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Wireless CLIL: a learning experience in videoconference[1]

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Abstract

The experience described in the present contribution is without any doubts a CLIL experience, but with some unusual characteristics. In fact, the leading idea for the project was to connect learners from a remote location to a class in a foreign language where the teacher is teaching content that is part of their curriculum, allowing interaction between the remote students and teachers. However, an open, distant teaching channel implies different behaviours and didactic approaches, which were also investigated in the project. Another objective was the promotion of the CLIL approach to exploit videoconferencing technology for the following CLIL purposes. The experience allowed exploration of different themes: the opportunity offered by technology for running lessons at distance; the management of European projects using wireless videoconferencing; the testing of teaching styles in a videoconferencing context; the use of videoconferencing technology as a training opportunity for future teachers; the presenting of CLIL lessons via videoconferencing. The focus of this article is on how we applied the CLIL methodology in a semi-virtual context, represented by the meeting of two groups of learners with their teachers in an enlarged classroom by means of the connections of two remote classrooms via videoconferencing. An example of didactic interaction is analysed as a case study.

Key words: CLIL, Videoconference, Active Learning, Intercultural Dialogue, Action Research

Resumen

Se reseña una experiencia europea de AICLE (Aprendizaje Integrado de Conocimientos Curriculares y Lengua Extranjera) muy particular y cuyo aspecto más innovador es la videoconferencia

como situación de aprendizaje central, una situación comunicativa que implica una reflexión sobre distintos aspectos, tanto de la comunicación misma como de la interacción en clase. Se describe la metodología empleada en la preparación de los materiales curriculares y en el desarrollo de las sesiones y se valoran los resultados didácticos obtenidos. Se presenta un ejemplo de interacción didáctica con metodología AICLE en el contexto semivirtual de aprendizaje a distancia promovido por el encuentro de dos grupos de estudiantes en una clase abierta conectada por Internet.
Palabras clave: AICLE, videoconferencia, metodología activa, diálogo intercultural, investigación – acción.

1. The project: rationale and main objectives

The CLIL methodology has already been explored in European projects (see, for example, Delhaxhe 2005); however, such projects used traditional classroom lessons to activate a CLIL process. The aim of the Wireless CLIL project was (1) to open up the classroom by using a videoconferencing system, and more specifically (2) to connect learners from a remote location to a class in a foreign language where the teacher is teaching content that is part of their curriculum, allowing interaction between remote students and teachers. This aim was intended to give the opportunity to experience CLIL also to students learning a lesser-learnt language (but one spoken by the remote content teacher) such as Italian, as in our case. Implicit in this aim was the promotion of language learning for students and teachers and that such a process would favor intercultural dialogue and promote the 'European Dimension' (Cifuentes & Murphy 2000). However, an open, distant teaching channel implies different behaviours and didactic approaches, as well as new and different roles for teachers and students, which was one of the objectives and foci of the project and of its composite research (Cabero 2003).

Using wireless and cabled videoconferencing technology, we ran videoconferences for the following purposes:
·   to meet and get to know each other;
·   to keep in touch with all members of the project staff and enable collaborative work;
·   to run CLIL lessons.

The experience allowed exploration of different themes:
·   the opportunity offered by technology for running lessons at a distance;
·   the management of European projects using wireless videoconferencing;
·   the testing of teaching styles in a videoconferencing context;
·   the use of videoconferencing technology as a training opportunity for future teachers;
·   the presenting of CLIL lessons via videoconferencing.

The focus of this article is on how we applied the CLIL methodology in a semi-virtual context, represented by the meeting of two groups of learners with their teachers in an enlarged classroom by means of the connections of two remote classrooms via videoconferencing.

2. Learning/teaching via videoconferencing

The project was a Minerva project (ICT–based projects supported by the European Commission within Socrates II) and involved four European countries (Spain, Italy, Sweden and the Czech Republic). The Italian, Spanish and Swedish partners were the so-called 'educational partners' as they involved students in the project activities, while the Czech partner was the 'technological' partner, as it was in charge of the development of the technological communication system (it was actually a small organisation specialized in the use of ICT for educational purposes). The CLIL approach was used to improve foreign language learning while learning content. A content teacher —a native speaker of the language that students living and learning in one of the other partner countries were studying as second language— taught such content.

Therefore, one of the main features of the project was to connect a content teacher and his/her students with a class learning their mother tongue in another country. Consequently most of the videoconferences were bilateral: a subject teacher in a classroom of students in one country delivered a lesson to students in a classroom in another partner country with the presence of their local language and subject teachers. For example a class of Swedish pupils learning Italian as a L2 was connected with an Italian class of Italian native speakers who had a history lesson on the same day at the same time. Therefore, the Swedish pupils learnt content in Italian quasi as if they were attending the lesson face-to-face in Italy. The same occurred with the Italian students learning Spanish as a L2 who attended a geography lesson that was run in Zaragoza (Spain). We ran the following bilateral videoconferences (table 1):

Table 1

Subject taught - location of delivering institution	Language used - location of receiving institution(s)
Italian literature and history – Italy	Italian as L2 - Sweden
Spanish geography – Spain	Spanish as L2 - Italy
Environmental issues – Spain	Spanish as L2 - Sweden
Immigration and demographic flows – Spain	Spanish as L2 - Sweden and Italy

Within the subjects shown in the table the following contents were selected:
· Dante Alighieri, his life and times; The Italian Resistenza (Partisan war);
· The right to vote for women in Italy (Italian literature and history)
· Characteristics of the Spanish Territory (Geography)
· Environmental issues in Spain and in Europe (Geography)
· Immigration to Spain (Geography)

The languages involved were therefore Spanish and Italian as foreign language and as mother tongue.

3. Preparation and running of videoconferences

Together with the client First Class, a software program allowing computer mediated communication, all possible technological opportunities were actually used and explored to facilitate all

interactional needs, especially instant messaging such as MSN and Skype. The latter are Internet services allowing the exchange of messages in real time and audio conference calls completely free of charge. Therefore the teaching staff met in Skype very frequently, sometimes even daily, to plan the next videoconference, especially when it came to choosing contents and preparing teaching materials. Such teaching materials consisted of:

- · PowerPoint presentations giving information about the theme of the lesson, showing the flow of the lesson, presenting short exercises and short reading texts. These were sent during the videoconference over the net.
- · Purely linguistic exercises (e.g. gap-fills, glossary exercises, multiple choice, true or false exercises, etc). These were sent in advance, sometimes completed during a lesson and sometimes after the lesson had finished.
- · Work with parallel texts (this work was done before the videoconferences by the language teachers).
- · Authentic texts, such as digital newspapers and images (iconic texts).
- · Short video texts (4 minutes maximum duration) prepared using Windows Media Maker.

The videoconferences were planned in great detail (e.g. length of each activity, teaching responsibilities and schedules) using a grid describing the didactic sequence. In order to avoid problems in turn taking, the interaction between the teachers in the videoconference was agreed upon in advance and even the role of the students was generally planned, but flexibility was taken into consideration.

4. Interaction: students' and teaching team's role

The L2 teacher and the content teacher were not both class teachers of the same group of pupils. Actually, they each took part in the videoconference with their pupils, who were having a L2 lesson in one country and a content lesson in the case of the mother-tongue pupils. As far as the two teachers are concerned, they could understand each other, as they used the same language in the didactic interaction. For the subject teacher it was his/her mother tongue; for the language teacher it was an acquired language he/she taught. However the subject teacher was not the 'regular' subject teacher of the receiving class, he/she was only their virtual teacher, which meant that the students had a different subject teacher at their school, as the subject they were learning with their virtual teacher was also included in their curriculum. On the contrary, the language teacher was their language teacher.

This unusual situation implied that the third actor on the stage —the local content teacher who could not speak the targeted foreign language— had to agree on aims and lesson content with the delivering subject teacher, who in turn had to share in advance his/her teaching approach, methodological suggestions, and testing and evaluation activities. The language teacher had to agree on the level of accessibility of the CLIL lesson for the non-native speaking students with the content-delivering teacher. All this was done —as previously mentioned— using Skype and during the project meetings that took place three times a year over the life of the project. Of course, most of the planning was done in the first project year, before beginning the lessons via videoconferencing which actually started only late in Spring 2005 (the project began in October of the previous year).

One of the major problems was that the level of competence of the pupils learning the foreign

languages involved (Italian and Spanish) was lower than that of pupils who were native speakers. We feared also that expectations of content learning were higher for the subject-delivering teachers' groups. On the basis of our experience we can state that performance at the level of content was not so different between the two groups, as they were assessed using the same test and results were very similar.

Furthermore there were at least three good motivations to foster this kind of 'remote' CLIL. In fact when preparing the lesson together with his/her remote colleagues, the delivering teacher was forced to make an effort to break down his/her subject into simple units accessible to non-native speakers. Especially low-skilled students could profit from this process. Consolidation and integration were done later on by the subject teacher, using face-to-face activities, when he/she would considered it necessary.

When the delivering teacher prepared the materials, he/she involved his/her students, who could point out what they perceived as the more difficult and problematic concepts and issues. A glossary was prepared, to find simpler ways of expressing the same concept. That is to say, students could 'manipulate' their mother tongue.

By discussing and comparing his/her methodological approach with colleagues teaching the same subject within the framework of a different educational context, the delivering teacher experienced real personal and professional enrichment and a transnational exchange of good practices.

The delivering teacher's students —as already mentioned above— were learning a subject in their mother tongue. Apparently they did not have any particular motivation to take part in the videoconferencing as:
·   they were learning what they would normally be taught in their class lesson;
·   they were using their mother tongue in the interaction with other young people and not a foreign language.

In this scenario however these particular groups of learners could play a very important objective role, and of course they were prepared to play their part. In fact, they interacted with their delivering teacher in the preparation of the teaching materials, expressing the difficulties they had with content and specific vocabulary. They were also invited to monitor their way of speaking, becoming aware of the need to avoid 'slang' expressions which make communication more difficult, as such words and idioms are not generally known by the foreign language students. This effort made students more aware of their own communication style and —of course adequately supported by the delivering teacher— of some aspects of their mother tongue.

They could also complement and take on the role of the language and subject teachers in a process of real 'peer learning'. This reinforced their attention and their motivation and developed readiness to cooperate and to foster solidarity.

5. Case-study: history lesson hosted in Italian and received by Swedish students

The preparation of materials and the running of activities is best explained by considering a case-study of interaction between the Swedish and the Italian student groups. All Swedish pupils involved in the project studied Italian as a foreign language. Over all the Italian history curriculum is a relevant subject both for the Swedish and the Italian students. The history of the Second

World War appeared to be an interesting topic to be dealt with in the CLIL lessons for the following reasons:

- · it was present in both history curricula;
- · it could give a different vision and interpretation of this important historical event due to the different involvement and perspectives of the two countries in the war.

The Italian and the Swedish teachers agreed to focus on one specific event of the Second World War: the Italian Partisan war, the so-called Resistenza.

The language objectives according to the Swedish curriculum for the participating students were as follows, corresponding to their level of competence:

- · to be able to read and, with good understanding, assimilate the content of simple instructions, narratives and descriptions, as well as be able to extract facts from non-fiction texts, which are simple in terms of language and contents;
- · to be able to express themselves in simple forms in writing in order to retell, describe or provide some information;
- · to be able to reflect on how their own learning progresses;
- · to be able to use a range of simple aids in order to (understand and) express themselves;
- · to be able, in a simple form, to plan, carry out and evaluate work tasks individually, or in co-operation with others.

And of course the language teacher focused on the goals above when preparing CLIL lessons together with the subject teacher. The language teacher contributed a wider perspective of the Italian Resistenza by presenting the students with some further Italian literary texts written by authors of Neo-realism.

Short film scenes were used as a first input because they are particularly comprehensible within a common cultural context such as the one represented by the European territory and western culture. Furthermore they can easily activate pre-knowledge.

From the content point of view the module was structured as follows:

1. Watching some scenes from the film Le Quattro Giornate di Napoli (Nanni Loy, 1962) and Roma, Città Aperta (Roberto Rossellini, 1945);
2. Reading of simplified, informative texts about the Italian Resistenza;
3. Commenting on photographs of the times;
4. Reading of literary texts (Il sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno by Italo Calvino and L'Agnese va a Morire by R. Viganò)

From the linguistic point of view, each of the above mentioned resources was accompanied by different kind of exercises, such as comprehension questions, glossaries, consolidation exercises, extensions and summaries.

We present below an example of interaction from one of the Swedish–Italian videoconferences. Students involved were Swedish students at the Katedralskola in Växjö learning Italian as a second language. They had an intermediate level of competence. As already mentioned, one of the topics in their history curriculum was the Second World War. The Italian class —made up of pupils at a vocational school— also had to learn this content in their history curriculum, and therefore the two teachers involved agreed upon the possibility of focusing on some events connected with this historical period.

In fragment 1 below, the history teacher, who is also the class' Italian teacher, is running a

history lesson with her students in Italy. Their Swedish teacher of Italian as a L2 supports the Swedish class. Joachim is a Swedish student.

Fragment 1:

HISTORY TEACHER: Abbiamo visto alcune scene dal film di Roberto Rossellini *Roma, Città Aperta*. Quale scena vi ha colpito di più o vi ha interessato di più? (Which scene from the film *Roma, Città Aperta* by Roberto Rosselini have you found most impressive or interesting)

JOACHIM: La scena della sparata. (The scene of the "boasting")

HISTORY TEACHER: Cosa intendi con la parola sparata? Prova a spiegarti meglio? (What do you mean by boasting? Can you explain better?)

JOACHIM: Quando i tedeschi uccidono la donna. (When the German soldiers kill the woman.)

TEACHER: Quando i tedeschi uccidono la donna, perfetto! (When the Germans kill the woman, perfect!). Però in italiano 'sparata' significa altro. (But in Italian 'sparata' means something else.) Chi vuole spiegare cosa significa sparata in Italiano? (Who can explain what 'sparata' means in Italian?)

ITALIAN STUDENT 1: Ad esempio diciamo l'hai sparata grossa quando una persona dice qualcosa che molto probabilmente non è vero e lo dice in modo quasi esagerato, si vanta di qualcosa.... (It means to exaggerate, to tell tall stories, to tell big)

ITALIAN STUDENT 2: Quando ad esempio sei interrogato e non sai bene cosa rispondere e spari a caso.(For example, when you are questioned and you don't know the right answer you can make things up).

HISTORY TEACHER: Esatto, sparare in questo senso significa dire cose sbagliate dando una risposta a caso. Una "sparata" è il sostantivo, l'atto di aver detto una cosa esagerata, falsa. (Exactly, 'sparare' means to exaggerate or to tell tall stories. And sparata is the substantive form, maybe in English 'bragging' or 'boasting'). Secondo voi perchè Joachim ha usato il termine "sparata" (Why did Joachim use the word "sparata"?

ITALIAN STUDENT 3: Perchè ha "sparato"!! (Because he made just things up!!) ITALIAN STUDENT 4: Ma no, perchè ha usato il participio passato del verbo "sparare" cioè "sparato" e poi lo ha riferito all'azione e ha usato il femminile (Oh, no, I think he used the past participle of the verb "sparare", that is to say "sparato" and then considering the fact that the word action is a feminine word he used the feminine version.)

TEACHER A: Molto interessante la tua considerazione. Vuoi dire che ha fatto un errore intelligente? Cosa ne dici Joachim? E' così? (Your consideration is very interesting. Do you mean that he made an intelligent error? Joachim, do you find that this explanation is correct?)

JOACHIM: Si, è proprio quello che ho fatto. (Yes, this is really what I did.)

HISTORY TEACHER: Secondo voi cosa voleva dire Joachim invece? (What did Joachim mean actually in your opinion?)

ITALIAN STUDENT 3: Penso che si riferisse alla scena della fucilazione. (I think he referred to the scene when the woman was shot; the scene of the execution, the firing squad.)

LANGUAGE TEACHER: (writing 'fucilazione 'on the whiteboard) Fucilazione, bene. Joachim, è giusto? Ti riferivi alla scena della fucilazione? ('Fucilazione', right. Was that what you meant Joachim? The execution scene?)

JOACHIM: Si. Quando i tedeschi hanno sparato e la donna è caduta per terra. (Yes, when the German soldiers shot and the woman fell down.)

LANGUAGE TEACHER: Questo atto in italiano si definisce 'fucilazione'. (This act is called in Italian 'fucilazione'). Dunque, Joachim hai trovato molto impressionante la scena della fucilazione, giusto? Quando i soldati tedeschi hanno sparato (e intanto scrive alla lavagna "sparato" (So Joachim, you found the execution scene very moving, didn't you? When the German soldiers shot. – writes 'sparato' on the whiteboard)

JOACHIM: Si, la scena della fucilazione mi ha emozionato molto. (Yes, the execution scene really moved me.)

HISTORY TEACHER: Bene, ora vediamo chi dei ragazzi svedesi vuole spiegare perché i tedeschi hanno fucilato la donna romana? (Well, who of the Swedish students can explain why the German soldiers shot the woman?)

If we consider the short interaction between the teachers and the students involved, we can observe that it follows the most common exchange pattern (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975) in class discourse; that is to say, the teacher initiates, students react and teacher gives a feedback. Joachim, the first student who reacts, makes first a vocabulary error and then he <u>describes</u> the scene to

which he refers, as he cannot find a word to express the same concept. This is due to the fact that the input the students received was a visual one (the film) that allows describing what would not be possible if the text were a written one. At the same time, Joachim is not aware of the different meaning the word *sparata* has in Italian, and only later on he becomes aware of the mismatch between the word he has used and its proper meaning, thanks to the contribution of the Italian students. On the contrary, the Italian students use periphrases to explain the meaning of the word 'sparata', which is not only part of their linguistic and cognitive heritage, but even of their daily jargon. Their effort is to explain, and this obliges them to reflect on the different meanings of the word.

As for the history teacher, we can observe that she uses allo-repetitions both as pedagogic feedback and as interactional feedback (Llinares García 2003). The following sentences are examples of the repetitions used by the teachers.

Esatto, sparare in questo senso significa dire cose false, esagerate. (Exactly, sparare means to exaggerate or to tell tall stories)

Dunque Joachim ha trovato molto impressionante la scena della fucilazione, giusto? (So, Joachim, you found the execution scene very moving, didn't you?).

The history teacher uses repetitions giving a positive evaluation of what the students say and at the same time repeating what they say. This is both to make the students' words clearer and to stress the word(s) the teacher wants to introduce to make the language accessible for the Swedish students learning Italian. The language teacher stresses two words, 'fucilazione' and 'sparato', and she writes them on the whiteboard as shown below, figure 1, gathering words belonging to the same semantic groups but underlining the idiomatic use of the word 'sparata'.

Figure 1
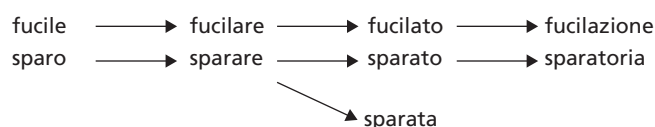
The actual input to the discussion was given by the students' contributions when paraphrasing and contextualising the words. In interaction with the teacher and the Swedish students they help to elaborate on the words (input) and to transform the process into real second language acquisition (Tomlin 1994). At the same time, they had the possibility of reflecting both on the use of their mother tongue and on some aspects of its functioning; they performed at a meta-linguistic level.

The Italian teacher acted in this phase of the class mainly as a language teacher (not only as a foreign language teacher). She uses scaffolding strategies as well, and when she wants to switch to the content she leaves the elaboration of linguistic elements aside but uses the word *fucilazione* as a bridge to the content, as it evokes the war situation presented in the film used initially both as content and as linguistic input.

In actual fact, with these last words (*Bene, ora vediamo chi dei ragazzi svedesi vuole spiegare perché i tedeschi hanno fucilato la donna romana?* Well, who of the Swedish students can explain why the German soldiers shot the woman?), the teacher switched from the linguistic level to the

content one. She uploaded a PowerPoint presentation containing a simple text about the historical period of the Resistenza and some images.

The students' interaction continued between videoconferences. For example, the Italian and Swedish students did their homework together using Skype, developing real interaction that can be defined as a form of true peer education. For example, they had to read some pages from 'Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno' by Italo Calvino and to complete some exercises for the language teachers by referring to the text. The students received a PowerPoint presentation on their laptops containing the exercises they had to do and they worked in pairs via Skype. The slides, below (figures 2, 3 & 4), are examples of the activities the students carried out. The students received exercises that are normally used in language lessons - not only in foreign language learning - such as 'read and match' or 'read and complete' exercises.
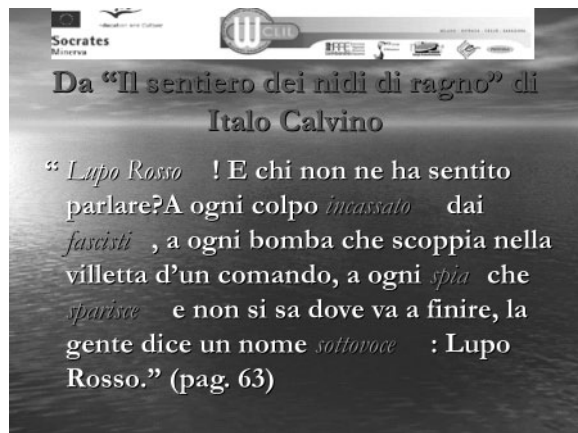
Figure 2. Reading exercise

Figure 3. "Read and match" exercise

Figure 4. "Read and complete" exercise

The final work the pupils had to submit was the following glossary (fragment 2), which was produced in pairs by Italian and Swedish students. To carry out this task, they had two possibilities:

· to use First Class using a shared document (a function offered by First Class which allows the sharing of files that can be modified by different users)
· to work in pairs using Skype. Most students chose the second technological opportunity.

Fragment 2:

Lupo Rosso: sostantivo maschile + aggettivo
Soprannome di un partigiano

Incassato: da incassare verbo
Nel pugilato, subire colpi dell'avversario senza diminuzione della capacità di lottare | Incassare tre reti, nel calcio, subirle. (fig.) - Sopportare senza reagire attacchi, accuse, offese e simili: è stato costretto a incassare un'offesa gravissima.

Spia: sostantivo maschile Chi riferisce di nascosto cose per cui altri possono subire punizioni, danni e simili: scoprire una spia; tra i congiurati c'era una spia | Fare la spia, riferire ciò che può danneggiare altri: fare la spia all'insegnante; fare la spia di qualcosa a qualcuno | Confidente della polizia.

Sparisce: da sparire verbo Sottrarsi alla vista improvvisamente o causando sorpresa, meraviglia; detto di persona o cosa che prima era presente o visibile: era qui e ora è sparito; una luce appariva e spariva; il sole sparisce dietro le nuvole; l'isola spariva alla vista; la visione sparì all'orizzonte | Sparisci!, (fam.) vattene immediatamente! | Sparire dalla terra, dalla faccia della terra, (eufem.) morire CONTRARIO: Apparire.

Sottovoce: avverbio a voce bassa, in tono basso o sommesso, per non disturbare, infastidire o per non far sentire agli altri quanto si dice: discutete sottovoce; parliamo sottovoce; suonare, cantare sottovoce.

This part of the activity was largely managed by the language teacher, but any experienced teacher can understand that this kind of activity is necessary and useful also for mother tongue students.

Some further reflections were made by the two students group about aspects of non-verbal communication; for example, the way students were sitting in the class room and their use of mimics. Italian students tended not to sit properly and to move frequently.

The assessment of content was done collaboratively by the teaching team (comprising three teachers: the two subject teachers and the language teacher), focusing on content and the use of the foreign language.

6. Conclusions

The use of videoconferencing proved to be extremely important for action research in the educational field and for research in general. The recording of the videoconferences allowed for considerations after the delivery of the lessons in accordance with the theory of the reflective professional, a step taken within the teaching team that can be used also in different teacher training activities (Kinnear, McWilliams, Caul 2002). After the reflection phase, three more CLIL videoconferences were staged to try to implement the observations into praxis in the spirit of an action-research project.

It was clear in all the videoconferencing sessions that didactical activities have to imply various cognitive operations (e.g. recognition, memorisation, problem solving, and reflection). Furthermore they have to be graduated according to the different level of language and subject competence of the two learning groups. Streaming of the videoconference can allow the support of the foreign-language teacher, who is aware of the level of competence of his/her students.

Constant interaction between teachers in the interval between any two videoconferences is essential. Interaction between students is best managed if it is organised and pre-planned. But informal interaction is important too. It contributes greatly to learning, especially as far as language learning is concerned (the reinforcement of the learning outcomes of the videoconference) but it can also benefit content learning. This peer activity is a process of learning by doing and of cooperative learning.

Communication technology does not automatically represent 'learning technology', but it can be an important resource in creating an environment favourable to learning. Certainly through the virtual meeting the students developed curiosity; in general, their learning environment became (and was perceived by them to be) an environment favourable to language learning and fostering better teaching/learning experiences.

Conclusions that can be drawn include:

1. The videoconferencing project improved linguistic skills and proved to be suitable for content learning. Both groups of pupils (learners of Italian and of Spanish as a L2) were assessed using tests that integrated linguistic skills and content. The test revealed progress both at the linguistic and at the cognitive level. The native speakers were tested in their learning language and no significant difference was detected between the two groups as far as content learning is concerned.
2. Students and teachers could see themselves on screen and could reflect on their behaviour during the lessons.
3. The project was a 'learning by doing' and 'peer learning' form of experiential teaching. At the same time, videoconferencing created a 'virtual' meeting place for people and a kind of 'exchange experience' where elements for the development of intercultural elements in communication were not only investigated but also reflected on.

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