

# The SMILE Project: Applying the Community of Inquiry Framework in Online Collaboration Classes to Enhance Thai Students' Communicative Competence

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## Abstract

This study examined the impact of the SMILE project on the communicative abilities and intercultural awareness of junior high school students in Southern Thailand through virtual collaborative learning. Specifically, it investigated how online activities, such as group presentations and language exchanges, support real-world communication, cultural exposure, and the use of English as a medium of interaction. The study involved two cohorts of Thai participants who participated in the SMILE project over two consecutive years. A mixed-methods approach was employed, with data analyzed using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework to examine the roles of Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, and Teaching Presence in fostering an inclusive digital learning environment. Findings showed that the collaborative virtual setup enhanced students' communicative competence, comfort with English, and cultural understanding. It also helped students express genuine emotions and improved related skills that support early communication development. Results further indicated that when social, cognitive, and teaching components are consistently integrated, educators can strengthen learner engagement and create more supportive learning communities. Overall, the study concludes that well-designed online collaborative learning environments offer meaningful learning experiences and promote global perspectives among young learners.

**Keywords:** Community of Inquiry (CoI), Online collaborative learning, Cultural awareness

## Introduction

The Students Meet Internationally through Language Education (SMILE) Project is an intercultural online communication initiative that connects junior and high school students across countries, including Thailand, Japan, South Korea, China, and Indonesia. Through the project, students engage in authentic English communication using a Dialogbook, an e-portfolio system that enables them to exchange ideas, present cultural experiences, and reflect on learning outcomes within a shared digital environment. The Dialogbook also enables teachers to monitor participation, assess engagement, and gather student perspectives on real communicative exchanges (Iio & Wakabayashi, 2020). These interactions allow students to practice English beyond conventional classroom tasks and gain exposure to peers from different cultural backgrounds.

Studies examining digital collaborative learning report that online platforms create new spaces for communication, knowledge sharing, and cultural exchange, promoting fluency, confidence, and active participation among language learners. Project-based learning approaches similarly encourage students to take ownership of their learning tasks, solve problems collaboratively, and articulate their personal viewpoints during communication activities. Research also suggests that authentic communication tools that allow students to share real experiences promote stronger engagement and meaningful language use, particularly in speaking and listening (Pornthanachotanan et al., 2024). However, while previous studies highlight the benefits of collaborative and project-based learning for language improvement, many focus on older learners or university-level settings, leaving limited evidence on how such approaches support the communication skills of junior high school students in authentic intercultural contexts.

With the increasing adoption of digital collaborative platforms in language education, it becomes important to understand how these tools influence students' speaking, listening, interaction, and confidence in using English. Although the SMILE Project has been implemented in multiple schools, its impact on communication skills has not been widely evaluated, and student perceptions of project-based intercultural communication remain underexplored. This gap indicates a need to investigate how junior high school students experience language learning in online intercultural environments and how such settings support their communicative development.

The present study aims to examine the influence of the SMILE Project on junior high school students' communication abilities, particularly in speaking, listening, and interactive engagement. It further seeks to explore how the program's project-based learning features affect students' confidence in using English and their perceptions of their learning experiences. Findings from this study are expected to provide insights for language teachers and curriculum designers in integrating project-based and intercultural online communication practices to support more meaningful and authentic English language learning for junior high school students.

## Research Objectives

1. To investigate the effectiveness of the SMILE Project, grounded in the Community of Inquiry (Col) framework, in enhancing the communicative competence of Thai junior high school students.
2. To examine how the Col framework supports Thai students' online collaborative learning during school exchanges with Japanese peers.
3. To determine whether Thai junior high school students demonstrate significant improvement in communicative competence after participating in the SMILE Project.

## Research Hypothesis

1. Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the communicative competence of Thai junior high school students before and after participating in the SMILE Project.
2. Alternative Hypothesis: The junior high school students demonstrate significantly higher communicative competence after participating in the SMILE Project.

## Research Framework

This study is anchored in the Community of Inquiry (Col) Framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), which emphasizes that meaningful online learning occurs through the interaction of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. The framework guided the design and implementation of the SMILE Project, an online collaborative learning program in which Thai junior high school students participated in virtual school exchanges with Japanese peers.

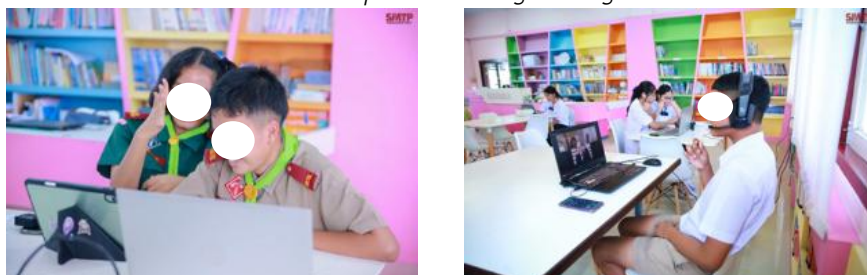
The intervention consisted of three online collaboration classes conducted through Zoom for synchronous communication and Dialogbook for asynchronous interaction and reflection. Students are engaged in collaborative tasks focusing on self-introduction, cultural exchange, school life, hobbies, food, sports, music, and discussions about past experiences and future aspirations. Throughout the intervention, teachers facilitated learning by designing collaborative activities, guiding discussions, monitoring student participation, and providing continuous feedback.

Within the intervention, social presence was developed by encouraging trust, open communication, and intercultural interaction among Thai and Japanese students. Cognitive presence was fostered through collaborative discussions and reflection activities that enabled students to construct meaning and apply language in authentic contexts. Teaching presence was established through instructional design, facilitation of discourse, scaffolding, and formative assessment to support meaningful learning.

Although the online collaboration involved both Thai and Japanese students, the present study examined only the communicative competence of the Thai participants. The integration of the three Col presences is expected to enhance Thai students' communicative competence by providing authentic opportunities to use English in intercultural communication.

**Figure 1**

*Shows how students communicate with their peers through a digital environment*



## Methodology

### 1. Population and Sample

This study employed purposive sampling to collect data from all students who participated in the SMILE Project. A total of 31 Thai students participated in the project over two consecutive years. The first cohort consisted of 11 Thai students who participated from October to November 2023, while the second cohort consisted of 20 Thai students who participated from November to December 2024. All participants were ninth-grade students (Mathayom 3) and were within the same age group. The students were guided by their English teacher, who participated in the SMILE project and was responsible for overall planning, information gathering, and student support from the beginning to the end. The collaboration class is divided into three 60-minute sessions. The topics for each class are shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.**

*Collaboration class topics*

| Class                               | Topics                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> collaboration class | Self-introduction, family, school life, school uniform, hobby                                                                                                                          |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> collaboration class | Extra-curricular activities, clubs, sports, music, movies, food, etc.                                                                                                                  |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> collaboration class | Past and future events:<br>1. What was the most exciting event you experienced?<br>2. What would you like to do in the future?<br>3. What activities do you want to try in the future? |

Throughout the three sessions, the students were divided into groups of four to five members (e.g., 2 or 3 Thais and 2 Japanese students), who interacted through the online platform and the Dialogbook. Two (2) rounds of interaction, each lasting thirty (30) minutes, complete each session. For the second (2nd) contact, they had to switch members to finish the 60-minute engagement. Afterward, the students used the Dialogbook to record their feedback and assess their interactions with peers. Teachers provided rubric questions to each collaborative class's Dialogbook (see Table 2). The participating teachers also have real-time access to a Dialogbook,

which allows them to view students' feedback and ratings regarding their experience. It also provides a reference for them to adjust the session and monitor their performance during collaborative sessions.

## 2. Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a mixed method design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection instrument. Quantitative data was derived from two instruments embedded in the Dialogbook platform: (1) a self-assessment questionnaire and (2) students' reflective comments. Following each online collaboration class, students completed a self-assessment questionnaire consisting of five statements related to the session topic (see Table 2). Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale: 0 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Agree, and 3 = Strongly Agree. Moreover, students also provided written reflections and feedback in the Dialogbook comment section to share their opinions and personal thoughts freely. All of these were completed by the end of each session as you can see in figure 2.

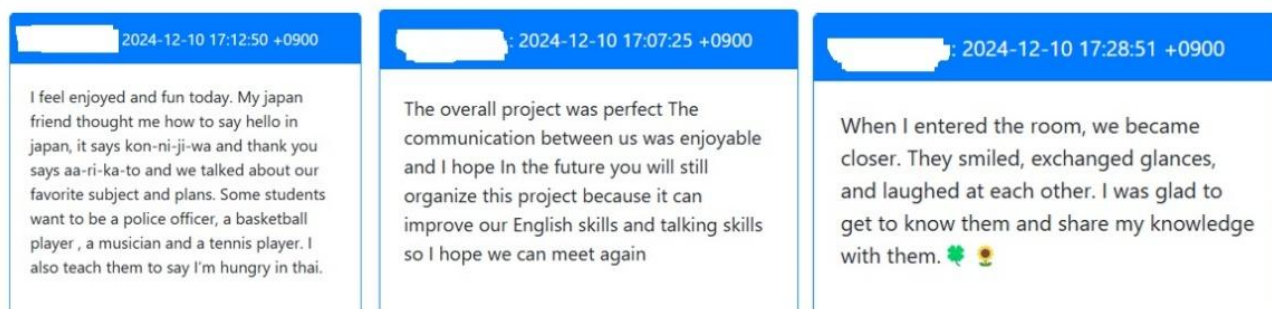
**Table 2.**

*Rubric questions*

| Item       | Question                                                                              |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Question 1 | Did you participate well in today's online collaboration class?                       |
| Question 2 | Did you enjoy the conversation on today's topic?                                      |
| Question 3 | Did you ask questions and respond properly to your classmates?                        |
| Question 4 | Did the online collaboration class help improve your English language skills?         |
| Question 5 | Did you make your best effort in expressing your thoughts and ideas on today's topic? |

**Figure 2**

*Represents sample student comments in the Dialogbook's comment section*



Additionally, qualitative data were conducted by semi-structured interviews upon the completion of the three collaborative classes to assess the project's overall impact on language

learning and skill development. Some of the questions asked are: What is the most important thing you learned personally during this project? How will you use what you have learned in the future? What do you think you need to improve yourself, and how would you do it?

## Results

Table 3 presents the combined average of the two schools for Thai and Japanese students in the first study group following each collaboration class, using Dialogbook's rubric questions. The average scores above 2 across all topics, often recorded during collaborative sessions, indicate that most students strongly agree with the rubric's items. Furthermore, the ratings for Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5 increased gradually, indicating a stronger desire to learn more about cultural differences between Thailand and Japan in sports, music, film, education, and food. It is also noteworthy that during the second collaboration session, Question 2 received the highest score.

**Table 3.**

*Combined average scores in the first study group following each collaboration class*

| Questions                                                                                 | 1st Collaboration | 2nd Collaboration | 3rd Collaboration |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                                                                                           | Class             | Class             | Class             |
| Q1. Did you participate well in today's online collaboration class?                       | 2.45              | 2.48              | 2.68              |
| Q2. Did you enjoy the conversation on today's topic?                                      | 2.75              | 2.90              | 2.79              |
| Q3. Did you ask questions and respond properly to your classmates?                        | 2.40              | 2.43              | 2.63              |
| Q4. Did the online collaboration class help improve your English language skills?         | 2.70              | 2.71              | 2.74              |
| Q5. Did you make your best effort in expressing your thoughts and ideas on today's topic? | 2.50              | 2.67              | 2.74              |

Remarkable trends emerge when carefully reviewing each student's response to the question. Higher motivation to communicate in English and familiarity with information and communication technology (ICT) for interaction are indicated by a significant increase in Question 1 scores, particularly between the second and third collaboration sessions. In contrast, Question

3 shows a steady rise trend, indicating improvements in peer-to-peer English discourse exchange. Significant effort is evident in expressing ideas and opinions during social interactions, particularly between the first and second collaboration classes; the trends in Question 5 are like those in Question 1.

Regarding Question 4, the gradual improvement in scores across collaboration sessions suggests that these sessions had a substantial impact on students' ability to communicate effectively in English. According to the results of the previous collaboration class, most teachers held positive views of online collaborative learning. They acknowledge its capacity to promote free expression and intercultural understanding while enhancing students' self-esteem, language proficiency, and cultural awareness. Additionally, teachers value the flexibility that online platforms provide, enabling students to learn English in a variety of settings beyond traditional classrooms.

Table 4 shows improvements from Question 3 to Question 5, indicating increases in communication ability, particularly in interaction, language development, and self-expression. A lower SD in 2024, particularly on Questions 3 and 4, indicates more consistent student responses, which is a positive sign of stable development.

**Table 4.**

*Thai students' participation and perceptions of the SMILE Project*

| Area                                                                                      | Year   | Mean | Median | SD   | Range     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|------|--------|------|-----------|
| Q1. Did you participate well in today's online collaboration class?                       | Year 1 | 2.58 | 2.60   | 0.12 | 2.40-2.70 |
|                                                                                           | Year 2 | 2.44 | 2.42   | 0.07 | 2.36-2.57 |
| Q2. Did you enjoy the conversation on today's topic?                                      | Year 1 | 2.58 | 2.54   | 0.10 | 2.45-2.72 |
|                                                                                           | Year 2 | 2.54 | 2.55   | 0.11 | 2.38-2.66 |
| Q3. Did you ask questions and respond properly to your classmates?                        | Year 1 | 2.63 | 2.63   | 0.16 | 2.45-2.81 |
|                                                                                           | Year 2 | 2.77 | 2.76   | 0.08 | 2.64-2.88 |
| Q4. Did the online collaboration class help improve your English language skills?         | Year 1 | 2.63 | 2.63   | 0.16 | 2.45-2.81 |
|                                                                                           | Year 2 | 2.77 | 2.76   | 0.08 | 2.64-2.88 |
| Q5. Did you make your best effort in expressing your thoughts and ideas on today's topic? | Year 1 | 2.63 | 2.63   | 0.08 | 2.50-2.72 |
|                                                                                           | Year 2 | 2.77 | 2.76   | 0.10 | 2.55-2.82 |

Furthermore, Question 1 and Question 2 had a slight drop in Year 2, which may indicate a need to change engagement methods; however, Question 3, Question 4, and Question 5 showed a noticeable improvement in Year 2, particularly in asking and responding (Q3) and expressing ideas (Q5), indicating stronger engagement and communication development over time. Despite initial declines in participation and satisfaction, the data indicate that later sessions of the SMILE project in Year 2 had higher levels of involvement and effort than in Year 1. These

findings indicate that students adapted to the project and became more confident and interested as it progressed, highlighting the importance of sustained efforts and familiarity in fostering positive educational outcomes.

Selected feedback from Thai students recorded in the Dialogbook comments section across the collaboration sessions is presented below:

1. *Today I'm very happy. This is my first time talking to a Japanese friend. I know that today it's sunny there. But in Thailand, it's raining. (Student A)*
2. *Today I'm happy to see everyone. It's the first time that I've talked with Japanese people. I introduced myself with them. They are cute and friendly. I hope the next time will be good time again. (Student B)*
3. *During our conversation today, we shared about each other's cultures. We discussed various aspects, such as Sumo wrestling and Songkran Day, among others. We also spoke in each other's respective languages. They taught us three Japanese phrases: "Sayonara" for goodbye, "Itadakimasu" for let's eat, and "Arigatou" for thank you. (Student C)*
4. *Today's class, I talk about my hobbies and what we eat in our lunch time in Thailand. I also talk about my hobby. We introduced some games too. (Student D)*
5. *Today I had a lot of fun. I was a bit nervous in the first session, but I did better in the second session. This time we prepared a presentation introducing Thai culture which made it easier for us to discuss various topics. I felt that I did better this time than last time. But what I need to improve is reduce my nervousness. Although I regretted a little that I did not exchange contact information with the Japanese student in the second session because the time was up. But overall, the collaboration went well. (Student E)*
6. *Today meeting I have learned a lot about new things about school in Japan. I have know a game that Japanese student like to play it's kinda like a game in Thailand it so very interesting. I want to talk to you for a little longer, so see you next time. (Student F)*

According to the comments, Thai students learn new things about culture, language, food, playing games, and other topics while conversing with their Japanese peers, and they also discover certain similarities. A student also mentioned overcoming nervousness and communicating well.

7. *Today I was able to have the best conversation I've ever had, so I was very happy. I am grateful to have such valuable experience. Thank you very much. (Student G)*
8. *The collaboration for today, my partner and I talk with Japanese friends about future goals. We exchange careers that each person want to be. It's funny although sometime they are shy to answer my question but they are good listeners. I think this project makes me know how is my English skill. It's good I think, I satisfied but I think it should be better. Thank you for this opportunity. I hope I'll see them again someday. (Student H)*
9. *Good at all. My English improved very much by this project. (Student I)*

10. *It was really good. We talked a lot this time. We shared personal stories about food, games, etc. This project gave me the courage to speak up. Express more opinions it is considered a good project.* (Student J)

The students' responses reflect their attitudes toward their English language abilities and their perceptions of the SMILE Project's impact on the development of their communicative skills. They appreciated the opportunity to communicate in English with Japanese students and evaluate themselves. Following the completion of the SMILE project, interviews with the students were conducted. The goal was for students to reflect on their project accomplishments and determine the English communication skills they wanted to improve to attain their long-term goals. The interview questions are listed in Table 5.

**Table 5.**

*Interview Questions*

| Questions                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Q1 What is the most important thing you learned personally during this project? |
| Q2 How will you use what you have learned in the future?                        |
| Q3 What things do you think you need to improve about yourself? How?            |

The following are responses from students to Question 1:

1. *"The most important thing is I guess English is very useful and it's definitely some other languages they need to know when you try to talk to other people from the countries."* (Student A)
2. *"I have learned how to talk about other people with my accent and be confident with your accent to have people understand you."* (Student B)

According to their responses to question 1, they emphasized the significance of English as a means of communication with people from across the world, as well as having the ability to communicate effectively in real-world situations.

On Question 2, students made the following comments:

1. *"When I go abroad in the future, I will try to communicate with others by using similar topics that I heard in this meeting."* (Student C)
2. *"I will be confident and have to believe in myself that I can communicate with others."* (Student D)

The responses they provided to Question 2 highlighted the importance of using what they acquired in the future and detailed the level of confidence they have developed because of the exchanges.

Students responded to Q3 with the following comments:

1. *"I will improve myself, I will practice how to speak and pronounce words clearly and have a good vocabulary and sentence to talk other people."* (Student E)
2. *"For me I think I need more confidence to speak. And I think I need to know more vocabulary because sometimes I need to say something but I dont know how to say in this language."* (Student F)
3. *"I need to learn more vocabularies maybe by watching English movies and reading more books in English."* (Student G)

The responses in Question 3 emphasized the students' thoughts on their abilities and the knowledge that they could improve themselves in particular aspects of communication, demonstrating a self-assessment of their language ability.

## Discussion

Given the challenges most Thai schools face, it is important to emphasize the development of communicative skills among Thai students at all levels. The speaking component is typically overlooked, if not limited to, or treated as minor, in Thai classroom activities or examinations, with most teachers focusing on vocabulary and grammar but offering no opportunity to apply them in real-life conversations. Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) is another technique that may enable students to use the language to communicate online (Songpitak & Ekkayokkaya, 2022). Furthermore, a recent study has shown that a well-designed collaborative activity most strongly promotes the social and interdependent aspects of learner autonomy (Zhong, Q.M., 2021). According to Little (2000, 2017), a key component of learner autonomy development is students' ability to engage in social interactions critically and collaboratively. Learners are "never (*italics original*) independent; rather, they are linked to other people and their tools and their practices in complex ways" (Toohey, 2007).

The patterns and results align with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which emphasizes three essential elements — cognitive presence, social presence, and instructional presence — to support meaningful learning in online and blended contexts. The improvement in responses to Questions 4 (English skill improvement) and 5 (expressing thoughts and ideas) in 2024 indicates increased cognitive involvement. As the SMILE project progressed, students gained confidence and a sense of meaning in their language use, demonstrating that the collaborative atmosphere fostered deeper learning and critical thinking. The consistent increase in Question 3 (communication with peers) and Question 1 (participation levels) (by the third collaboration) in 2024 demonstrates an increasing feeling of inclusion. The rising numbers indicate that students were more comfortable communicating with other students, creating a supportive environment in which they could ask questions and engage meaningfully. The consistent or better results in Question 2 (enjoyment of the conversations) and subsequent gains in participation (particularly in the third collaboration) demonstrate that the SMILE Project's structure and facilitation

procedures were effective. The design likely facilitated students' gradual adaptation to the collaboration, resulting in sustained engagement and meaningful participation.

## Recommendations

1. The Community of Inquiry framework provides a valuable lens for evaluating and enhancing online collaborative learning environments. The Col framework offers a structured approach to analyzing and supporting collaborative learning in online settings, which aligns closely with the study's objectives. This approach, which views online learning as a community of inquiry, gives insights into the important components and relationships that contribute to effective learning outcomes. Using the Col principle, this study investigated how social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence influenced students' perceptions of learning outcomes and satisfaction in online collaborative learning environments.

2. The study's findings indicate that online collaborative learning, such as the SMILE Project, effectively improves students' communicative competence in English and other basic communication skills. This study also recommends including OCL in the curriculum as an additional method to help students develop real-world communication skills.

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