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Chapter 5. Making a difference: Reflecting on a telecollaborative project aimed at social change

How many times have we heard it said that our students are digital natives? As teachers we are witness everyday to the reality of our present-day society where young adults increasingly rely on and demonstrate their ‘scientific know how’. And we also see that no matter what religion, gender or social class, most teenagers have readily immersed themselves into this high-tech world.

But we must not forget the key role education has in guiding and supporting our youth so they can use technologies efficiently and responsibly. Arguably, one of the first steps for building a better society is ensuring that its youngest members walk into the adult world with the knowledge and skills necessary to attain well-being, on a personal and professional level. This implies that educators must make sure that students acquire appropriate values, and learn commitment and responsibility to society when using digital tools.

Inevitably, most of the young learners sitting in our classrooms nowadays will find themselves working in an increasingly connected, globalized world. Preparing for the future challenges they will face in their lives as the world becomes more and more interlinked must be a high priority for teachers everywhere. Problems such as poverty, migration and climate change will require solutions at both local and global levels and it will be collaborative thinking, collective strategizing and working together –often facilitated through technology- which will most certainly be key solutions to many of the challenges facing society, both now and in the future.

Aware of these demands on education, the teachers in our school -which is located in Terrassa, Spain (a city near Barcelona in the Catalonia region)- are always eager to innovate our practices to ensure that we are bestowing on our students the widest array of possibilities to improve their knowledge and 21st century skills. In particular, our school places great

emphasis on technology through various avenues. Projects implemented in the school might be as diverse as an American presidential campaign for “President’s day” in year 9, mobile app development in year 10 or a musical performance in year 12. The underlying premise of this approach to educating our youth is to ensure that students have acquired the necessary abilities underscored by Wagner (2008) in his work report entitled *The Global Achievement Gap*. These are: critical thinking and problem solving; collaboration across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurialism; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; and curiosity and imagination.

Many, if not all of the above objectives, had already been taken into consideration when the syllabuses were developed in our school. We like to consider our school as the ‘central nervous system’ where all students can learn autonomously while generating knowledge together. Our goal is to help them acquire the necessary content knowledge to become responsible citizens while working and sharing our thoughts and opinions to help them develop their own critical thinking. Still, as it has already been mentioned, we are always keen to try out new ideas and approaches and that is why, when we were offered the opportunity to take part in a telecollaborative project with another school in Europe, Torre del Palau embarked on the venture enthusiastically.

Why telecollaboration?

Not only the English department at our school, but also the school management felt that taking part in a telecollaborative project would be beneficial for the 12 year old students who would be participating. It is commonly believed that giving teenagers access to the culture and language they are studying as a second language increases their intrinsic motivation as it gives them the opportunity to focus on other realities beyond the classroom. As Castello (2015) mentions, the L2 learner needs to identify with the target language culture – this identification may be linked to their progress and success in learning that language.

However it was not merely the opportunity to be exposed to and to practice the use of the target (foreign) language (and its culture) that prompted the teachers and school administrators to participate. The fact that the students would be involved in Project-Based Learning (PBL) was also relevant to the decision to form a part of the telecollaborative team. According to Thomas (2000), PBL offers key features for supporting deep, transformative learning since, by nature, “projects are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems”. This implies that students will be involved in “problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities” (p. 2).

Locally, our high school has a good reputation for its technology-based and project-based curriculum. In particular, the teachers feel that appropriate use of technology can help empower students. As Warshauer (1996) points out, teachers can boost learners’ motivation when dealing with computer work, not only because of the empowerment and enhancement of learning opportunities, but also because their electronic communication widens and can be integrated in regular class goals and achievements. However, despite the regular use of technology in our classrooms, the notion of technology-enhanced, project-based language learning through telecollaboration is not well-known within the Catalanian context. Both the Swedish and Spanish teachers were eager to see how their students would interact, create and evolve thanks to their common work and effort.

Planning: Diagnosing possible obstacles

Telecollaboration opens a whole new range of possibilities for teaching and learning, in particular in language education because it obliges both the teachers and the students to engage in intercultural sharing and global communication. Often times this may be the first contact that young students have with individuals who are not part of their immediate community or their interaction may be limited to rather indirect, short-term exchanges, facilitated through adults (e.g. holidays). Thus, this project was of special interest to the teachers involved as it included a more direct, personal engagement with distanced partners that was needs-driven (they had to work together to complete their assigned tasks).

The idea of this project came about thanks to Maria Mont and Melinda Dooly, both of whom work at the Department of Language, Literature and Social Science Teaching Department (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona). The exchange was part of the larger research project called Knowledge for Network-based Education, Cognition and Teaching (KONECT-EDU2013-43932-P)¹. With the goal of finding ways to help our students improve their communicative and academic skills to ensure their responsible participation in today's society, we began to work together with our Swedish partner to devise an attractive project that would allow our students to work together on a project that would have social impact.

As a preliminary step, first meetings were set up between Melinda Dooly and the whole English department of the Catalan School in order to introduce the general idea to all of the teaching staff and to ensure administrative support for the elaboration and implementation of the project. Some possible themes for the project were lobbed in the first gatherings, resulting in an array of ideas such as 'dystopic literature', 'future careers, and how to prepare for them' and 'our lives in the near future'. A meeting was also set up with the head of studies and the school principal to discuss the research parameters and research ethics and to obtain informed, comprehensive consent from the school administration, the teaching staff, the parents and the students. However, it was not until the Swedish teacher (Sara Bruun) paid a visit to Catalonia in October of 2015 that final decisions were made and the project began to take shape. During the time the news had been widely focused on the plight of Syrian refugees and it was decided that this would be a central focus point of the project.

Similar to cooking a dish from a good recipe, all the ingredients of the telecollaboration program had to be prepared and 'set out on the tabletop' to be added to the dish before the 'real cooking' of the project could begin. Those first meetings with Dr Dooly and Sara Brunn were the 'ingredients selection and preparation' sessions for the project that then became the springboard to make sure the project would be successful.

One of the 'ingredients' had already been set out prior to the meetings. The two secondary teachers had already shared key information concerning the language level of their respective learners, learning goals, course objectives and general course outlines. It was clear that students' level of

1 www.konectproject.com

the target language in Furutorpkolann was higher than the level required in Spain however this was not considered to be a barrier to designing and implementing a successful telecollaborative project. During the 3-day meeting, which was hosted at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, the topic, the learning activities, and some materials were selected and designed. During the discussions it soon became apparent that five important issues had to be resolved: the lack of overlap in schedules (implying that synchronous meetings would be difficult), the difference between the two groups regarding their command of English, the difference in amount of class time devoted to teaching English in each country, different class ratios and dissimilar course requirements.

In order to overcome the first barrier, the teachers decided that it would be best to prepare and send videos with presentations prepared by the students. These messages would serve as introductions and at other times would form part of input from each other regarding different assigned tasks, all of which would eventually lead to the final project output. At the same time, the teachers were aware that a telecollaborative project lasting over several weeks that relied only on asynchronous communication ran the risk of losing students' interest. So in order integrate face-to-face communication and boost motivation, it was decided to have a smaller subgroup of volunteers (called 'Junior Researchers') who would meet outside of class to discuss issues that arose in the project, to reflect on what the students were doing and learning, to exchange opinions about the project and then to report back to their classmates what had been discussed synchronously with their telecollaborative partners.

Despite the different levels of command and comfort with using English among the students involved in the enterprise, everyone agreed that the right course of action was to support and really promote its use whenever possible. For the Swedish teacher, reading was a key skill that she wanted to focus on, whereas for the Spanish class, oral skills were predominant in the course. So, the first idea, which came up at the very early stages of the project, was to read a novel that dealt with the issue of seeking refuge from war and to use this as the basis for the rest of the collaboration. However, that was deemed too difficult for the Spanish students so web articles about the Syrian crisis were chosen because, while these texts include some technical or low-frequency vocabulary, the length is much more manageable. Likewise, the teachers decided that the listening input should include native-level English sources so news clips and short

documentaries were also added to the list of resources. And of course, the students were getting ‘target language’ input from each other – which is not always recognized by foreign language teachers as an important asset to telecollaborative projects when in fact it is a genuine ‘simulacra’ of the real world they will be inhabiting where transnational workplaces are usually made up of ‘non-native’ English speakers.

Within the context of key knowledge instruction, **students must also learn the essential skills for success in today’s world, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration.** When a school or district builds on this foundation, combining the entire Framework with the necessary support systems—standards, assessments, curriculum and instruction, professional development and learning environments—students are more engaged in the learning process and graduate better prepared to thrive in today’s global economy. (Partnership 21st Century Learning, 2015, p. 9; bold letters added by author)

Next, the teachers discussed the differences in number of hours that it would be possible to devote to the activities in the project on each side of the partnership. On the one hand, Spanish students attended English lessons for 5 hours a week. Three of them are dedicated to regular classes, whilst the other two were part of an elective subject in the syllabus. On the other hand, Swedish students only receive 2 hours of English per week in their school. This was immediately sorted out by assigning the 2 hours of the elective classes as the working space for the project in the Spanish school.

Another issue that was detected during the initial meeting was the difference in number of students in the partner classes. There were 27 students in Sweden versus 15 in the Spanish class. Again, this was fairly easy to resolve by setting up larger working groups in the Spanish class so that the international working groups were made up of five students total (3 Spanish, 2 Swedish). This also provided additional group support to the Spanish groups who felt less confident in their target language use.

Finally, because the Swedish partnership would be carrying out the project during all of the hours that would normally be dedicated to ‘regular’ foreign language class, the Swedish teacher needed follow a quite strict teaching plan that included the 4 language acquisition skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Since the project was going to be carried out in the elective part of the English classes in the Catalan school it was not a problem for the teacher to adapt to the Swedish course requirements and both teachers agreed to design the activities to ensure all the

skills were presented and practices in a balanced fashion. Having worked out the possible pitfalls regarding schedule, course needs, student profile and calendar, we were now ready to begin planning the activities and sessions of our project.

Finalizing the plans: ‘How to make a difference’ comes to life

Having settled possible points of contention, we now turned to giving an overall outline to the project. First we needed to set the number of sessions we would devote to the project that we had decided to call “How to make a difference”. Despite the fact that we were ‘first-timers’, we decided to embark on a 12-week project that would take the entire semester. We felt that it was the minimum amount of time needed for such a complex topic and we really wanted our students to have time to comprehend the different aspects of a social situation that is quite alien to many of them.

We also wanted them to create a final output that could have a social impact on their local communities so it was agreed that the students would work together to create a blog that covered several aspects of the ‘Syrian crisis’ – from explaining to the public how refugees are categorized and assigned asylum to providing tips and ideas how everyday citizens can be involved in local campaigns to provide aide. The main idea, however, was to raise public awareness that the situation should not be seen as ‘isolated’ from the local community; as members of the European Union citizens from Spain and Sweden should consider these situations as part of their own daily lives. Thus the final project was a *Wordpress* titled *How to make a difference*².

Having agreed upon a final output, it was important to identify the objectives we would both seek as teachers of the two separate classes. Eventually we settled on the following:

2 The final product can be seen here: <https://howtomakeadifference2016.wordpress.com/>

- Improvement of linguistic competence in the target language (English).
- Interacting through the four main communicative skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.
- Practicing and improving communicative skills through technology (21st century competences).
- Development of intercultural competences.
- Development of the ability to work in teams (project and collaborative work).

Next, we designed the activities (main tasks and subtasks that lead up to the final product and decide their sequencing. It was decided that the first activities would be individual and group introductions between the partners. These were done differently in each country. Students from Sweden sent videos about themselves and their hometown. Students in Catalonia programmed short games using the programme Scratch to share with their partners³. These were followed up by a group video of the whole group welcoming their Swedish partners.

Because the project started just before Christmas, the partner groups exchanged informational videos about how this holiday is celebrated in each country. In the case of the Catalan students, a video about traditions that are not very well-known outside Catalonia was created. Moreover, the Catalan students decided to mail traditional Christmas food from their country so the Swedish students could enjoy “turró”, (a special Christmas nougat), before their winter break.

The roadmap: How to make a difference

The project was divided into eight main blocks of activities that served as orientation for both groups to work together towards the final product. However, some flexibility in the planning was needed in order to allow for any local contingencies and to ensure space and time for extra sessions or activities that each local partner might require. The eight main blocks were:

3 This was done in conjunction with the technology teacher, Cristobal Peralbo.

1. To take a close look at the term ‘refugee’: look at how has it been defined and used in different texts and contexts, discuss what the students understand when they hear this word. Finally, the students should work in their online partner groups to come up with their own definition of the word which would be added to the blog for raising public awareness of the discourse surrounding the topic.
2. To create a first draft of a manifest: After reading and discussing ‘prompting’ texts, the students discuss the main content to be included in a manifest they would write on the behalf of the refugee community. Each group creates three to five sentences to complete the phrase “We deserve ...”.
3. To discover more about refugee life: Students view documentary information about the typical travelling that a refugee might have to do before arriving to a refugee camp (travelling by foot, lorries, boats). Students are encouraged to fully understand the distances covered, what the conditions are like both on their way and once at refugee camps, what happens once an individual or family is in a camp and what the status of asylum requires. This exploration is supported by videos and reading in English about the life and conditions of EU refugees. Students create commentary messages for their partners about their opinions regarding what they have discovered.
4. To promote understanding of both sides of an argument: Both groups are introduced to argumentative text writing. They are then required to compose two texts that represent both sides (for and against) of the situation of providing asylum for political refugees.
5. To gain deeper insight into the causes: Students are provided with articles that outline the history of the conflicts, dating from the beginning of the conflict till 2015. This activity focuses on reading comprehension and provides arguments for finalizing the essays.
6. To create a campaign for public awareness: Starting from the slogan ‘Keep calm and poke on’, students work in groups to create succinct ‘tips’ for the local community regarding small efforts everyone can do to contribute to helping families in refugee camps across the European Union. Having raised public awareness that it is not just a ‘distant’ problem, this activity focuses creating ‘pokes’ (a term commonly used with Facebook and therefore familiar to the students) to prod the community’s activism. Ideas range from donating books and sleeping bags to inviting refugee families to one’s own home.

7. To report on the situation: Students are asked to be ‘journalists’ and show the world what they have learnt about the conflict (causes consequences, what can be done).
8. To write and post a manifest: Student groups edit and finalize their sections of the manifest. These are recorded and shared on the blog and the partners provide feedback.

Due to differences in the class calendar, the final sessions (wrap-up and revision) for each group were slightly different. In the Spanish class, the students created a Prezi to reflect on their learning. In Sweden, students used Augmented Reality glasses to watch a 3D film called *The Displaced*, produced by the NY Times. As each individual watched it, they had to dictate to the rest of the class what they were watching. The rest of the class took notes of what they were learning and feeling as they listened to the experiences narrated in the film. All of the reflection materials from both countries were posted in the blog so the learners could check out their partners’ productions.

In terms of assessing, both teachers agreed that exams were not needed. Formative assessment and self-evaluation tools were used instead, along with assessment of group and individual products stemming from different sub-tasks throughout the course of the project.

One final synchronous meeting was held between the classes (the Swedish teacher switched her class schedule with another teacher for the day) and the partners exchanged their farewells via Skype.

The Junior Researchers

As mentioned previously, four students from each country volunteered to be group leaders or ‘Junior Researchers’. Apart from the other project tasks these students also had the responsibility of maintain regular contact with the other country’s Junior Researchers (through social media, outside of class hours) in order to record and document the development of the work done within the project (see figure 1). These were students who had quite high command of the target language and felt comfortable using it. The role of Junior Researchers provided them with an added incentive to practice the target language and kept them motivated when they finished their tasks more quickly than others.



Fig. 1. Junior researchers hold videoconference after class

In Spain, the sessions that were held outside the class were supervised by a PhD student from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Because the Junior Researchers were tasked with informing their counterparts about what was going on in the project on their end, the Spanish teacher provided them with form they could use to ask their colleagues about their impressions regarding the different activities such as what they had enjoyed, what technology they had used and their opinions of the topics that had been discussed. General impressions from both groups were then recorded in a shared google document.

The implementation of the project

Despite having been designed by the teachers from each country together, when it came to the actual implementation, adjustments were often made locally and *in situ*. “Language acquisition is fostered if it occurs in a context that is supportive and motivating, communicative and referential, developmentally appropriate, and feedback rich“ (Kagan, 1995, p. 2). Taking the individual contexts into account, there were implicit differences to the ways in which the sub-tasks for producing some of the output were carried out. For example, the Swedish students were given more autonomy when writing their essays than the Spanish class because the Swedish group was more used to doing this type of lesson. For the Spanish students this was a new format and therefore they were instructed more on essay structures, possible sentences and pieces of information to include in their productions.

However, all activities were designed with the final aim of setting up and sustaining a collaborative learning process, integrating the five key features presented by Liang (2002) which are the following: positive interdependence, individual accountability, quality group processing, explicit teaching of small group skills and teaching of social skills.

In the next section, how some of the sub-tasks were carried out is described in more detail.

Taking a close look at the term 'refugee'

During this task cycle, students had to reach an agreement on how they would define the word 'refugee'. In order to scaffold their understanding of the term, two tools were used: *Kahoot* and *Quizlet*. Kahoot is an online platform that allows teachers to create learning games in different formats (e.g. multiple choice questions, open-ended questions, etc.). The students can answer the questions on their own devices (computers or cellphones) in the class while the questions are displayed on a shared screen (e.g. whiteboard). This tool encourages rapid, individual participation to answering questions and is often used as a 'mini-race' among the students. Similarly, Quizlet allows teachers to create interactive online questions. It is especially suitable for working on definitions since it allows teachers to create online flashcards.

Kahoot was used to introduce to potential vocabulary that could be used to write their definitions (e.g. 'home', 'safety', 'freedom'). Quizlet was used to highlight and review key words the students had chosen for their definition and to ensure that everyone understood completely their meanings. Some examples of the vocabulary items are 'family', 'religion', and 'conflict', to name a few.

The definitions written by the Spanish students were submitted to the Swedish students, who then edited them and finally a vote was taken (using the platform *menti.com*), to choose the definition that would be used for the project blog.

Creating a manifest

As part of the objective of raising students' awareness about the causes of refugee situations, this exercise was set up to help students understand the link between social and political situations and consequences that affect

everyone. They were also required to look more closely at the needs of refugees. This reflection was sparked pictures and a quote from the book *Once* by Morris Gleitzman “Everybody deserves to have something good in their life. At least once”. Using the beginning from the sentence, the Spanish students completed it by saying ‘Everybody deserves ...’ in order to come up with the first draft of the manifest.

This list was sent to Sweden for editing and additions. The vocabulary (key words) that were drawn out during the discussions were displayed in a *Wordcloud* and uploaded in the blog.

These were just the first steps of the manifest. Some weeks later, and after the compilation of more information about the conflict, recordings of the definite manifest were made and uploaded in the *Wordpress*.



Fig. 2. Students begin work on manifest

Discovering more about refugee life

In order to understand more deeply the situation in Syria and what was happening with the country’s inhabitants who were migrating to other countries nearby, two videos, produced by Hans Rosling and published in *Youtube* were presented to the students. These were a) Why Boat Refugees Don’t Fly! – Factpod #16 and b) Where Are the Syrian Refugees? – Factpod #17

Both videos were uploaded into *Zaption*⁴. This app allowed teachers to prepare multiple choice and open questions for learners to answer while watching the film. The learners could stop and listen to the information as many times as they liked and complete the activity at their own pace. After the students had viewed and understood the videos, they were expected to compile group comments on a document shared with their Swedish partners. The final goal of the videos and the class work were to make sure students could understand –and hopefully empathize with –the travails the Syrian people were undergoing. Our premise was that the more knowledge children gained about the problem, the more effective their final message would be.

Understanding both sides of an argument

This exercise was exceptionally potent for bringing up some issues and discussion amongst the learners. The final product was a ‘For and Against’ essay (seeking a balanced argument) about whether the refugees should be given political asylum or not. The Spanish students were given this statement: “Giving asylum to Syrian refugees is not only humanitarian but wise”. Discuss.

Because the twelve-year old Spanish students had never faced this type of essay-writing, it was necessary to provide them with prompters such as how to use connectors, transitions, conjunctions and other similar syntax. The Swedish teacher decided to give a more open topic for her learners to develop. Some of the titles they came up with were: ‘Refugees’ and their future’; ‘Refugees: I don’t want more refugees in Sweden’; ‘Refugees: Sweden can take some more’.

Due to the different levels of experience in writing in the target language, this activity was addressed differently between the two classes. The Spanish students were provided with more parameters for the structure expected in the essay whereas the Swedish students were given more leeway because the teacher was interested in seeing what her learners were capable of developing on their own, with minimal guidelines.

The final essays were published online and posted in the common blog to help further educate the general public about different positions concerning the political and social situation of the refugees.

4 This tool was closed down in June of 2016. However, *Edpuzzle* has taken its place. This is a similar tool which is very useful when it comes to improving listening skills.

Gaining deeper insight into the causes

The teachers were concerned that the students should be exposed to authentic information about the difficulties refugees were encountering so they could truly understand the reality of what their lives are like. This was done through careful selection of news articles to be read and discussed by the learners. Again, this was a challenge for the Spanish students as the level required for understanding articles from international media is quite high. So texts from BBC reports were mixed with more student-aimed texts to clarify a bit more the tragic situation in Syria in particular and in the Middle East in general. Most of these came from <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/> which offers news from around the world in a more straightforward language. The page also provides exercises and other activities to complement the articles and which can be used by teachers.

The chosen articles were:

- *Syria protest getting bigger* (14th April 2011)
- *1 million Syrian child refugees* (24th August, 2013)
- *U.N.'very sorry' as Syria talks end in failure* (18th February, 2014)
- *Germany and Austria welcome refugees* (8th September, 2015)

After the students had read the articles and carried out some comprehension prepared for each text, the students were introduced to a game, based on ordering the content of the texts and which was posted on the blog.

Creating a campaign for public awareness

The next task cycle aimed to raise the students' own reflection by first getting them to focus on their feelings. After reflecting on how they would feel in a similar situation, the learners had to propose suggestions for the public in regards to actions that could be taken for improving the refugees' situation. The students then recorded their ideas as 'public pokes' and posted them on the blog, thus not only sharing their ideas with their partners but also with the world. The Swedish students also created online posters, with text and images, which depicted their ideas on how to help and support refugees.

The results of the recordings and the posters can be viewed in the final blog.

Reporting on the situation

This sub-task was anticipated as an opportunity for the students to learn about and practice writing factual, informative texts. However, due to lack of time, this part of the project was left out.

Writing and posting the manifest

This final activity was designed to be the culmination of the learning process and an opportunity for the students to display their collective understanding of the topic. As a sub-task to this activity, the main words from task two were voted on and then these words were put into visual mind-maps through the tool called *Visuwords*. This served as a visual prompt for new ideas to create the manifest.

The final thoughts of the two groups were collected differently in each group. The Spanish students recorded their manifest ('we believe that all refugees have the right to ...') and send these statements to their Swedish partners. Initially, the plan stipulated that these would then be edited by the Swedish students and then they would add their own thoughts. However, we were running out of time as the semester was finishing and so the recordings were uploaded directly into the blog. The Spanish students created audio files through *Soundcloud* while the Swedish students filmed short video clips and posted them in *Youtube* and then linked these to the project blog.



Fig. 3. Students' final presentation about what they have learnt

Assessment

A final reflection activity was given to the students that had not been part of the initial planning of the ‘*How to make a difference*’ project. However it was deemed necessary to check their overall gains and the knowledge acquired throughout the process. It was also important to see if what had been laid out by the teachers and researchers had been a success or a failure. Therefore, we asked our students to verbalize what they had learned from the project. Each teacher developed the activity differently. In Sweden, the students posted their answers on a Padlet. In Spain, the students were given four topics to elaborate in groups which they then added to a Prezi presentation. The four topics were about a) the ‘pokes’ and the manifest; b) the current situation of the Syrian refugees; c) the historical facts related to the refugee crisis of 2015; d) specific vocabulary related to the project. Additionally, the PhD student interviewed and recorded the students discussing what they liked and disliked about the project.

The students were not asked to sit an exam during any part of the project. The outcomes of the sub-tasks and main tasks provided sufficient evidence to evaluate their writing, reading, speaking and listening skills. Thus, formative evaluation was used to check the students’ progress. Improvement over time, as seen in the group work and individual work were supplemented by recordings taken during class and the forms collected by the Junior Researchers.

During the planning, there was some discussion about using the same rubric for evaluation in each activity, but it was finally decided that each teacher would assess their students according to the best approach for each school and class. However, looking at the documentation and output that was derived from the project in comparison to the established objectives, clearly the project provided learning opportunities for the students. Let’s look at each of these more closely.

Improvement of linguistic competence in the target language (English): For the Spanish students the opportunity to interact with students whose level of English was higher was a challenge that they were able to overcome and which had an impact on their confidence in using the target language (in particular in the spoken mode). Swedish learners had the opportunity to improve their writing skills (and general knowledge of the target language) by editing and correcting texts. Moreover, the difference in the general command of the

target language promoted an almost intangible aspect of communication that is key to its use: Whilst the Spanish learners had to make an effort to ensure they were understood, the Swedish students had to make sure they understood their partners' interventions, thereby promoting the linguistic meta-reflection that is so necessary for intercultural communication.

Interacting through the four main communicative skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking: As it has been outlined in the activities, all of the skills were integrated into the different tasks –at times they were focused principally only on one but they were often integrated in a highly complex way (e.g. watching a video while reading the sub-titles and writing answers into another text).

This (technology networking) will also help the students become better prepared to face likely work conditions when they begin their professional lives, including the use of communication technology with other professionals across the globe. In today's globalized world, the use of computer-mediated communication technologies to engage in either real-time (synchronous) or asynchronous communication among team members separated by great geographic distances is commonplace. (Dooly, 2010, p. 2)

Practicing and improving their communicative skills through technology (21st century competences): Without a doubt, most students nowadays are high-tech but that does not necessarily translate into knowing how to efficiently use new technology in a learning context. The project introduced the students to a new use of social media (Facebook, Instagram, wikis) and apps (blogs, podcasting...) for social purposes (creating social impact) as well as a tool for collaborative work.

Development of intercultural competences: It was our reasoning that because the students had the opportunity to use their second language in real communicative settings; their interest for the language (as both object of study and as a communicative tool) would increase. Moreover, through the use of the target language as a means of getting to know and work with other learners from another they would broaden their knowledge other cultures and traditions. The tasks helped them engage in discussion about different traditions (e.g. how they celebrate Christmas – similarities and differences) as well as more mundane aspects of their class work, their schools and their lifestyles outside of the classroom. Moreover, helping students to broaden their knowledge of the world by discussing present-day topics with teenagers from different cultures was also an important asset.

Development of the ability to work in teams (project and collaborative work): Quite often teachers are aware of the need for helping their students develop the ability to work collaboratively (often cited as one of the most important competences for the 21st century) but do not realize that simply carrying out group work in class does not necessarily enable learners to be able to carry out this type of work beyond the classroom. Teachers are usually quite adept at leading their learners to work collaboratively within the classroom but they must also learn to collaborate with others outside of their local community – individuals who may not have the same understanding of social and cultural norms, of how tasks should be carried out to complete work, etc. Helping them to learn to work with others who are outside their immediate circle has been important for this project.

Some key take-way points from the experience

The fact that most of the tasks led to output that was published in the project blog implied that the learners were using the language creatively and for an authentic purpose, especially as they knew that the blog was open to any reader. Furthermore, asking the teenagers to share their created materials with each other nudged them to be careful with what they publish; they tried to be more accurate in the way they communicate, for instance, so they were sure they were getting their ideas across and also to put forth ‘their best face’.

Also, we observed that the more they learnt and the more they used the target language to communicate with each other, the easier they found it to accomplish increasingly more complex tasks. And of course, because the final output had an authentic purpose of convincing others outside of their classes to be more aware of the situation of refugees in the European Union, were more motivated to carry out the activities.

There is no denying that achievements and motivation are closely correlated. According to the correlation between motivation and English achievement for senior high school students was very high ($p < .01$). Hsu (1998) also argued that there was a high correlation between motivation and final grades for junior high school students. In similar vein, Huang (1990) pointed out that students with high motivation tended to have a better English achievement than students with low motivation. (Liang, 2002, p. 65)

On a more individual level, as a first-time teacher working on a telecollaborative project, six key points emerged as time went by.

The first one is having the objectives very clear in mind. In our case the aims were specified and a consensus was reached before the project started. This helped us to identify and design the activities that would be needed to ensure the acquisition of these competences.

Secondly, it soon became apparent that the development of collaborative teamwork is not limited to the students. Usually teachers work in isolation and are solely responsible for the development of the syllabus, the design of the activities and the preparation of materials. Sharing materials and goals with people outside my school was new for me and the sense of accountability that accompanied this teamwork was intimidating. I must admit that the sense of letting go (of at least half) of the control of what would take place and sharing this responsibility with someone who was working in a faraway country was very difficult to cope with at first.

Through reflection I came to understand that this uneasiness comes first from the fact that we teachers have our own ways of doing things and we feel comfortable with 'our way'. Opening up our classroom to others may mean that we sometimes feel criticized when a colleague claims he or she would reach a goal differently. However, it is important to bear in mind that each cultural environment has a different impact on how objectives, task development and learning are interpreted and that means that we may not 'understand' or even agree with some of the teaching techniques of our teacher partners. As a consequence, fluid communication is absolutely essential when embarking on such a project.

It is also important to realize that the most relevant learning that can take place through these projects must be communication. Allowing students to articulate their ideas and feelings and that this must not be 'shoved aside' just to complete the tasks as they are written down in the work plan. Teachers must be aware that the original plans can be changed and they must be ready to adjust.

Inevitably, then, the Teacher 2.0 must be able to not only design effective telecollaborative tasks, but be able to monitor and assess the learner interaction (in the classroom and online) in order to optimize the task-as-process. (Dooly, 2010, p. 17)

Another point to bear in mind when dealing with this type of projects is knowing that problems might (and probably will) arise during the implementation and sorting things out might become complicated. For instance,

despite the fact that regular lesson schedules, school trips and holidays during the planned working period were taken into consideration when designing the project, we still could not finish all the tasks we had planned. This can be frustrating and teachers may conclude that the project did not reach a proper closure if things are not completed as they were stipulated at the beginning. As I've indicated before, being flexible and willing to adapt are crucial for the success of any project. As long as the teacher understands that even if the project activities are shortened or even aborted, learning will always be present.

A further key point that materialized was the fact that cultural differences emerge –not just between the students but also between the partner teachers. While these differences may not seem to be important at first, but the way two such different countries work might shock the partners and, inevitably the project risks ending up cluttered like a bric-a-brac stall in a flea market. The partner teachers must never lose sight of the fact that the objective is learning how to work together. Highlighting what each partner country will contribute to the other and what each can learn from the other can help with this. All the teachers involved must be willing to learn from each other and to widen their minds. Acting as models, likewise, students will take advantage from exposure to new ways of teaching and different points of views.

The sixth and final point that stands out for me is the fact that through a telecollaborative project with a clear social goal, we were able to bring the world into the classroom. With *How to make a Difference*, the refugees were humanized, they became equals whom had to be taken into consideration while the students were doing their lessons. Twice a week, they were not empty faces from the news –faces that one could avoid by switching off the TV channel. While not always easy –and definitely not always 'comfortable' material to with- this telecollaborative project forced teachers, researchers and learners to face a crude reality and to try to do something about the problem at hand by involving our students and triggering their critical thinking in order to guide their actions towards improving the world they are living in. It also forced the 'adults' (the teachers and researchers) to try to have a social impact through our everyday our jobs. Being able to do this requires that teachers think out of the box. It also implies risk – above all that mistakes can be made. And mistakes were made and hard work was needed. However, errors must be seen as an opportunity to develop our teaching skills not as a reason to give up. And

when 12 and 13 year old students can stand up and claim they know how the world must be, that the world must be different from the one that exists, one knows a good job has been done.

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