

Web-Building Connections: A Best-Practice Example of Using International Resources in Online Intercultural Didactics for Teachers

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Abstract

The English Language fifth-year Lab at Primary Education Science in Roma Tre (academic year 2019–2020, second semester) aimed to foster trainee teachers' language competences while providing them with methodological skills and examples of active engagement in intercultural projects using e-learning/distance learning. The Covid-19 lockdown deeply affected the course development: it forced participants to restructure their learning and activities so as to meet their new needs of self e-teaching in an e-didactics modality, as well as the fears that the new scenario was triggering; it also enabled them to discover unforeseen perspectives of international cooperation and emotional empathy with their peers at home and abroad, which fostered their will to use English as a lingua franca and improved their linguistic skills.

Task-based activities regarding the different Lab modules, which ranged from self-/peer-directed assessment questionnaires to story writing and video recordings of different games, singing and creativity sessions, made the Lab become a sort of hub for innovative strategies and practices in language teaching, including the use of Makaton and music to tell stories and describe illustrations. These outputs, which have been collected and are currently under research, were meant as an assessment for the students, but also as motivating challenges to tackle the future teachers' competences in intercultural international activities (and use English) themselves. Strategies for L2 teaching and learning have proven effective also in conveying a sense of extended community, belonging and participation in achieving shared goals to foster responsible citizenship.

Key-words: interculturality, storytelling, teachers' self-awareness.

* Raffaella Leproni set out the Lab format at Roma Tre and is responsible for the Introduction and the Conclusions; Mireia Canals-Botines developed the part on Storytelling for L2 teaching, while Sharon Tonner Saunders described the HOTW project.

As an educating community, the school generates a diffused relational conviviality, interwoven with affective and emotional languages, capable of promoting the sharing of those values which enable the members of society to feel they are part of a real community. “Teaching to learn” is paired with “teaching to be”, aimed at nurturing the uniqueness and individuality of each student’s cultural identity.

(MIUR, *Indicazioni Nazionali per il Curricolo*, p. 6)

1. Introduction: practice what you preach

The present-day emergency has forced teachers at all school levels to cope with an enormous amount of self-e-teaching, as well as with providing materials, lessons and support via previously unexplored channels. At the university level, since teaching on-site with huge numbers is impossible, courses had to be restructured for an e-didactics modality, so as to cope with different needs concerning technical as well emotional issues, on both the teachers’ and the students’ side.

When teaching primary school trainee teachers, we must also consider that the strategies used in the courses set an example for those who are learning how to perform the same job at a different level: the teacher becomes a facilitator of the students’ learning and at the same time a model for their imitation process, communicating not only content, but also relational, cultural and strategic aspects. The fifth-year Laboratory of English Language for Primary Education in Roma Tre, held from March to June 2020, was therefore focused on building a facilitating environment (Margottini and Rossi 2019), allowing students to learn competences as well as notions, and fostering *learning readiness* – the necessary maturity to assimilate a “vast set of knowledge, abilities, behaviours, competences” previously acquired, through listening and performing (Trinchero 2015: 54). Learning by doing and task-based learning¹ were at the basis of the activities designed for trainee teachers, to help them construct the preconditions for future education interventions.

¹ About task-based learning/teaching, see Lightbown and Spada 2006, and www.insegnareconitask.it.

The laboratory was conceived to achieve multiple aims: enhancing language competences (both at the communication level – production and understanding – and classroom language use); providing students with methodological skills and examples of how to engage their pupils in intercultural projects using e-learning and distance learning; constructing an *intercultural communicative language learning/teaching* (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, Kohler 2003, and Newton, Yates, Shearn, Nowitzki 2010) to teach culture and develop linguistic abilities alongside intercultural communication.

The integrated method of language teaching proposed embedding the learners' cognitive and learning styles in Gardner's multiple intelligences theory ([1983] 2011)² and fostering critical thinking while promoting social and collaborative learning. In classroom practice, Dellit's five principles (2005: 26-28) were applied to experiential didactics (reinterpreted in an inclusive e-learning modality), to actively involve all students, regardless of numbers and non-homogeneity, in the construction of knowledge through exploring cultural practices. They were prompted to build connections between cultures and previous knowledge of language and culture, and the new competences offered by the course; enhance social interaction through communication activities which cross cultural barriers; critically reflect on cultural and linguistic awareness, assuming the responsibility for their own cultural growth.

In terms of innovation, the aim of the students' active involvement in different international projects integrated into the lab syllabus was to develop identity, autonomy, interrelation, professional as well as linguistic competences, and responsible citizenship, through a specifically devised setting able to convey a sense of extended community, belonging and participation in achieving shared goals. The practice strategy relied on promoting reflection on experience through exploration, observation and comparison, to understand how teachers can work together, even at a distance, in planning, creating, implementing, and managing active, participatory

² For a deeper perspective, see also Kolb, David A., 1984, *Experiential Learning. Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Englewood Cliffs (NJ), Prentice-Hall Inc.; Sternberg, Robert J., 1997, *Thinking Styles*, C.U.P., Cambridge.

and “real” intercultural learning. This aspect also represents an important research outcome, as it has provided the investigators of the different projects with data to assess the efficacy of their interventions at multiple levels (before/during lockdown teaching strategies, before/during lockdown linguistic achievements), thereby allowing comparison between the projects as well.

2. Teaching path: structure, activities, challenges³

The original blended format of the laboratory was restructured so as to cope with the emergency in a smart-learning perspective. Ninety-nine students were presented different units on a moodle platform (formonline), each including study materials (PowerPoints, video lessons, documents, texts), serving as a basis for the practical tasks they had to complete to obtain the lab grade; they also had access to external online resources and participated in live meetings and webinars.

All activities were carried out online. For each unit, the original blended format was replicated and adapted to its specific contents, taking into account the new needs imposed by the lockdown. An explanatory meeting (synchronous or asynchronous depending on the unit) was provided for every task assigned, along with materials on the platform, calibrated so as to support students in the activities they had to develop; production of outputs in English was requested, foreseeing both linguistic and extralinguistic goals focalised on the topic of the unit, as well as on the use of ESP (classroom English, English for educators) along with B2-level general English. Task-based activities included questionnaires of self-/peer-evaluation and peer-assessment; story writing (narratives aimed at language teaching, based on some specific structures explained and exemplified in the support materials); short videos to be produced within playing, singing, and recreational sessions (many of which were conceived as a specific response to the emergency conditions).

In facing the present context of uncertainty and disorientation, it is more imperative than ever to reinterpret goals and expected

³ For a quick overview of the whole project, including assessment, see the Sway page <https://sway.office.com/XFmhIF7KjtRPH495?ref=Link>.

results and analyse expectations. To do this, teachers (and trainee teachers) should focus on self-awareness as well as on their need to learn new key competences (Council of Europe, Recommendation 18 December 2006). In this perspective, the first two units touched on the importance of L2 teaching and learning (focusing simultaneously on higher education and primary school, and offering an overview of different strategies, tools and materials, in the light of the *Indicazioni Nazionali* 2012 and subsequent additions), and on teachers' self-evaluation and assessment strategies and tools. Two questionnaires⁴ developed within an on-going project on English teachers' self-assessment and one on the Analysis and Construction of Didactic Materials⁵ were offered to students, to prompt their critical thinking strategies on self-evaluation and planning competences. A forum was opened to favour interaction (in English) among peers, as well as with the teacher.

Students were then involved in two international projects: *Storytelling for L2 Teaching*, carried out with the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia, Spain, and *Hands of the World – Can You See What I Say* (HOTW), an award-winning eTwinning project developed by the University of Dundee, Scotland. Both

⁴ PET-PA Primary English Teachers – Practice Analysis, and PET-LSE Primary English Teachers – Language Self-Evaluation, available at <https://formonline.uniroma3.it/>, were designed to foster the reflection on professional needs and practice that makes the teacher a “reflective practitioner” (Schon, [1983] 1991), reasoning “on the action while it is taking place” to elaborate more aware and effective operative models. The PET-PA Questionnaire (34 items on a 0-4 Lickert scale) aims at self-/peer-oriented analysis of teaching practice: use of the language, materials, didactic approaches, life-long learning. Students provided feedback on it through an evaluation grid, which made it possible to reformulate/reposition some items. The PET-LSE focuses on both teaching and learning, inquiring on language skills (questions concern the teacher's needs in the four abilities), and extra-linguistic skills (cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities, socio-relational abilities, affective/emotional-motivational abilities) through 15 questions subdivided into multiple items, on a 0-5 Lickert scale + yes/no/other + open choice. The questionnaires, made to be re-used over time, deal with expectations, observation and outcomes, as student teachers need to analyse their teaching experience, motivate their choices, rethink their own teaching experience, analyse a colleague's experience or relate to their own activity. The analysis of these questionnaires' outputs is not going to be dealt with in this paper, as it is still under investigation.

⁵ M.A.T.E.R.I.A.L.S. – Analysis and construction of didactic materials, at <https://formonline.uniroma3.it/mod/folder/view.php?id=26003>.

projects develop reflection on and narration of one's personal experiential paths through actively involving students in performing tasks ranging from the importance of stories and the capacity to construct and use them in teaching and learning a second language, to the need to develop an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences. All activities were held in English, and designed to be performed as students, but also to be replicated as teachers in a classroom.

During the lab, students already working as teachers of English in primary schools were invited to cooperate on a survey on the lockdown effects on the didactics of a foreign language, conducted on a sample of ninety-nine teachers within the regions of the three sponsoring universities (Lazio for Roma Tre; Catalonia for UVIC; the western region of Romania – Timiș, Hunedoara, Caraș-Severin and Arad – three for Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara). The questionnaire (22 items, partly multiple-choice, partly open answers organised by grades, intensity and possibility, and subdivided into four sections) was administered on a voluntary basis between May and July 2020. The outcomes of the research, under publication forthcoming, show that before Covid-19 the digital competence of teachers was on average rather low: the majority of the answers indicates lack of training in online teaching to children, on crisis management, and on online support for parents and families, as well as for teachers. The situation changed during the lockdown, as the number of teachers using live lessons tripled; answers show a prominent use of webinars, video recordings and screencasts, together with a more intense use of virtual class management systems and online games. As to the challenges faced during lockdown, three main issues were highlighted: monitoring the children's progress; lack of training and support; and keeping the children motivated. After the first lockdown, the tools the teachers would continue to use include video recordings, screencast software and online games, followed by virtual classroom management and webinar tools. Notwithstanding the initial difficulties faced by teachers in handling distant teaching, the survey shows how keeping a positive attitude, especially concerning the role of the "school-family alliance", proved fundamental in building a cooperative environment which significantly helped children in their new learning experience.

3. Storytelling for L2 teaching (University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia)

3.1. Description of the project, aims and features

Unit 3, dedicated to storytelling, opened with an individual questionnaire⁶ investigating previous knowledge on the topic. So far, results show that although the majority of students had heard about it, they did not have specific or technical knowledge of the methodology, especially applied to L2 teaching.

Taking part in the Storytelling project, students were invited to write a story with some classmates, with the imagined purpose of using it in a class of their own. Following the teacher's guidelines, students were asked to reflect on different structures and innovative strategies in storytelling sessions from the double perspective of students and trainee teachers. PowerPoint recordings with explanations were provided, which helped foster the creative writing process. The first session was about the scope, chronology and main topics of children's books and picture books, and the evolution of children's literature into more recent formats; the second session dealt with drama in relation to children's literature, providing materials on the structure of stories that people read, and the difference between children's stories and adult stories. The classical Aristotelian structure, divided into three acts, was then introduced, along with the concept of the base-chain, which is the formula of the structure, in order not to forget which parts need to be included in the story.

The question arising at this point is if a classical structure is applicable to tales for children in a foreign language, as many complications may affect the length of the stories and consequently the attention of the children – this limitation possibly leading to unsubstantial stories. The classical three-act structure can therefore be used if some parts of the structure are modified.

Within the classical system, two structures were presented: the causal structure with a final turning point, and the descriptive structure, which has five substructures: informative, circular, protagonist, dramatic and narrative (Canals-Botines 2020). The

⁶ Available at <https://formonline.uniroma3.it/mod/url/view.php?id=26000>.

objective was that pre-service teachers could learn to write good stories for primary school pupils starting from the base-chains and including all the elements required.

3.2. Task

The task assigned to students consisted of writing a short story for children (between a page and a page and a half long), in any form the students liked, choosing one of the structures and following the base-chain given beforehand. Students were instructed to work in pairs, online, using the forum on the lab platform to cooperate. The aim of the stories created was to teach the students target-vocabulary, grammar forms or functional expressions. Some key requirements had to be met: the audience would be between 3 and 12 years old (kindergarten to primary school education; vocabulary should be adapted accordingly); a title; and a biography for the main character had to be built up. This would help to create the story. Students also had to give a name to the main character which should sound familiar to their audience, to foster empathy and make the listeners feel the framework close to their everyday life. The actions of the story should be numbered.

Some rules for writing for children were suggested too, as children are as demanding as adults: the point of view should be the children's; ellipsis ought to be used to create suspense and so that pupils can guess what is coming next; no overuse of fantasy, because children can detect extreme exaggeration; characters should be one-dimensional and simple, so children can easily follow the events. All in all, stories should be real and straight plausible, and complications should look like real difficulties.

3.3. Clues for the evaluation and results

Students created sixty-three stories in subgroups of two to three people each. Six items were evaluated, so as to explore the extent of the students' creativity, as well as to understand how they had interpreted the potential of using stories to develop linguistic awareness and extra-linguistic competences in their pupils:

- The NARRATIVE STRUCTURE chosen to create a story for English Language Learning (Causal Structure with two variations for

the final turning point; or Descriptive Structure with five variations for the inner development of the plot). The most frequently used narrative structure was the negative-to-positive causal structure (38), followed by the circular descriptive (9), the dramatic descriptive (6), the informative descriptive (5), the positive-to-negative causal structure (3) and the protagonist descriptive (2).

- The AGE OF THE PUPILS for whom the story was made. Most stories addressed six to eight-year-olds (31), while ten to twelve was the least popular age bracket (5); the rest addressed pupils between three and five, or nine and ten.

- PROTAGONIST'S GENDER: During the sessions, a broad explanation was devoted to the need for the stories to be in the line of gender equality. In reference to the protagonist's gender, feminine (30) and masculine (30) characters were chosen equally; some co-protagonists appeared (2), as well as one no-gender protagonist which dealt with the gender topic. Also, using humanised animals or objects is characteristic of stories at these stages.

- The TYPES OF PROTAGONISTS were clearly stated: animal protagonists (24), girls (22), boys (12), unanimated objects such as water drops or books (4) and an ungendered protagonist.

- The most common TOPICS were friendship, and school and classmates. Nevertheless, many other topics arose such as gender equality, nature, jealousy, inclusion, difference, family, cooking, helping others, fear, playing together, colours (also linked to emotions), a day at the park, strength, traditions, love, water lifecycle, farm animals, a new pet, seasons, and sharing. Covid-19 was also present, to explain the emotion of fear of the unknown.

- The FORMAT of the story (narration, song, rhyme, poem, or any alternative format). Narration was the most common format (55), then picture books (3), verse combined with narration (2), poems (2). There was also an animated PowerPoint featuring a water drop as the protagonist and an edited short cut with a narrator. Some unexpected results arose: Open Ending, the use of verse and picture, picture books, emphasis on onomatopoeia, the use of photography as a form of graphic narrative, and a tale-inside-a-tale to exemplify the conflict in the story.

Fulfilling the initial hopes concerning the level of English of the trainee teachers (B2 by law in Italy, to obtain the qualification to

teach at primary school) the English in general was well written, although some corrections had to be made before using the stories in class. Final recommendations were suggested: the use of images to contrast with words to complement the narration, and the need to consider a language learning aim. This was clear prior to the students' creating the stories, as they themselves had to take language aims such as functional expressions and vocabulary sets related to the topic they chose into consideration when working on the task. The variety of topics and characters, and the combinations of structures chosen in writing the stories, widely discussed among students on the forum, confirmed that promoting creativity fosters debate, enhances motivation and triggers cooperation and connections.

4. Hands of the World: Can You See What We Say?

Hands of the World: Can You See What We Say (HOTW)⁷ is a global intercultural project originally created to unite pupils aged 3–18 from around the world using music and Makaton signing⁸ as the main communication mediums (Tonner-Saunders 2019b). The project's aim was to create an inclusive learning environment where linguistic identities could be preserved and pupils could “work collaboratively to develop an understanding and appreciation of identities, cultures and languages” (Tonner-Saunders 2020). These aims were aligned with the United Nations' (n.d.) views of the importance of preserving linguistic identities to enable people to develop an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences and to ensure that many linguistic identities around the world do not become extinct. The HOTW project made every effort to celebrate and share the many linguistic differences within the community of learners to ensure that the richness of the wonderful sounds associated with each language was heard by all rather than muted. English was the lingua franca, as all webinars for the teachers and

⁷ <https://twinspace.etwinning.net/94991/home>.

⁸ Makaton integrates signs (gestures) and symbols (pictures) with speech, in spoken word order, to help people communicate. Facial expression, eye contact and body language back up the speech too, to give as much information as possible. See https://makaton.org/TMC/About_Makaton/What_is_Makaton.aspx, last accessed 1 September 2020.

trainee teachers were held in English; pupils at school and trainee teachers were engaged in activities using both English and their mother tongue.

The HOTW project provided a participatory learning environment where communication barriers were broken down and linguistic identities preserved through online inclusive collaborative activities: songs, rhymes, interactive postcards, a travelling teddy bear, differentiated challenges and online webinars (Tonner-Saunders 2019a). The rich learning that was taking place within the project, with over two thousand pupils from over forty schools around the world participating, allowed the trainee teachers to experience a real live project rather than to learn about the benefits of intercultural learning only through lectures and professional literature. Contextualised learning enabled learners to make connections between the context and the learning rather than learning in isolation (CORD 2006 and Satriani 2012). Participation in the project, constantly monitored through the different apps and tools implemented on the eTwinning space (e.g. Padlet, Vimeo, Blogspot)⁹ and on the Facebook group, helped students to make connections with theoretical models of learning, e.g. constructivism, where learning is a social process (Vygotsky 1978). Students experienced three progressive levels of participation: first by observing how pupils from different countries were constructing their knowledge together through the various project activities, next by taking a more active role by asking teachers in the project questions and then to full active participation by being involved in activities as learners rather than observers or questioners. This tiered level of learning is grounded in the notion of Lave and Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation, where learners progressively work towards full participation in a community of practice where knowledge is co-constructed (Wenger 1998).

Over the duration of the HOTW project, students' participation levels varied greatly due to various factors: academic and professional commitments, priorities, time available, motivation, context, and unpredictable circumstances. The latter was the key factor that impacted greatly on the others, in a positive way. When the World

⁹ See the section *Collaborative Learning through eTwinning and Online Tools* at <https://twinspace.etwinning.net/94991/pages/page/989340>.

Health Organization (2020) announced Covid-19 in January 2020, all schools involved in the HOTW project were enthusiastically engaging in many of the project's activities in their classroom settings. At that time, participation for those who attended university courses on-site was high due to them taking part in the activities during their lessons, therefore having the time, space, and real-time support to be questioners and active participants; videos were created of them singing and signing HOTW songs in their own language, alongside watching contributions by other universities and schools. Most students who were not attending courses on-site, instead, took a hidden observation role in the project's online environment, where all the activities took place (videos and comments were uploaded on Padlet, peer-exchanges were fostered both on eTwinning and on formonline platforms) – something like being a lurker online, where people are members of an online group only to observe rather than contribute (Dennen 2008; Tedjamulia *et al.* 2005; Sun *et al.* 2014). This was evident through low participation in the HOTW teacher Facebook group and the project's activities. They did become active questioners and participants in their own time in the monthly online professional development webinars. This greater motivation to participate could be due to the extrinsic motivation of gaining a certificate of attendance and/or the intrinsic motivation of the webinars' themes being chosen by them¹⁰. Another reason could be attributed to the flexibility of the webinars: students could either attend the live sessions or watch the recordings later, with the latter being the preference at that time.

Participation in the HOTW project changed dramatically during the lockdown period, where there was a sudden, rapid increase in students wanting to watch the formerly recorded webinars and share their reflections. The live webinars, which previously had an average attendance rate of around 30 trainee teachers, rose considerably, to around 130 attendees per webinar. The recorded sessions were now attracting over 370 trainee teachers compared to around 60 previously, as testified by the comments left on the various webinar columns on the different Padlet pages. This increase in interest was due to the lockdown removing variables that had hindered students'

¹⁰ See Deci and Ryan's (2008) self-determination theory.

participation; for example, time was no longer a constraint – personal and professional commitments were now limited due to the restrictive nature of the lockdown, thus freeing up more time, which changed priorities. There was also a considerable increase (almost 500%) in students being active questioners on the teacher's Facebook group and the project's online areas. More students were now voluntarily active participants in the HOTW activities, creating videos of themselves singing and signing songs, stories and rhymes alongside taking part in live singing and signing webinars which pupils from around the world attended. There were, nonetheless, a small number of students who moved from active participants to lurkers or non-participants, due to the variables of time and context where some students undertook more working hours and others found the lockdown difficult with regards to their mental health.

Due to the many variables that may affect the students involved in intercultural projects, participation levels should be perceived as moveable along a continuum rather than fixed (Wang and Yu 2012). Numbers seem therefore to suggest that the lockdown did not impact negatively on students' intercultural learning through the HOTW project. Instead, it enriched their experience as they were able to develop an understanding of how teachers need to be flexible. Collie and Martin (2016) emphasise the importance of adaptability, stating that "it enables successful adjustment to life's inherent changing circumstances" (p. 28).

During the lockdown, the project changed many times to meet the needs of the teachers and learners, considering the contexts that they were working in and the many barriers to learning that they were facing. Each school is unique due to "its history, culture, community, leadership, students, policies, communication, networks, structures, resources and teachers" (Starkey 2012: 9). Covid-19 added an additional layer of complexity to creating successful intercultural projects with schools around the world; however, it showed students that they need to be resilient and not give up, taking creative approaches that consider all the different complexities of education to make intercultural learning between schools successful.

Students were also able to increase their use of English while developing a deeper understanding of the importance of preserving

linguistic identities and how this can be achieved through music and Makaton. They will hopefully now be able to make connections with the communication aspect of the project and their classroom practice, where they will possibly have pupils experiencing communication difficulties.

Among the many benefits of participating in the HOTW project, one student summed up her experience by saying that she *‘really enjoyed seeing what teaching was like outside the classroom’*: “It has been really valuable getting experience from practiced teachers and to be able to ask questions about how they bring learning to their classrooms, how different approaches are working out with the classroom and how they bring these experiences into the classroom as well” (Tonner-Saunders 2019b).¹¹

5. Conclusions

The Lab placed trainee teachers in an innovative position of confrontation with manifold perspectives integrated into the same learning environment. On the one side, they had a chance of experimenting on themselves with strategies and activities they can offer their pupils (albeit allowing for the difference in language abilities and scaffolding instruments), while improving their own language skills according to the ministerial requirement for teachers to have a knowledge of English at least to B2 level. On the other side, they had the opportunity to meet people of different cultures and backgrounds, experiencing intercultural partnership, and taking part in international research and didactic projects, whose format they can replicate (or modify) in their own teaching, possibly creating collaborative nets with colleagues from other countries. Furthermore, they were prompted to rethink self-analysis, as well as self- and others’ assessment, in terms of both teaching and language expertise.

The active role of student-teachers, participating individually and in small groups (according to the different activities/tasks) in content development, experimentation of competences and sharing experiences, was pivotal in building a constructive and inclusive

¹¹ For an overview on the project’s assessment, see <https://sway.office.com/zCphPnpgCJSu9qjt>.

learning environment of listening between teacher and pupils, and among peers, which engendered a satisfying cognitive, social, and affective development for all involved. It also enhanced intrinsic motivation and fostered emotional awareness, a key element in educating balanced citizens. This is evident from the comments made on the activities performed as tasks on the Padlet pages of the HOTW project, as well as on the forum. As for school pupils, they gave their feedback to their teachers, who reported it during the webinars held throughout the project¹².

Though the ample and varied amount of data provided by the lab as a research output (questionnaire, forum, tasks, survey) are still being investigated, the general trend seems to indicate that as the comments on the forum suggest, and the survey confirms, students were positively surprised by the improvement in their ICT skills and competences; some had never tried many of the tools introduced in the project and were pleased to discover they were willing and able to use them in their own learning and teaching activities. Due to all schools involved in the project having to use online tools, students were made aware of many different digital tools for content creation, sharing, communicating and collaborating. This experience also provided them with opportunities to develop their digital literacy to become competent and confident in some aspects of the European Commission's Digital Competence Framework (Carretero *et al.* 2017).

Notwithstanding some difficulties intrinsic to online teaching/learning a foreign language (e.g. not always having an immediate feedback on the actual understanding of some lessons/seminars, due to the asynchronous recordings), language skills in all four abilities were improved too, as all participants used English as the main language of communication in all activities, so as to allow people from all countries to understand each other; all experienced different accents and ways of speaking, dealt with authentic materials and produced outputs in the target language. This greatly contributed to boosting their intrinsic motivation to use English, as their confidence in the expertise they were gaining in practicing

¹² For an overview on the research outputs so far, on student teachers, teachers and pupils' comments see the results and impact of the HOTW project at <https://twinspace.etwinning.net/94991/pages/page/741925>.

their linguistic abilities grew along with the different tasks they faced.

The Covid-19 lockdown was therefore a time for both students and researchers to develop a deeper understanding of how different projects integrate into curriculums in different countries and educational settings (kindergarten, primary, secondary and a special-needs school), and how teachers manage projects in different contexts and restructure tasks because of unforeseen circumstances, such as the pandemic. They were able to observe how to manage, organise and implement didactics in two different teaching environments: in a physical classroom before lockdown and online during lockdown. This was an excellent real-world example of how different pedagogies had to be used for the different environments, where what works in one may not be replicable in another. Independently from the emergency, which has forced schools to turn to distance didactic and e-learning as the only possible means to face lockdown, while its potentialities had already been explored and applied for many years, the technological support of digitalisation offers a great opportunity to rethink teaching in terms of inclusion and autonomy, where teachers and students share in the challenge of creating a wider and more intercultural society.

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