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### Chapter 3. Are we really that different?

#### A telecollaborative project between refugee students from Myanmar and a primary school in Sabadell (Spain)

This chapter describes a telecollaborative project between a school set up for refugees in Myanmar and a primary education centre in a country in Europe. Based on the diagnosis of the learner needs of the refugee students, the project was designed to promote digital and language competences among students at both partner schools, with the added incentive of fostering the European students understanding of the reality of refugees in Myanmar. Firstly, I outline the underlying reasons for deciding to set up and carry out a telecollaborative project in the rather unusual circumstances of a refugee school. Next I describe how the partnership was set up. Because the pupils from the school in Myanmar were adult learners who were taking educational courses, the project took on a two-pronged focus, with the European students learning about communication technology, intercultural and social aspects and practicing their use of English as a foreign language while the Myanmar students not only telecollaborated with the primary education students, they also worked directly with the project teachers to design materials and provide feedback as part of their courses in educational science.

The design and implementation of the project endeavoured to keep the students' needs and individual profiles in mind as much as possible. The two groups were very different in ages, (oral) language competences in the target language and technology skills. These differences presented both challenges and opportunities for a multidimensional international project. The design and implementation of project are described in detail below.

## Why a telecollaborative project?

The idea of the telecollaborative project arose from various needs. Firstly, the necessity to train students in the use of technologies, secondly the need to learn a foreign language through authentic, purposeful communication with others and finally the urgency to make the situation of refugees visible to children around the world as a means of breaking down stereotypes that are far too prevalent in many Western societies. These needs derive from the very particular context of the schools taking part in the project: a primary school in Sabadell (which will be referred throughout the chapter as School Peacock) and the migrant school (which will be referred as School Meerkat) where I was teaching, located at the border between Thailand and Burma. As Sauro and Chappelle (2017) point out, there is a definite “need for a better grasp of cultural, social, and political issues, perhaps in part through developing transdisciplinary projects for student learning” (p. 462).

The context of Meerkat School was complex. It was a boarding school located in Thailand, on the border with Myanmar. It had around 40 students, all of them migrants or refugees from different ethnic groups and parts of Burma, so they had different mother tongues. The pupils were between 17 and 23 years old and their educational and socioeconomic backgrounds were diverse. A few students came from big cities and had good economic means however the majority of the students had dropped out of primary education because they had had to flee Burma due to military problems. Some students had had to quit school and start working at very early ages to support their families economically. In most of the cases the students’ families were living in Myanmar but they were continuously encouraging their children to travel to Thailand to continue their education in order to increase their chances of a better future, although this was at a high economic cost for the family.

Thus, the objective of Meerkat School was to train these young adults during one year in the necessary skills to apply to a higher education institution, either international universities or local migrant schools with social insertion projects. The curriculum of the school covered 6 core subjects; Maths, Science, English, Social Studies, History and Computers, and also offered complementary subjects such as problem solving, vocational studies (sports, teacher training and hospitality), health, Burmese Issues and

Music. Also, the school provided an additional opportunity of a second year of studies for students who wanted to become teachers. Candidates for this programme could apply after finishing their first year in the school. All the subjects of the school were taught in English by foreign teachers, with the exception of health and Burmese Issues, which were taught in Burmese by migrant teachers.

Due to the widely different experiences of schooling among all the students, the levels of English at the start of the school year varied significantly from one student to another, so the students were grouped homogeneously according to their scores in a test held at the beginning of the first term. The group that participated in the telecollaborative project was the English Elementary class, with 16 students who had a level equivalent to the A2 of the European Common Framework of Reference (COE, 2001). They had all learned English in Myanmar during their prior years of schooling, mostly following a textbook-based approach and using Burmese as the language of instruction. This inevitably led a very poor development of the students' listening and speaking skills before arriving at Meerkat School. The exceptions were students who had had foreign teachers in their refugee camps for periods between one and three years, with whom they had spoken English. This more advanced group represented around a third of the group of 16 students participating in the project.

Once in the school, as previously mentioned, most of the subjects taught in the school were in English, which boosted the oral skills of the students' development at a fast pace. Moreover, in order to improve their skills even faster, the student council had agreed to apply a 24-hour English policy in the school, with a punishment for those students who would not follow the rules of only using English. This decision was taken by the student president, independently from the teachers' opinions, and, although it benefitted the oral skills of the students, at the same time it created a bigger gap between written and oral competences in English of most of students. As a result, the students were able to understand and produce oral texts with great fluency, at times using quite advanced vocabulary, yet they struggled in writing, often making basic grammatical mistakes.

Regarding 2.0 technologies, contrary to some portrayals of the country, there is access to digital technology in Myanmar and platforms such as Facebook were certainly popular amongst the students. However, their exposure to 2.0 tools in a school context had been minimal or non-existent. Therefore, the students were unfamiliar with the keyboard, and in contrast

to their skills with cell phones, they lacked other basic digital skills such as using search engines or sending emails. Based on the above, the need to enhance the use of technologies among the students was established as a priority in the school, especially since some of them wanted to pursue further education and apply to international universities in the near future, where a high level of digital competence would be a basic entry requirement, which is in line with the worldwide skills identified by Chun, Kern, and Smith (2016) in their recent overview of principles for technology and language teaching and learning, including ways of dealing with new texts and genres supported by digital communication technologies.

Finally, it seemed relevant to try to bring to a fore the situation of refugees for children in Europe, especially since news of the Syrian crisis and, more recently the Rohingya crisis, appear often in the media. Moreover, also due to mass media, the students at Meerkat school held an overly idealistic view of Western society and their opinions, too, were based on stereotypes. So the project aimed to break down stereotypes from both sides.

With all of the above in mind, starting a telecollaboration project seemed a perfectly suitable way to provide a meaningful context for the students to use new technologies and work on their written English skills (Dooly, 2008, 2010, 2017; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012). What's more, communication beyond the classroom walls would provide the opportunity to bring different cultures together and raise awareness about the differences and similarities between students around the world, regardless of their context (Dooly, 2016; O'Dowd, 2006, 2007, 2016). Moreover, having studied a course on approaches to telecollaborative language learning during my teacher education degree<sup>1</sup>, I felt that I had the basic understanding required to take on this challenge.

In order to give the learners an active role from the very beginning of the process, they were involved in making the decision whether to start a virtual-exchange project, which they all found to be an excellent idea. The main objectives were decided within the group, with orientation from the teacher, and the pupils were provided with examples of other telecollaborative projects, so as to ensure the class understood the project as a truly beneficial learning opportunity.

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1 This is reference to the course Technology-Infused Language Teaching, a telecollaborative course with co-teaching between Dr. Melinda Dooly (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and Dr. Randall Sadler (University of Illinois Urbana Champaign). Both are members of the KONECT project. See Sadler & Dooly (2016).

## Finding a fellow school

The next step after the students agreed on participating in a virtual-exchange was finding a partner school for the project. Ideally, the students would have similar ages and would all be learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This would provide a context where students would have shared interests and could construct knowledge together. As I am originally from Sabadell, Spain (a small town approximately 25 kilometres outside of Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain), I contacted some schools and teachers that I personally knew or had worked with in this town. I explained the context of Meerkat School and the initial idea. The project had to be designed and implemented in less than 3 months, which was the period of time I would be teaching at Meerkat. Therefore, I felt it was important to start the project with a teacher and a group of students who were accustomed to project-based and competence-based teaching and learning.

At Meerkat School, we had no flexibility regarding time, since I was going to teach there for only one term. That made the search for a partner school significantly more complicated. Nevertheless, there was a primary school (Peacock), which had included in their year planning for the English subject a virtual exchange. Hence, the teachers and administrators were looking for a partner and were flexible regarding the scheduling and open to planning a project collaboratively, under the ‘umbrella’ topic of “comparing daily routines”. This seemed like an appropriate topic to approach the reality of refugee and migrant students from a perspective that young students could understand and make sense of and give a realistic view of the daily life in Western society.

Equally important in setting up the details of partnership was to compare linguistic and technological objectives to ensure the project would promote shared knowledge construction and be equally challenging for both groups of students. The linguistic aims of the target language of Peacock School for the project was based on practice of the present simple verb conjugation, which was congruent with the grammatical structures that Meerkat School was interested in improving. On the other hand, technologically speaking, Peacock students, although younger, had a better command of digital tools, which potentially, for the Meerkat students, could be challenging.

After going over these points and exchanging views of our different ideas of how the project should be, and having set some common ground, we, the partner teachers, felt that a collaborative project seemed plausible. The students in Meerkat School were informed about the fellow school and the possible direction of the exchange and were asked for confirmation that they were still interested in going forward. Once again, it seemed important to involve the students in the decision-making process since they were adults who had their own conception of the education they wanted. Ensuring a positive attitude towards the project was considered essential for its success, so I tried to involve them in the planning process as much as possible.

## Project design and materials production

“Same same but different” was designed from a socio-constructivist approach of language learning, which is an approach to teaching and learning languages that places interaction between individuals as the pivotal point of knowledge construction. Having established socio-constructivism as the perimeter for the pedagogical approach, this implied that the main goal of the project was to provide an appropriate context and final product for which the students would have to interact amongst them. Additionally, because of the telecollaborative component of the project, the use of technology was key to the interaction. Incidentally, interaction in the project was focused on promoting both face-to-face and online collaboration between students, always supervised by the teachers. Additionally, collaborative skills would be explicitly taught during the development of the project.

In order to design the activities and materials, the teacher from Peacock School and I were in contact several times a week for a period of three weeks. Synchronous communication through chats or video-conference was impossible due to time difference between the countries. Thus, the planning was done through emails and shared documents, working collaboratively at a distance. This telecollaboration during the designing process highlighted the difficulties of the time difference to work together, which guided our choice of effective communication tools for the students' project. After exchanging ideas and resources, Padlet and Google drive were chosen to be the main tools for the exchange. Despite the impossibility of synchronous communication, we wanted the project to work all

of the productive (speaking, writing) and receptive communication skills (listening, reading). Thus, since video-conferencing was not an option, activities such as oral presentations, discussions and video exchanges were planned in order to include an oral component in the project.

Due to the different language level of the students from both schools, the in-class materials to set the grammar and vocabulary background for the project were different for both groups telecollaborating. Every teacher was in charge of developing materials for their own class, adapting them to their students' level and necessities. Still, both teachers agreed that a priority for the project design would be to 'hand over' a portion of the responsibility of learning to the students (promoting learner autonomy) while, we, as teachers, would take the responsibility of guiding and providing support whenever necessary.

In the case of Peacock School, the materials introduced the students to the grammar rules for using the present simple tense in English and were created by the teacher. However, at Meerkat School, the students were given the responsibility of producing their own in-class resources, in order to make them more authentic. The starting point was a brainstorming with the whole group about how to define and explain the present simple tense, think of some examples and outlining the basic rules of use. Once the students had brought up everything they knew about present simple, they were asked to create a small summary including the most relevant information and examples to help them during the project. They could do it individually or in small groups, according to their preferences, and they had to group with people who had a similar learning style. The school had been working on multiple intelligences in various subjects, and the students were learning to produce summaries, studying materials and final assessments in different ways in order to enhance creativity and promote authentic and individualized materials. Thus, working in synchrony with other subjects, we decided to create our own present simple tense auxiliary materials, based on multiple intelligences. The results were very diverse, ranging from mindmaps, to summaries to even a small song with rhymes. These materials created by each individual or group of students were designed to be available during the telecollaboration with Peacock School. They also served to help the students of Meerkat remember and use the present simple tense correctly themselves while helping their telecollaborative partners in their learning.

It should be noted that the idea of Meerkat students guiding the language acquisition process of Peacock students arose after some discussion with my telecollaborative colleague about which materials needed to be created and used for the project. We were already aware that due to the

difference in language levels between both schools it would be difficult to plan activities that could create equal opportunities for learning for both groups. It just so happened that the Meerkat students had teaching training as part of their education and would be carrying out an internship at a primary school during the term when the telecollaborative project would be implemented and English was amongst the subjects they would teach. This was ideal as it opened up an opportunity for transdisciplinarity; Meerkat students could give feedback and monitor the Peacock students' acquirement and use of the present simple tense rules during their exchanges, while working together with the Peacock students to create the final product.

That created a parallel objective for the students at Myanmar; they would be telecollaborating with the students at Peacock with creating the final product of the project and answering the initial question of the project, while at the same time working with the teacher at Peacock by providing formative assessment during the project and gathering information on the students' common mistakes in order to guide future decisions on what to work in class. Although this created an additional layer of complexity to the project, this double telecollaboration would give an extra motivation to the students at Meerkat, who could see the project not only from the student perspective but also from a teacher perspective, thus contributing to their teaching training subject. Because the project objectives are quite complex, a graph is provided below (figure 1) that outlines the structure of the telecollaboration between the Meerkat students and the Peacock School.

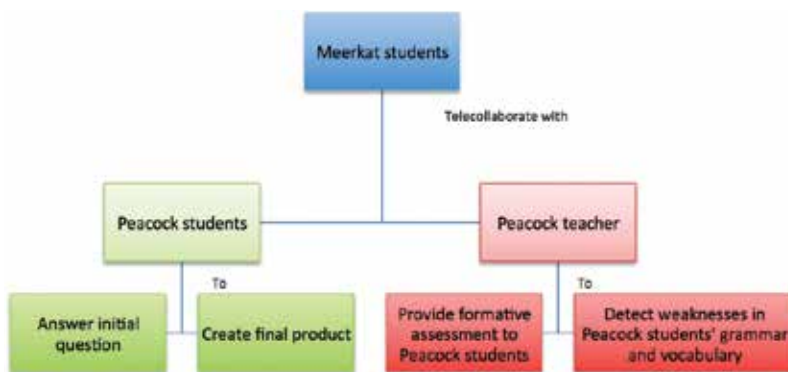


Fig. 1: Graph of the telecollaboration between Meerkat and Peacock schools

The double telecollaboration that the students at Meerkat would take part in implied creating two final products as well. On the one hand, they



would collaborate in creating a presentation comparing the daily life of the students within the same working group (mixed Peacock and Meerkat), and on the other hand they would make an analysis of the most common mistakes the students at Peacock made when writing or speaking English, to give to the Peacock School's teacher. In the spirit of transdisciplinarity, the Meerkat students would also analyse their own mistakes and these would be added to the sampling of common errors and could be used in the subject of teaching training to work on foreign language education.

In summary, the final work plan looked like this:

Table 1. Outline of the main activities per each partner

<i>Meerkat School</i>	<i>Peacock School</i>
Activity 1: Introduction videos: done with the whole group	
Activity 2: Debate about similarities and differences: done with the whole group	Activity 2: Debate about similarities and differences: done with the whole group
Activity 3: Message exchange through Padlet	
Activity 4: Assessment of Padlet and ICT skills	
Activity 5: Role-play on assertiveness and feedback	
Activity 6: Add comments to the Google Slides	Activity 6: Create the slides of the presentation
Activity 7: Analysis of mistakes when using English from Peacock and Meerkat students'.	Activity 7: Oral presentations about the virtual peers
Activity 8: Final debate to answer initial question "Same same, or different?"	
Activity 9: Final self-assessment rubric	
Activity 10: Goodbye video	

## Project implementation

### *Introductory video*

This was the initial activity of the project and its main goal was to create a successful and motivating first contact between students from both schools, in order to emotionally engage them in the project. The two groups were enthusiastic about the notion of a Skype session, where they could see

each other however, since that was impossible due to the time difference, a video seemed the most suitable option.

To create the video the learners decided how and what to include in the video by brainstorming on the main cultural and personal aspects that they should explain to their peers in order to give a realistic view of their lives in school. My fellow teacher and I, each with our own groups, guided the decision making in order to meet the goals of the activity. Once the students decided which sequences the video would have and in which order would they be, the recording of the video and audio started. For the audio, the main foci were pronunciation and articulation, since the learners from both groups had different accents and it was important to make themselves understandable to their partners. With this, they were made aware of their strengths and weaknesses in their oral skills, thereby promoting metacognition, linguistic meta-reflection, communicative strategies and developing the so-called 'learning to learn' competence.



Fig. 2: Image from the introductory video by Meerkat School2

Ideally, the students would have edited the video themselves as part of the technological skills development of the project. However, the computers of Meerkat School did not allow video editing and, on the other hand, we considered it was beyond the students' Zone of Proximal Development. Hence, as teachers, we recorded and edited the videos, which we showed to the students of our own schools and then exchanged them with the partner class.

- 2 The author has received consent from all the individuals represented in the image to reproduce the images for this publication.

*“Same same or different?” debate*

After watching the video, students engaged in a debate about the differences and similarities between both schools. I, as the teacher, was the mediator of the debate and asked questions intended to promote reflection such as why the students at Peacock School had included the different rooms of their school and why they had considered it relevant to do so. During the discussion some students showed surprise from the size of the Peacock School and the amount of classrooms it had. Others asked about a room with food pictures on the walls, which was the dining room, and were very surprised to see that the Peacock School had a special room to eat. On the other hand, some people in the class noted how well and clearly the primary pupils could speak, and wondered why.

All in all, the videos served to awaken the students’ curiosity about each other and they felt the need to ask more about what they had seen, in order to understand the lifestyle of their virtual friends. The debate also provided a space for cultural and linguistic discussion. In the Meerkat School, we talked about language acquisition and how the age of coming in contact with a language for a first time affects the way it is learned. This was further discussed in their teaching training lessons as a transdisciplinary activity. The debate closed by introducing the students to the main question of the project “are we the same or different?” The opinions were diverse, but the class conclusion was that, at that point, there were more differences than similarities between both groups. They also highlighted the need to know more to make a final statement, which opened room for the continuation of the project.

*First message*

For the next step, students of Meerkat School wrote a group message to their virtual partners, thanking them for the video. The platform used to exchange messages was Padlet, that way no individual email accounts were required and all students could access it.



Fig. 3: Images from the Padlet students used to exchange messages.

The message from the students at Meerkat School had a slightly religious tone (“God bless you”) and was written in a register which was different from what students at Peacock School were used to. I wrote an email to my fellow teacher pointing out the cultural load of the language and the need to not change how students had expressed themselves, since it was part of their personality and it could only enrich the exchange. Thus, we agreed to approach the cultural impact of the language to bring deeper understanding.

### *Discovering the groups for the project*

As a response to our message, students from Peacock School sent greeting messages back to us. However, in this case they were not written and addressed to the whole group but they were written by two students from Peacock to one or two students at Meerkat. These messages would start a small conversation in groups of 3 or 4 students, which would be the groups for the project.

The students at Meerkat did not remember the names and faces from the video and, thus, a guessing game started. They all read their messages and the names of the students who had sent them. Since the names were mostly Spanish, it was hard to know whether the author was a boy or a girl. They were asked to guess the gender of their e-pals and, afterwards, we watched the video to check whether their intuition was right or wrong. In

addition, since some names were repeated they had to guess which Paula, for example, was writing them.

Once they had identified their telecollaborative partners and checked whether they were right or wrong with their guesses, the video was played again so the students could focus now on listening to the information their partners had shared in it, such as favourite places in the school, favourite colours or subjects. They could then use this information to send their responses to the messages.

### *Writing to their e-pals*

With the information they gathered from the video, Meerkat School pupils wrote a reply asking for more information about their virtual pals' hobbies, routines or any other question aimed to gather information in order to critically analyze whether the learners from both schools were similar or different. The instructions to write the message were to use short sentences with simple grammar that would be understandable by the primary students. When writing the messages, the students at Meerkat School used the materials they created before the project about present simple tense rules based on multiple intelligences. Once they had their message, before sending it to their virtual peers, Meerkat students were asked to show and read each other's messages in order to give in-class feedback on language and style and improve them if needed. With this, the students not only revised their work but they were made aware of their own learning process, once again promoting metacognition and learning-to-learn competence development. During the exchange of feedback, I gave advice and feedback on how to be constructive on their suggestions for improvement, thus carefully guiding the cooperative work.

### *Exchanging information with the groups*

The students of Peacock School gave their answers and sent questions of their own in return, in order to do their research about the daily routines of the students from Myanmar. In their replies, the pupils from Meerkat School were encouraged to give Peacock learners feedback about their language in order to help them improve. All the conversations were shared

in the Padlet, so everybody could read all the messages and get a broader view of the exchange and help avoid potential stereotypes or biased opinions due to a lack of information.



Fig. 4: Images from the Padlet after the students' information exchange

During the whole process, the teacher at Peacock School and I collaborated at all time to adapt the pace of the project or the activities to the students' necessities. When designing the project, we did not know how much the information exchange phase of the project would last, but we agreed on keeping it flexible and asking the students in order to ensure learning was happening. The time between messages was rather long due to unanticipated events or time hiccups, yet after some weeks we could consider this phase closed and moved on to the next one.

### *Self-assessment of ICT skills*

From this point on, the project continued without Padlet and thus, before starting any other activity, we considered it important to do a self-assessment activity for the students to reflect on their ICT competence and make them aware of their own learning. The students at Meerkat used a rubric, showed below, while the students at Peacock did the assessment orally.

The students had used rubrics before in the subject to assess oral presentations of themselves and their peers, and they had been rather demanding. So, to avoid excessive criticism, they were asked to be honest and admit when they could do something perfectly well instead of focusing

on the small things that could be improved. The result was generally quite positive (with a few notable exceptions due to individual circumstances). In general, the students acknowledged improvement on their ICT skills and showed enjoyment.

### Using Padlet

	4. Genius	3. Proficient	2. Apprentice	1. Beginner
<b>Use of padlet:</b>	I know how to access the Padlet	I know how to access the Padlet but sometimes I need to try more than once.	Sometimes I don't remember how to access the Padlet.	I always need help to access the Padlet.
<b>Writing new notes:</b>	I know how to add a new note on the padlet	I sometimes need help adding a new note on padlet	I usually need help when adding a new note on padlet	I don't know how to add a new note on padlet yet.
<b>Commenting on existing notes:</b>	I can find other's notes and add my comments without problem.	I can find other's notes and add my comments, although sometimes they are not saved and I need to type again.	Sometimes, I struggle to find other's notes and add my comments. Usually they are not saved and I need to type again or ask for help.	I need help to find other's notes and add my comments.
<b>Editing your comments:</b>	I know how to edit my comments to change my text or correct any mistakes.	I normally know how to edit my comments to change my text or correct any mistakes, although sometimes I need a bit of time to remember.	Sometimes I know how to edit my comments, but I need to ask for help quite often.	I don't know how to edit comments yet, I always need help.
<b>Enjoying Padlet?:</b>	I like working with Padlet.	I normally like working with Padlet although I also like working with my notebook	I like working with Padlet, but I prefer working with a notebook or paper.	I don't like working with Padlet.

Comments:

Fig. 5: Rubric used in Meerkat School to assess students' progress with Padlet

### *Working on assertiveness to give feedback*

To help their virtual peers to prepare the oral presentations comparing the daily routines of students in the Thai-Myanmar border and Spain, the learners at Meerkat had to insert comments on the work of their mates, giving them feedback. This activity worked on a wide set of skills, from linguistic, ICT to cooperative competences. The students had to provide Peacock's pupils with critically constructive feedback, so a classroom activity was prepared in order to explicitly work assertiveness and giving

feedback sensitively. First, we started a discussion defining the concept of ‘assertive’ and its importance for group work. Although the topic was quite abstract, the students could understand it fairly fast and could brainstorm strategies to ensure an assertive attitude. They were also able to discern the difference between positiveness, negativity and assertiveness. During the conversation with the whole group, I provided some questions and acted as the “devil’s advocate” to engage in deep reflection.

After, the students participated in some role-play in pairs about some common conflicts that routinely arise during teamwork. The students were asked to approach the conflicts from a negative, positive and assertive way and discuss which emotions arose from each of the scenarios. I walked around the class observing and asking the students questions when I considered it necessary to check their understanding of how to be assertive.

### You did it wrong!

You and your partner are doing a project together. He or she shows you his/her part once it is finished and you realize it is not correct, so you tell him/her to change it.

- Negative way
- Positive way
- Assertive way

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Fig. 6: One of the role-play situations presented in Meerkat School

### *Preparing the presentations*

The platform to prepare the slides of the presentations was Google Drive. Since not all the students had Google accounts, to allow access to everyone without forcing them to open a personal account, the link to a private folder was shared, where the students of each group created a Google Slides presentation. The design of the presentation was the responsibility of the students from the Peacock School. However, students at Meerkat School could access the documents and add comments as feedback for



improvement. The students at Peacock School would then make the necessary changes to complete the presentations.

Peacock School's learners had previous experiences using the Google Drive, so no preparatory lessons were necessary. However, for the Meerkat students this was their first introduction to Gmail and Google accounts in their computer lessons. Once again, in the spirit of transdisciplinary competences, the Google drive unit plan for ICT class was approached through English as well, by introducing the students to Google Slides and the process of inserting comments in the documents.

Next, the students were given time to manipulate Google Slides and become familiar with inserting comments and editing them. I answered questions and guided them whenever the students requested help. Some of them were able to find the way to insert comments on their own while some others needed constant interaction with the teacher. I felt that giving space to the students would increase their confidence with technology for those who needed no help. At the same time, it would give me opportunities to provide more individualized attention to those students who needed more guidance.

After having worked on the technological and cooperative aspects of the activity, it was time for the students to comment on their virtual peers' work.

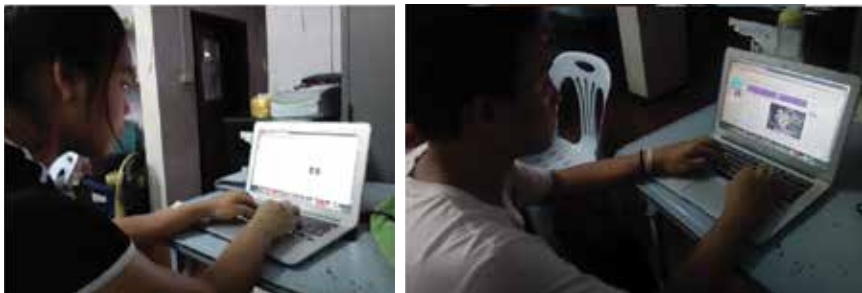


Fig. 7: Two students from Meerkat School adding comments to their colleagues' presentations

During this phase of the project, 16 students were using the computers with Google Drive at the same time, and we soon discovered the Internet of the school could not support these. The pages were extremely slow to load and students had to wait a long time to open and edit the documents, which created frustration amongst the learners. To overcome this, students

agreed on taking turns and working on the presentations, one at a time, so only one computer would be using the Internet. That was a solution for the Internet speed, yet it caused a delay in the schedule. The students of Peacock School had a date for the oral presentations before the end of the term, which could not be postponed. As a result, some of the comments and feedback arrived after the day of the presentations, which discouraged the students at Meerkat School.

Nonetheless, this situation opened room for another discussion; is it too late to learn when the presentation/exam has passed? The learners had different opinions, which they exchanged during an engaging whole group debate. I acted as a mediator, asking questions to promote reflection, until the group arrived to a final conclusion: the feedback was not too late because their virtual peers still had to learn and continue improving.

### *Analysing the mistakes from Peacock and Meerkat students*

In this step of the project, Meerkat School learners started developing their final product; the comparative analysis of mistakes when speaking English, compiled from output of both the Peacock and Meerkat students. Data were collected from the dialogues in Padlet as well as the presentations and comments. Students had been reflecting on the mistakes of their peers (virtual or in class) through the co-assessment activities. Now, with all the information, they were asked to work in pairs and try to compare their data and classify the types of mistakes under the criteria that they chose. Next, they joined in groups of 4 and repeated the same process. Finally, they were asked to regroup in teams of 4, mixing with people from all the other groups, making sure that they were not working with the same people again. In those groups, they again compared information. After all the groupings, students had seen all the classifications from the other groups, so we started working with the whole class. The pupils organized the types of mistakes on the board, classified them in common or not common from both schools and suggested an explanation for the underlying cause of the mistakes. They put all of this information in a document that was then shared with the teacher at Peacock School as well as the teacher of the subject of teacher education so he could also use them in his lessons.

**MISTAKES WHEN USING ENGLISH**

Types of mistakes	Meerkat School	St. Mary's School	
Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- football</li> <li>- breckfast</li> <li>- fiborite</li> <li>- i am (without capital)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- dorm-atary</li> <li>- chanel</li> <li>- faivourite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Both schools make this mistakes</li> <li>- P school students make them more often</li> <li>- Some words are difficult for both schools</li> <li>- Maybe we make this mistakes because English doesn't sound like it is spelled (is not phonetic)</li> </ul>
Grammar	Confusing he/she	_____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maybe it is because in Spanish he/she is the same word or almost the same</li> </ul>
	Writing 3 <sup>rd</sup> person of present simple without s - Go instead of goes - Have instead of has Writing 1 <sup>st</sup> person of present simple with s - Has instead of have	_____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Different in both schools</li> <li>- Maybe because the primary students need to practice more</li> </ul>
	_____	Confusing is and are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Different in both schools</li> <li>- In Myanmar there is no difference between is and are, it is the same word.</li> </ul>
	To have 9 years old		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Different in both schools</li> </ul>

Fig. 8: Image of page one of the final product from Meerkat School

*Final debate “Same same, or different?” and self-assessment*

To end the project, the students engaged in a whole group dialog to revisit the initial question: are the students in both schools similar? (“Same same, or different?”). The conclusion was that, after learning more about their lives as students, they realized there were more similarities than they had expected at the beginning of the project. They were glad to have learned about the education in other countries through young students, and made a very positive balance of the experience. Finally, they were given a self-assessment rubric to analyze the development of their skills after the project as well as to share their feelings about it.

## Same same or different? Final reflections

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

	4. Genius	3. Proficient	2. Apprentice	1. Beginner
<b>Linguistic skills:</b>	I am sure my English has improved after this project. I understand present simple and can use it without making mistakes.	I have the feeling my English has improved after this project. I understand present simple and can use it without almost making mistakes.	I think my English might have improved after this project. I understand present simple and can use it making small mistakes.	I don't think that my English has improved after this project. I'm not sure I understand present simple and I make some important mistakes when using it.
<b>Cultural understanding:</b>	I understand our virtual peers' context way more and I have a better idea of how live is in Spain as a young student. I think this exchange has enriched my experience and I have a better informed opinion.	I understand our virtual peers' context a bit more and I have a better idea of how live is in Spain as a young student. I think this exchange has enriched my experience and my opinion is more objective, but I would still need to know more.	I'm not sure I understand our virtual peers' context or how live as a young student in Spain is. My opinion has not changed much from the beginning of the project until now.	I still don't understand our virtual peers' context or how live as a young student in Spain is. My opinion has not changed at all from the beginning of the project until now.
<b>Technological skills:</b>	I am sure I have improved my skills with the computer. I feel way more comfortable and I am looking forward to using technology again in class.	I think I have improved my skills with the computer. I feel a bit more comfortable and I want to use technology again in class to continue improving.	I am not sure if I have improved my skills. I still feel insecure sometimes and I'm a little bit afraid of using technology again in class.	I don't think I have improved. I am insecure and afraid of using technology in class. I hope we won't use it in class any more.
<b>Cooperative skills:</b>	I understand why assertiveness is important in group work. I understand the difference between positive, negative and assertive feedback. I can give assertive and constructive feedback.	I think I understand better why assertiveness is important in group work. I understand the difference between positive, negative and assertive feedback. I am better at giving assertive and constructive feedback but I can still improve.	I'm not sure I understand why assertiveness is important in group work. The difference between positive, negative and assertive feedback is not yet 100% clear to me. I struggle to give assertive and constructive feedback but I feel I'm improving.	I don't understand why assertiveness is important in group work yet. The difference between positive, negative and assertive feedback is not yet clear to me. I struggle to give assertive and constructive feedback.
<b>Would you like to participate in another virtual exchange?:</b>	Definitely!	Most probably	Maybe	Not really

Any thoughts?
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Fig. 9: Image of final rubric for Meerkat School

Due to the lack of time, there was no time to exchange any farewell videos, which would have been a nice closing to the project.

## Challenges

When planning the project, possible challenges were predicted in order to anticipate responses. However, there were difficulties which were not foreseen, which I suppose is the product of a lack of experience in the field of telecollaborative projects. The first challenge we encountered, which had an effect during the whole implementation of the project, was communication. I was aware of its utmost importance for the success of the project, having read articles about telecollaboration and experiences of teachers. However, I underestimated to what extent it was essential. I believe that the aforementioned impossibility for synchronous communication between the teachers made it difficult to build empathy and the feeling of shared responsibility for each other's part of the project. Communication during the implementation of the project never stopped, in order to ensure its continuity and to make decisions about the following steps. Nonetheless, the unforeseen events that caused delays in the timing were justified after they had happened rather than warned in advance.

We had agreed to be flexible, knowing there would be some unexpected delays. Thus, there was no problem in sharing the adjournment of some activities without prevision. Still, in the long term, that produced a significant delay in the project. That might have been a result of a lack of the sense of shared responsibility that comes from empathy between the teachers. The fact that all communication between the teachers happened through asynchronous messages might have had a negative effect on the empathy and boundary necessities for the project. The conclusions after reflecting, once the project was finished, were that a more personal way of communication, such as video-calls or even videos, might have enhanced this empathy, emotionally engaging the teachers, in a similar way to what was done with the students by exchanging introductory videos.

Nonetheless, the delay accumulated during the implementation of the project was not only due to communication issues between the teachers, but to technology-related problems as well. As explained in the previous section of the chapter, during the implementation of the project, we realized that the Wi-Fi network at the Meerkat School simply could not support all the students using Google Drive at the same time. The connection was very slow and it was impossible to work in class with all the students together, since the pages did not load. The solution of working with the computers

one student at a time, made the continuation of the project possible yet delayed the implementation of the following steps. This inevitably affected the last activities of the project, such as the feedback of the presentation or the final video, which could not be carried out in the end, and created the need for new activities, such as the debate “is it too late to learn when the presentation/exam has passed?”, in order to ensure the motivation of the students would not decrease.

The poor Internet connection of the school was not only an obstacle to use Google Drive, but sometimes to simply use the computers in class. On one occasion, students had to write messages to their e-pals and realized that day the Internet was not working well. At that point, the students were already engaged in the activity and had started thinking about what to write. Therefore, as a solution, everyone took a piece of paper where they wrote their messages. The notes were collected and typed by the teacher at home in order to not cause another delay to the project. The solution was not ideal, yet it was aimed to not discourage the students from participating in the project due to connectivity issues and, hence, it seemed appropriate for that one moment to salvage the situation. Gonzalez and St. Louis (2013) have documented very thoroughly the many challenges that the use of technology in ‘low-tech contexts’ can bring. However, as they have also pointed out, “there are many ways in which these obstacles can be overcome” (p. 237) and this project demonstrates exactly that point.

It was acknowledge that students at the Meerkat School had very little experience working with technologies, which was one of the reasons to start a telecollaborative exchange. Nonetheless, there was no awareness to what extent that affected their relationship with computers and 2.0 tools. When introducing new platforms, the students seemed absolutely overwhelmed, and needed more time than expected in order to familiarize themselves with the tools. Thanks to the self-assessment rubrics, information was gathered on how the students experienced their interaction with technologies and which were their strengths and weaknesses in their opinion. Having worked with primary students the previous year, my experience when introducing new applications and web pages was that students could become familiar and comfortable with them fairly easily and could use them with just a bit of practice. What I assumed about the students at Meerkat School was that they would be able to easily understand how Padlet worked, since it has a simple format and they were very used to posting in Facebook, which has a much more complicated structure.

However, I did not realize that Facebook was one of the only 2.0 tools the students had ever used, and their proficiency in its use was a result of many hours using it rather than a good level of ICT competences. Thus, the time devoted in class to become familiar with and understand the platforms did not seem to be enough for all of the students to feel comfortable using ICT, and further practice would have been ideal. The resolution of this challenge is that, if starting a project with the same group or students with similar technological backgrounds, more time would need to be devoted to understanding and using ICT in order to ensure that all participants meet the objectives on the technology field.

Finally, the most difficult challenge to overcome for me was related to the methodology of the project. The educational background of the learners at Meerkat School was diverse, yet they all had a traditional approach to education in common. Being used to teacher-centred methods based on memorization, they had to adapt to a more student-centred approach of Meerkat School, where critical thinking and creativity were strongly enhanced in all the subjects and activities. Luckily the project was carried out during the second term of the school year and, thus, the students had gone through the most important part of the adaptation process. During this time, they showed a significant improvement in confidence and participation in class, carrying out the main roles of teacher with more comfort. Nonetheless, although it seemed that they shared the importance of understanding rather than memorizing to learn, they never came to believe the constructivist approach to learning to be effective. During the implementation of the project, some students expressed their concern of not learning enough because some much time in class was devoted to projects and activities rather than “actual” teaching. Others were asked to name something that they had learned and their answer was “nothing”.

At that point, the project was at the stage of exchanging messages between both schools, which was in the middle of the process. Realizing that students did not seem to see the project as a learning opportunity was considered the most significant critical incident of the implementation. It was essential that the students were aware of their learning since they were the main agents of the knowledge construction process, and had the responsibility to monitor it. On the other hand, one of the core competencies to develop through the project was learning to learn. A positive attitude from the students towards the project was necessary for them to take profit of all its learning opportunities.

Wrongly, it had been assumed that since they agreed with the methodology of the school, they would feel comfortable with project-based learning. Nonetheless, it seemed that their preconceptions of learning were quite opposed to this approach and they did not see competence-based learning as “actual” learning, because they could not list all the concepts they had acquired at the end of the project. To overcome their apprehensions, students were given an explanation of competences, since they were adults whose cognitive level allowed the understanding of such abstract concepts. Moreover, since they were learning how to be teachers, it was considered a relevant topic to approach. I explicitly shared the target objectives and competences for the project and asked the students to reflect on their personal process towards their achievement. That had a positive effect on them and helped change their view of the project as not “enough” learning to a “different” way of learning.

## Reflections after the project

Starting a telecollaborative project was challenging from the beginning, yet it has been incredibly rewarding for both the students and myself. Communication beyond the classroom walls has brought the learners closer to a reality that they believed so far from them. Some of the students noted that, before the virtual exchange with the students in Spain, they had very idealistic views of education and the life in Western cultures because the only source of information they had ever had was the media.

Some aspects of the culture they liked and others created some debate. One of the students noted how, after the project, he considered it important to teach English to young children from his community from very early ages, so they could speak as well as his virtual-mates. Regarding extra-curricular activities, the opinions were diverse; some of the students at Meerkat School appreciated the opportunities for education that those provided, since it was something they would have dreamt of as kids. Some others wondered whether such young students would suffer from stress, not having free time to play with their friends. But what all the opinions had in common was that the experience had been absolutely culturally enriching and had helped them approach and better understand Western



people. In their own words they felt they ‘had seen very little of the world outside Myanmar’ and the project helped them break many of the stereotypes they had acquired over the years due to the mass media.

Concerning the language learning, the students highlighted their improvement in their oral skills after the project. Having to speak in a video for people whose accent is different from theirs encouraged them to put extra effort on articulation and pronunciation, and made them more aware of areas that they needed to improve. Furthermore, listening to the pupils at Peacock School made the Meerkat School learners want to speak better and clearer, just like the young boys and girls they were telecollaborating with, and helped them become more aware of their oral skills. This was surprising, due to the fact the project was not focused on oral competences. Yet, it was what the students underlined as one of the main language improvements resulting from the project.

In regards to grammar skills, students agreed that they were now more aware of their grammar mistakes after engaging in the process of detecting their own and other’s errors in usage. They admitted to having improved with the use of the present simple tense, despite not seeing it absolutely necessary at the beginning of the project, and added that they now desired to learn more complex structures and advanced vocabulary in the future.

The Meerkat School had an uncommon context, in which English was the vehicular language due to students and teachers having different mother tongues. Hence, the project was one amongst other meaningful opportunities to use English for real communicative purposes. That contrasts with other schools, in which telecollaborative projects are carried out to provide a context for significant communication. Nevertheless, the students reviewed the experience of being in contact with other English learners as very positive, since they only spoke English with the teachers and with each other. That, according to them, added some pressure to speaking, owing to the fact that they wanted to show proficiency and were afraid of making mistakes. In their opinion, the project had helped them feel more confident when speaking English, having been able to help their virtual peers with their skills.

Finally, concerning the technological competence, the students acknowledged an improvement in their attitude towards ICT in class. The problems with the Internet could sometimes be frustrating, but the learners highlighted the excitement of working on a document with people thanks to the Internet. They compared the experience to Facebook; they

were using the Internet to communicate with the people who were far away from them now, the difference being that it was in school and technology was used to learn.

As a teacher, I consider the experience a success in the sense that the students' attitude towards new platforms changed. After the project, students seemed more confident ICT users, and they showed a general improvement in their ability to use technology. In the end, the lack of good computers or the bad Internet connection, which sometimes discouraged the group, was not a big enough obstacle to impede learning. Having taken the plunge of using technology frequently and with the purpose of communicating with others encouraged the pupils to use it more, and helped them realize its importance for their professional careers. They now consider the ICT competence as essential for their development as future professionals because they have experienced its advantages.

Additionally, the project has been the perfect excuse to polish small but important mistakes, which were common amongst the group when speaking or writing. Although that meant targeting the language of the project to a lower level than the one the learners usually worked, it seemed important to consolidate the basic aspects of language use before moving on to more complex linguistic structures and vocabulary. This resulted in speakers who are much more aware of their mistakes now and often correct each other spontaneously in class. Also, being able to contribute through the project to the other subject of teacher education was a very nice supplement. The students were not used to transdisciplinarity due to frequent change of teachers in the school, as most of them volunteers, thus making it difficult to set up transdisciplinary projects in the school curriculum. Finally, on a cultural level, the exchange was brilliant for breaking stereotypes and bringing the reality of western countries to the students from a credible point of view.

Because of all of this, I would, without a doubt, engage in another telecollaborative program in a developing country. I have experienced first hand how this type of experience can make a difference. Even though the resources are not always available, sooner or later they will be, and these students will be ready and competent to use them.

After this very positive experience, having overcome the challenges we have encountered more or less successfully, I take some important lessons with me, which I will apply to my next projects. Firstly, I will explicitly follow the progress made towards meeting the set objectives, together

with the students, in order to make them aware of their learning and avoid situations in which they feel they are not learning enough. Additionally, if working with a group with a similar background to the one from Meerkat School that has participated in “Same same, or different?”, I will devote more time to explaining and showing the benefits of group work and project-based learning, making them participate in activities and small sequences based on these methodologies in order to have some experience before engaging in a bigger project, such as a virtual exchange.

In conclusion, this telecollaborative project has been very rewarding and a great opportunity to learn, for both students and me. Yet, most importantly, I believe it has been the chance for these refugee students to have a voice that can be heard from far away.

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