of food, festivals, schedules, greetings, language use, religion or customs. – Appreciation of cultural diversity as educationally or personally valuable. – Description of cultural similarities, differences or stereotypes without explicit reference to unequal relations.
3. Professional intentions and pedagogical reflection	Professional networking and strategy	– Joint discussion or design of teaching strategies. – Reciprocal feedback and exchange of professional experience. – Possible use of COIL or related technological resources in future professional practice. – Continued professional contact with international peers.
	Anticipated classroom application concerning diversity	– Reference to cultural diversity in future classrooms, incl. Indigenous/immigrant pupils. – Teacher responsibility for inclusive classroom practice. – Intention to establish culturally inclusive learning spaces. – Proposed use of intercultural activities or virtual collaboration in future teaching.

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PARENT THEME	CODED CATEGORY	LOWER-LEVEL CODES
4. Power-aware socio-structural reflection	Self-positioning concerning stereotypes or inequality	– Examination of the participant's own assumptions about national stereotypes when explicitly connected to unequal relations. – Examination of the participant's own social position in relation to social-class inequality. – Examination of personal assumptions associated with coloniality or unequal authority. – Questioning assumptions of regional cultural homogeneity when explicitly connected to hierarchy or coloniality. – Professional self-positioning concerning unequal educational or employment conditions.
	Explicit reference to structural inequality or unequal authority	– Global North dominance or unequal attention to Anglophone countries. – Institutional educational inequality, unequal employment conditions, low pay or devaluation of the teaching profession. – Colonial, postcolonial or social-class inequality stated without personal self-positioning. – South–South cooperation discussed in connection with unequal international attention or authority.

Note. The lower-level codes specify the content used to assign passages to each coded category. Categories and codes were non-exclusive. Assignment to a power-aware category required an explicit reference to unequal authority, social hierarchy, coloniality, institutional inequality, unequal professional conditions, or the participant's position within such relations. Cultural comparison and stereotype rejection without such reference were assigned to descriptive reflection.

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