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Time For Change: Technological And Soft Skills In The EFL Class

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Official Master's Degree in Teaching in Secondary Schools, Vocational Training and Language Centres

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Contents

Abstract

This master's dissertation analyses the ways in which tasks carried out during an international telecollaborative project helped students develop and improve their competencies in English as a Foreign Language as well as their competencies in technological and "soft" skills. The study is based on data gathered by the KONECT research team during an international telecollaborative project. The project took place between two secondary schools, one located in Spain and the other in Sweden, as part of their English as a foreign language classes. The students worked together using English as lingua franca to create a blog to raise awareness about the challenges faced by Syrian refugees.

Following results of the analysis, modifications for those tasks that did not help develop those competencies and skills are suggested. This dissertation aims to highlight the relevance of technological and interpersonal competencies for the 21st century and their link to communication and language learning. In addition, this paper puts emphasis on the importance of designing tasks that leave space for creativity but do not let students lose focus from the goals set by the teacher.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, soft skills, technological skills, telecollaborative project.

Resumen

Este trabajo de fin de máster analiza de qué manera las actividades realizadas durante un proyecto telecolaborativo internacional ayudaron a que los alumnos desarrollaran competencias en inglés como lengua extranjera, habilidades tecnológicas y habilidades blandas. El trabajo utiliza parte de los datos recogidos por el equipo de investigación KONECT durante un proyecto telecolaborativo internacional. El proyecto se llevó a cabo entre dos institutos de secundaria, uno en España y el otro en Suecia, dentro su programa clases de lengua extranjera. Los alumnos trabajaron juntos usando el inglés como lengua franca para crear un blog que pretendía concienciar sobre los retos que afrontan las personas refugiadas sirias.

A partir de los resultados del análisis de los datos, se proponen modificaciones para aquellas actividades que no contribuyeron al desarrollo de dichas competencias y habilidades. Este trabajo subraya la importancia de las competencias tecnológicas e interpersonales para el siglo XXI y su conexión con la comunicación y el aprendizaje de lenguas. Además, este trabajo enfatiza la importancia de diseñar actividades que dejen espacio para la creatividad sin permitir que los alumnos se alejen excesivamente de los objetivos marcados por el profesorado.

Palabras clave: inglés como lengua extranjera, habilidades blandas, habilidades tecnológicas, proyecto telecolaborativo.

1. Introduction

Between 2014 and 2018, the Research Centre for Teaching & Plurilingual Interaction (GREIP) carried out the Knowledge for Network-based Education, Cognition & Teaching (KONECT) project with funding by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry & Competitivity: Proyectos I+D del Programa Estatal de Fomento de la Investigación Científica y Técnica de Excelencia. This project aimed at identifying the competences students need to become "e-functional" (Dooly, 2015). According to the researchers from the KONECT team:

> Being 'e-functional' entails many areas of competences, apart from digital and linguistic skills, not least of which are the ability to employ multiple literacies in order to work and communicate in multilingual and multimodal contexts. Even as students become increasingly more adept at the use of technology, schools must help them couple these digital capacities with the type of knowledge construction that they will need in an interconnected world in order to 'e-function' effectively. (GREIP 2016)

Although the 21st century requires e-functional students, most ESL teachers work on improving only four skills in the target language: speaking, listening, reading and writing. By focusing on those four skills, EFL teachers set aside pragmatic, sociolinguistic and multicultural competencies (Blake, 2016). These competencies arguably include interpersonal and technological skills that nowadays play an essential role in the transversal competence of communication. If students are to be able to communicate in multilingual and multimodal contexts, EFL teachers must bring to the class all the competencies involved in communication and not only some of them.

The present study analyses the video recordings of two sessions during which the KONECT project was being implemented. Through the analysis, this study aims to find evidence of the development of the technological requirements and "soft" skills

referenced in the project's white paper. Those skills are identified as "extremely vital features for preparing children and youth for the future" and "future competences needed for the 21st century" (Dooly & Thorne, 2018, p. 5). Furthermore, this study includes a didactic proposal designed to provide some guidance on how tasks could be modified in order to ensure that the student's learning outcomes become better aligned with the objectives of the project.

As a result, the analysis of the data will answer the following research questions:

1. Is there evidence that students were developing the technological requirements and the "soft" skills that the KONECT project aimed to enhance?
2. If not, can we identify some causes as to why students were not developing those technological requirements and skills?
3. What modifications in the tasks would help to ensure students' learning according to the project's stated objectives?

The answers to these questions should help the researcher and other teachers to detect gaps in learning and task designs that hinder, rather than help students develop linguistic, technological and interpersonal key competences for the 21st century. Moreover, this master's dissertation aims to raise awareness of why "merely bringing in computers, Internet or mobile phones into the classroom, without any interrogation of how they are used does not guarantee that needed changes in education will occur" (Dooly, 2015, cited in Dooly & Davitova, 2018, p. 1).

2. Theoretical framework

In this section we will bring out the relevance of the development of interpersonal and technological competencies in language learning. In addition, we will discuss the importance of these competencies for students' personal and professional future. It is not possible to do an exhaustive analysis of all the interpersonal and technological competencies involved in language learning in a short dissertation. Therefore, only those competencies especially worth mentioning because of the evidence of their presence or absence in the data will be reviewed.

The KONECT white paper groups the technological requisites for the 21st century into seven categories. The first group of skills that can be highlighted are the techno-social ones. Students need to work on interpersonal skills that go beyond the ones used in face-to-face interaction between human beings. In this century, citizens need to interact and work with digital beings and participate in online communities that are not limited by geopolitical boundaries. Teachers are now educating not just citizens but global citizens.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been promoting a global citizenship education since 2012. This organization claims that the concept of global citizenship "refers to a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 11). Students need to develop an understanding of how local, national and global issues are interconnected and interdependent in order to become "informed, critically literate and socially-connected, ethical and engaged global citizens" (UNESCO, p. 6).

Kramsch (2014) states that globalization is causing deep changes in foreign language education. According to this author, one of the changes required due to

globalization is that second language teachers should keep teaching the standard. However, they should not present the standard as if all native speakers spoke it in any context. The standard does not imply "native" level; it is merely a means of ensuring maximum understanding. Students need to learn to reflect on language and be responsible of their language choices. The author also claims that the goal of instruction is " (…) to strive to make our students into multilingual individuals, sensitive to linguistic, cultural, and above all, semiotic diversity, and willing to engage with difference, that is, to grapple with differences in social, cultural, political, and religious worldviews" (Kramsch, 2014, p. 305). Again, interpersonal competencies, especially those related to interculturality, are highlighted.

From a sociocultural perspective on second language acquisition, language learning happens *because of*, with the *purpose of* and *through* communication practices integrated in a sociocultural environment (Moore, 2016). As a result, both communication and interculturality are inseparable from language teaching and learning. Sharifian and Jamarani (2012) remark that in any intercultural encounter there is the possibility that interlocutors misunderstand each other if they are unable to contextualize their messages and behaviors. In other words, regardless of the language proficiency of the interlocutors in terms of grammar and vocabulary, if speakers from different cultural backgrounds lack intercultural communicative skills they might not succeed in communicating.

International technology-enhanced telecollaborative projects such as the one analyzed in this study can easily create great opportunities to promote and develop the intercultural knowledge and the intercultural communicative skills that students need to become global citizens. Dooly (2005) distinguishes these two possible learning outcomes. On the one hand, *intercultural knowledge* refers to the exchange of information about each other's culture. On the other hand, *intercultural communicative skills* involve the

recognition of one's own preconceptions and values. That is, a deeper understanding of one's own culture that combined with the acquired information about the other culture encourages empathy. Depending on the task design and its purpose, international telecollaborative projects can focus mainly in one type of learning outcome (knowledge about the other culture or empathy with the other culture) or in both.

Sharifian and Jamarani (2012) refer to migration, asylum seeking or international recruitment as proofs of the need of face-to-face intercultural communication. However, they also point out technology is responsible for an unmatched increase in sophistication and size of communication. Technology has changed the way we communicate, and it must change the way we learn and the skills we need. Kessler (2013) criticized the fact that "in spite of the dramatically changing nature of our communication practices outside of education and the increasing quantity of information, it seems there is little reflection on the potential that these changes have to offer to language teaching and learning" (p. 313). It seems that even today, teachers are still mainly focused on pedagogical methodologies designed for a face-to-face environment, while ignoring this reality.

The second technological requirement for the 21st century is precisely related to the quantity of accessible information and the way we communicate: students need to develop critical digital skills. Critical digital literacy is related to both to technological and "soft" skills, such as critical thinking. According to Folgerpedia:

> Critical digital literacy is a set of skills, competencies, and analytical viewpoints that allows a person to use, understand, and create digital media and tools. Related to information literacy skills such as numeracy, listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking, the goal of critical digital literacy is to develop active and engaged thinkers and creators in digital environments. Digital literacy is more than technological understanding or computer skills and involves a range of reflective, ethical, and social perspectives on digital activities. (Folgerpedia, 2016, para.1)

Anderson et al. (2017) include in their definition other "soft" skills (pro-activity, critical thinking, creativity). They remark that no matter the frequency of use of technology, citizens must be aware of their ethical responsibilities when communicating and sharing information. All citizens need to know how to synthesize information that they have critically selected and thought over its authenticity.

3. Methodology

The present study takes a qualitative and interpretative methodological approach to analyze the data. "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings –this immersion in the setting can help researchers produce a thick description" (Geertz, 1973, cited in Dooly & Moore 2017, p. 3), that is, this research attempts to thoroughly describe the students' behavior, taking into account their social reality.

In order to study the data, a method of analysis that takes into account all the aspects involved in interaction is required. Since "conversation analysis calls for a thorough examination of all the data in the transcription; not only linguistic data, but all the multimodal aspects (body position, movements, glances, use of objects, etc.) that contribute to the progress of interaction" (Moore & Nussbaum, 2011, cited in Nussbaum, 2017, p. 55), a multimodal conversation analysis approach was considered as the best option to answer the research questions previously stated.

However, given the key relevance multimodality had for this study, the use of transcriptions only based on the Jefferson Transcription System (2004) would not have presented the data clearly enough to study them. Consequently, the transcription framework called *pictorial transcription* used in Dooly (2018) was followed as a model.

As a result, transcriptions in this study also provide "a more accurate representation of the interaction that was being analyzed or when the preferred modality of communication (as oriented to by the participants themselves) was not primarily language-based" (Dooly 2018, p. 188).

The data was kindly provided by Dr Melinda Dooly, lead researcher of the GREIP and the KONECT project and tutor of this master's dissertation. The data collection took place with the informed and written consent of the participants and the parents or legal caretakers of the minors. The author of this dissertation agreed on using the data ethically according to the terms established by the GREIP research team. The real names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms to respect their anonymity. Any faces of the participants appearing in the images used in this dissertation were blurred for the same reason. It is important to state that, although one of the objectives of this research is to propose alternative tasks to the ones carried out by the teachers of the KONECT project that could have helped to develop more key competences for the 21st century, this study has not by any means the intention to disparage the teachers shown in the video recordings.

Throughout the KONECT project, middle-school students aged 11-13 years old from Terrassa (Spain) and Hässleholm (Sweden) worked together in an intercultural telecollaborative project that focused on Syrian refugees in Europe. After several preliminary activities to help the learners become more familiar with the topic, students created a blog to raise public awareness of the challenges Syrian refugees were facing and how EU citizens could help them. A principal, transversal aim was to develop social empathy and a sense of civic responsibility, while helping learners not feel overwhelmed and incapable of facing serious problems. For this reason, the awareness campaign looked

at local measures that could be taken, on an individual, family or community level, to help alleviate the refugee situation.

Due to the international nature of the collaboration, students had to use English as a lingua franca for communication. The students in the video performed at lower intermediate and intermediate level of proficiency of English. Further information can be found at the KONECT pilot projects website included in the references.

A total of 15 minutes and 3 seconds of video recording from one session (herein, "session 1") and a total of 32 minutes and 14 seconds from another session (herein, "session 2") were analyzed. In session 1, students had to dictate a summary of a poster to the teacher to post it in a blog, then search for the definition of refugee in 4 online dictionaries and finally create together their own definition to send it to their Swedish telecollaborative partners. In session 2, students worked in groups of three or four to prepare a message and some questions for the Swedish students. Later, they recorded the messages and sent them to the Swedish students.

4. Data Analysis

In this section, three fragments were analyzed chronologically. The first fragment corresponds to the first part of session 1. In this fragment the teacher gives the instructions for the next activity and the first two groups of students contribute to the task by reading the summaries of the posters they made in groups. Ricard, Miquel and Jaume are members of the same group. In this session, the teacher has her computer connected to the overhead projector so that the students can see her screen.

Fragment 1. Participants: teacher, Gerson, Sergi, Miquel, Jaume.

001	Teacher	good so\ (.) what we are going to do:/ (2)
002	Notes	((the teacher pastes some questions on the new entry of the blog for everyone to see))
003	Teacher	is to\ (.) what we are going to do is to/ (.) make a summary/ (.)
004	Notes	((the teacher claps her hands one time to call Gerson's attention while walking towards the back of the class))
005	Teacher	Gerson\ (.)
006	Notes	((students stop talking and making noise))
007	Teacher	what we are going to do is to make a summary
008		of what you've just (.) a:h read/ (.) but/ (.)
009		of the posters you've just seen/ (.)
010		but/ (.) instead of just doing it orally what we are going to do/ (.)
011		is to post it in the blog\ (.)
012		okay/ (.) so (.) here you have/ (2.2)
013	Notes	((the teacher goes back to the whiteboard and points at the questions))
014	Teacher	the four questions\ (.) okay/ (.) so/ (.) first one\ (.)
015		Syria why did the war start/ (.)
016		can you tell me why the war start/ (.)
017	Notes	((the teacher looks at Sergi and nods at him))
018	Students	xxx
019	Sergi	the war start/ (.)
020	Teacher	it (.) started/ (2.1)
021	Notes	((teacher starts typing the summaries and moves her head to give the floor to the student))
022	Sergi	with the petrol/ (.) for the xxx (1.1)
023	Teacher	because (.) of (.) the petrol/ (1.9)
024	Sergi	the OTAN/ (3.8) the xxx/ (3.2) a group of mercenaries/ (5.1)
025		and conflicts between citizens\ (.)
026	Teacher	a:nd (.) confli:cts (5.2)

027	Notes	

Image 1: Students behind Sergi do not pay attention to the task. One of them shows the other something funny on his screen and laughs.

028	Teacher	<u>good</u>/ (.) group number two the gangs/ (.)
029		tell me\ (.) what do the gangs do\ (.)
030	Ricard	**e:h** (.) **quién lo dice**\ (.) **yo**/ (.) e:h\ (1.8)
	Trans	*hm who says it me*
031		gangs (.) the (.) there are (.) eh (.)
032		organits (.) sai (.) organitsations/ (.)
033		of people who traffic (.) **droga** (.) perso (.) e:h persons/
	Trans	*drugs*
034		e:h money and (.) and (2.5)
035	Notes	((moves his hands looking for the word, blows air from his mouth and tries to reach the mouse to look for the word))
036	Teacher	sorry which (.) which ones/ (.) sorry/ (.)
037	Ricard	e:h (.) [e:h]
038	Teacher	[say] that again\ (.) gangs are organizations/ (.)
039	Ricard	are organitzations of people who traffic (.)
040		e:h **droga**/ (.) e:h people/ e:h money a:nd (.)
	Trans	*drugs*
041	Teacher	how do you say **droga** in English/
	Trans	*drugs*
042	Gerson	drugs\
043	Teacher	drugs/ (.) people/ (.) **molt be/** (.)
	Trans	*very good*

044	Ricard	e:h money a:nd (1.8) **pera** (.)
	Trans	*wait*
045	Teacher	money/ (.) and/ (3.2)
046	Notes	((Ricard types something on the computer))
047	Teacher	and guns\ (.) right/ (.)
048	Ricard	guns\ (.)
049	Teacher	guns\ (.)
050		**armes** (.) he said\ (.) <u>good\</u> (.) the most famous one was/ (.)
	Trans	*guns*
051	Students	xxx
052	Ricard	xxx **Sicilia** (.) from e:h (1.2)
	Trans	*Sicily*
053	Notes	((looks at Miquel and Jaume))
054		nine (.) nineteen/ (.) e:h (.)
055	Notes	

Image 2: Jaume shows a paper to Ricard to help him.

| 056 | Miquel | ((looking at Ricard)) century\ |

First, the teacher uses the projector to show her screen and creates a new post on the students' blog. She prepares the post to start writing there the students' summaries. Once it is ready, she starts giving the instructions for the activity. The students do not pay attention immediately, but they do stop talking when she calls for their attention.

The teacher asks the first question to Sergi's group. The student dictates the summary to the teacher slowly. Two students behind Sergi show a lack of focus while their classmate is dictating: instead of looking at the teacher's projected screen, they look at their own computers. In Image 1 we can see that one of them shows his screen to the other in order to share something funny.

However, later in the fragment, there is evidence of a predisposition to pro-socially engage and collaborate, despite the initial lack of engagement of group one. This can be found by paying attention to the behavior of the second group of students. The team decides quickly who is going to read (line 30) and the other two members of the group stay ready to give support to their peer. In Image 2 and line 56 the student's implication on the success of their teammate is clearly shown.

As students read out loud their summaries, the teacher corrects any mistakes in their original written productions or their new oral productions through reformulation of their answers (lines 20 and 23). In line 39 the student shows that he is using cognitive flexibility skills as he corrects himself while answering the teacher's questions. The teacher acknowledges the improvement in the student's production in line 43.

In conclusion, the potential of using individual computers is unfulfilled in this fragment. Instead of profiting from the advantages computers with internet access can offer to enhance learning, students use them in the same way as they would have used paper. To make matters worse, some students use computers for other purposes than completing the task; misuse which the teacher seems unaware of as she pays more attention to the language they are using.

The next fragment corresponds to session 2. Students are preparing some questions for the Swedish students. A researcher has approached a group of three students

more than once and she has asked them to think of questions about Sweden. She asks them what questions they have prepared, and she realizes they still have not thought about any questions not related to the project.

Fragment 2. Part 1. Participants: researcher, Miquel.

001	Researcher	really/ (.)
002		don't you wonder <u>nothing</u> about your Swedish friends/ (1.5)
003	Notes	((Miquel puts one hand behind his ear to ask the researcher to repeat what she said))
004	Researcher	Swedish friends\ (.)
005		don't you don't you want to ask something to them/ (.) or (.)
006		<u>say</u> something to them/ (2)
007	Notes	((Miquel shrugs his shoulders))
008	Researcher	nothing/ (2.5)
009	Miquel	**no sé**/
	Trans	*I don't know*

Their conversation is briefly interrupted by the teacher. Once the teacher has stop giving instructions, the researcher catches the attention of the students and carries on with the conversation.

Fragment 2. Part 2. Participants: researcher, Miquel, Ricard, Jorge.

010	Researcher	can you can you tell me/ (.) e::h what will you ask (.)
011		to your Swedish friends\ (1.2) o:r/ (.) say\ (1)
012		not necessarily ask/ (.) you can say something also/ (.)
013	Miquel	e:h ask a:bout the project a:: (.)
014	Researcher	not necessarily about the project\
015	Miquel	[<u>oh</u>]
016	Researcher	[it] can be about anything\ (3.5)

017		for example are they learning English/ how many hours/ (.)
018	Ricard	[eh o:r]
019	Researcher	[what time] do their classes start/
020	Ricard	if they like her (.) e:h (.) school (.) o sea her school
021		**o:** (.) **o:** (.) **sí** her school (.) or eh what's the weather [like]/
	Trans	*or or yes*
022	Miquel	[xxx]
023	Researcher	sorry/
024	Ricard	what's the weather like in Sweden o:r/ (.)
025	Researcher	mmm/
026	Miquel	oh very good mamut/ (.)
027	Notes	((Miquel raises his left arm))
028	Researcher	okay weather/ (1.9)
029	Notes	((Miquel, Ricard and Jorge laugh, Ricard looks at Miquel and he moves his lips to ask "mamut?"))
030	Researcher	what a what other the things/ (.)
031		weather (.) the school (.) the hours (.) what else/
032	Notes	((the researcher starts counting with her fingers))
033	Miquel	the:s (.) that (.) i:s (.) a: (.) I want to think that is cheap (.)
034		that is cheap (.) go to the: Swedish (.) and ski\ (1.2)
035	Notes	((Miquel moves his arms up and down besides his body as if he were skiing))
036	Researcher	is it cheap or not\ (.)
037	Miquel	yes\ (.)
038	Researcher	okay\ (.)
039	Miquel	to go to the: holidays\ (1.1)
040	Researcher	okay\ (.) maybe next time you can go there/ (.)
041	Miquel	yeah\ (.)
042	Researcher	yeah\ (.)
043	Miquel	my father wants to go [Swe]
044	Researcher	[huh]/
045	Miquel	my father wants to go (.) Sweden/ (.)

046	Researcher	really/ (.)
047	Miquel	yes\ (.)
048	Researcher	and you want to go (.) to Sweden also to meet your friends there/ (.)
049	Miquel	no\ (2.9) ((laughs)) **me la suda**\
	Trans	*I don't care*
050	Researcher	don't you have an idea/ (4.8)
051	Miquel	**a mi sinceramente**/ (2.7) no:: (.)
	Trans	*to be honest, to me*
052	Researcher	help him\ (.) Ricard\ (.) Miquel help him\ (.)
053		what can (.) he ask\ (1.2.) or say\ (4.3)
054	Miquel	he can [se]
055	Researcher	[xxx] (.)
056	Miquel	he can say (.)
057		are you (.) are you searching (.) a:: (.) boyfriend/ ((laughs))

In this fragment the researcher shows her surprise by the fact that the students have not included any question about Sweden despite her insistence (lines 1, 2, 5, 6 and 8). Later, there is evidence that the students still had not considered asking anything about their international partners' country (line 15). Finally, the researcher's perseverance results in some questions regarding Sweden (lines 20, 21 and 34).

However, there is also evidence that Miquel is still not interested at all about the Swedish culture (lines 49 and 51). His comments in lines 49 and 51 are not isolated; before and after this fragment he had made similar statements showing his interest in the Swedish girls only as potential partners (line 57), with little interest in their country or culture. Similarly, another group of boys interviewed by the same researcher that did have a question about the life of the Swedish students just wanted to ask whether they liked a videogame or not.

This fragment provides evidence that some students lack spontaneous predisposition to learn about other cultures. Although questions related to the students' daily interests can lead to an exchange of information in which cultural differences are especially relevant, that type of outcome is not guaranteed. This has repercussions in the intercultural skills that the students will develop as we will discuss in the next section.

In the last fragment, a group of three students are working on the same task as the students from fragment 2. They are using a shared Google Document to write their questions together. The researcher approaches them and inquires what they are going to ask the Swedish students. One of the students uses Google Translate to explain to the researcher that he can no longer edit the document. He shows his screen to the researcher and reads out loud the translation, as can be seen in Image 3 (on the left, "m'han desactivat els permisos per editar"; on the right, "I turned off permissions to edit"):
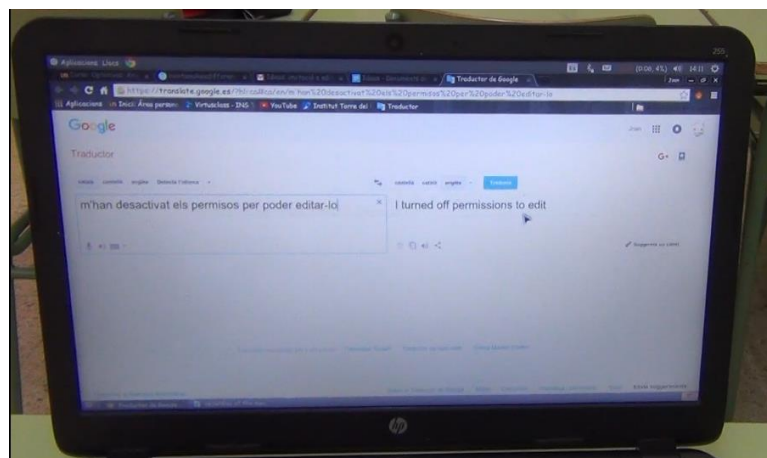

Image 3: Antoni's screen using Google Translate to interact with the researcher.

The student responsible for this situation justifies his decision in fragment 3.

Fragment 3. Participants: researcher, Oscar, Antoni, Jordi.

001	Oscar	he/ (.) he wa he doesn't want to stop (.)
002		writing (.) stupidity:/ (.) stupidity things/ (.) and I (.)
003		I have to (.) to <u>block</u> him (.) to (.) by writing in the document\ (1)

004	Notes	((Oscar looks at the researcher and moves his hands to point to Antoni and his computer))
005	Researcher	so you are creating google documents/ (.) right/ (.)
006	Oscar	yes\ (.)
007	Researcher	a:nd (.) he is the one who is sabotaging you/ (.)
008	Notes	((the researcher taps Antoni's head))
009	Oscar	he/ (.) and he\
010	Notes	((Oscar points at Antoni and Jordi))

This fragment demonstrates that these students have basic technological and techno-collaborative skills that they know how to use for problem solving: Antoni uses a machine translator service to bridge a gap in his English language skills and Oscar creates a shared document with customized sharing options. Moreover, there is also evidence of the use and development of "soft" skills, as Oscar uses his cognitive flexibility to find a solution to end with his classmates' misbehavior.

Finally, shortly after this conversation Antoni uses the sentence he read from the online translator, proving that he retained the new expression and can use it autonomously. The researcher asks Antoni what else they are going to ask to the Swedish students, but he wants to insist on the fact that he cannot access the document. He says almost the same words as when he used the translator, "you turned off permissions to edit", after taking a few seconds to remember the sentence. However, there is also evidence (lines 3, 7 and 9) that conflicts can arise when students use their technological skills without being socially engaged to work collaboratively.

5. Discussion

The activity described in fragment 1 could have potentially better developed students' basic foundation skills and techno-collaborative skills by letting students access the blog

and writing the summaries themselves collaboratively. By using a collaborative document to write the summaries, students would have not only developed the technological skills already mentioned, but also had the opportunity to critically analyze their peers' language choices and assess their partners by adding comments and suggestions. An activity with these characteristics would have contributed to teach students how to give and accept constructive criticism in the target language in order to be socially responsible members of a team.

In addition, students who are not reading their summaries, and therefore not directly engaged in the co-construction of the collective knowledge and output, might get easily distracted as we could see in Image 1. It is debatable if students lose focus because of technology or not, as other distractions could come forth in the absence of computers, as Fang (2009) indicated by asking "Whose fault is it if distracting activities are going on in the classroom? What caused the distractions other than the availability of technology? Will alternative distractions occur if the technological tools are removed?" (Distraction as Opportunity section, para. 2). In other words, technology alone may not be to blame for student's distraction, despite the fact that we can see that the group is using the technology for a purpose that is not oriented towards getting the task done. Nevertheless, technology could have been used to help students to stay focused on the class by asking them to type their peer's summary and the teacher's corrections as a team, for instance.

These changes in the task design offer an alternative to *how* the students could have carried out the task. However, the task itself (reading their summaries out loud) left out opportunities to develop skills such as critical thinking or creativity. So as to ensure students used those skills, the goal of the activity could have been making students reflect on the topic: the summary would have been just a small part of a larger text where students would have shared their perspectives and reflections on the topic.

Considering the variety of answers valid to explain some of the phenomena discussed during this project, students could have also developed their tolerance for ambiguity by exchanging their points of view and recognizing that they do not have enough arguments to fully dismiss a classmate's opinion. For instance, complex questions such as "why did the war start" (lines 15 and 16) do not have clear cut answers.

So far, many "soft" skills have been left unpracticed because of the task design. The "soft" skills needed to reflect on a topic, synthesize and organize ideas or reach agreements through argumentation require language skills. As a result, practicing these "soft" skills not only would have contributed to educate critical and socially engaged students but also to the improvement of their English proficiency. That is, missing opportunities to develop "soft" skills meant missing language learning opportunities.

Moreover, students are supposed to learn to find and identify reliable sources of information, analyze the purpose and intentions of the author(s) and detect any bias or manipulation in the information in order to give complete and objective answers. However, in this activity students missed the opportunity to develop those critical digital literacy competencies. They accepted their classmates' answers without questioning whether they were right or wrong and without knowing if their classmates had used reliable and unbiased sources of information.

In fragment 2 it is clear that students' interests are some of those that one can typically expect from teenagers of their age: girls and videogames. However, letting students ask questions according only to their interests can result in missed opportunities to fully develop intercultural communicative skills or to enhance intercultural knowledge. Moreover, the students choosing to ask about certain topics might be stopping themselves from asking about other interesting topics because they feel more confident using vocabulary, expressions and structures in English more familiar to them. In brief, a lack

of guidance in this activity can lead to a loss of opportunity for acquisition of intercultural knowledge and foreign language learning.

International collaborative projects are not easy to prepare. Therefore, taking action against this kind of losses might be more sensible than expecting students to ask the most productive questions without any guidance or without making the goals of the activity explicit. Nevertheless, forcing or excessively conditioning the students' inquiries does not foster a real interest towards the other culture and can ruin students' engagement. Teachers must find a balance between these two extremes.

For instance, students can be given a few sample questions or a list of suggested topics to talk about so that they have a reference of the type of research they are expected to carry out. Previous tasks could also be used to guide students' questions in a subtler way. If students have already been asked to do some research about the other culture or if some questions about it have already been left unanswered there are more possibilities that they spontaneously look for difference and similarities between cultures.

In fragment 2 we also find evidences of both resistances to enquire into the Swedish students' culture and the first hints of an emerging interest towards their lifestyle. It is also evident that the researcher's insistence is precisely what finally triggers the students' curiosity. However, students seem to be using only the language they already knew before the project. This fact is another reason why previous activities that require that the students have a first contact with new words, expressions or topics related to the other culture can help elicit better questions from them.

It is worth mentioning that students do not seem to be reflecting on how the Swedish students' perspectives can hinder communication. They want to ask "what is the weather like in Sweden" and they want to know if it is cheap to fly there. "Cold" or

"cheap" —possible answers to the students' questions— are examples of words that might seem to have an easy or clear translation between languages. However, as Sharifian and Jamarani (2012) pointed out, if we disregard the culture of the interlocutor and we describe our reality without realizing that our perspective and assumptions are not universal, we are not going to understand the message or make ourselves understood. For instance, the same temperature commonly perceived as "cold" in one culture can be commonly perceived as "warm" in another.

It is a fact that words that depend heavily on the speakers or the listeners' subjectivity are generally accepted without enquiring too much about what exactly the speaker meant. Speakers who share the same cultural background usually have a common frame of reference and in most cases can communicate effectively without going into detail on what certain words mean to them. Nevertheless, in those cases where the interlocutors do not share the same culture, it is more probable that the meaning is distorted to a point where the speaker and the listener understand opposite ideas. For example, having dinner at eight is described as having dinner "early" in some cultures and "late" in others. The subjective meaning of those words is relative to the culture of the person using them, and this fact cannot be dodged by language teachers.

Students could be asked how they are going to deal with these differences in their cultural framework to make sure that they can understand the answers to their questions. For instance, if the Swedish students answer that the weather is cold and that travelling there is cheap, students should be prepared to ask for exact temperatures, prices or even about the cost of living in Sweden.

The group of students from fragment 3 is aware of the potential benefits of using technology in class. Although it was not mandatory to use a shared document, Oscar recognized the convenience of using one and created a file that he later was able to restrict

access to when Antoni and Jordi did not use it for the completion of the task. Moreover, the decision making and leadership skills or the pro-active attitude that Oscar showed when he asked if they could use a Google Document are precisely some of the "soft" skills that teachers should aim to enhance. For this activity, the teacher could have requested the use of a digital tool as part of the task or she could have used the first group's action of taking the initiative (Oscar's group, in this case) to bring attention to the advantages of working collaboratively online and then let students decide how to organize themselves.

For his part, Antoni uses the automatic translation machine to interact with the researcher. Interestingly, he reads the translation using "I" instead of "he" as a subject, although this type of mistake does not match the English skills he had demonstrated so far. That mistake can indicate a lack of critical digital literacy given that Antoni accepted the computer's sentence as correct without using his previous knowledge to critically adjust the message to what he meant.

Teachers take a risk when they allow the use of certain technologies such as translation machines that can make students feel as if they need to put less effort into using the target language. Drawing from Kramsch's (2014) recommendation of making students reflect on language, specific activities that force students to analyze the language they are using can prevent that they use technology without any critical spirit.

Unfortunately, other fragments worth analyzing do not appear in this dissertation as this study was limited by time and space. For instance, in session 1, students were asked to look for definitions in four online dictionaries that they had to access using the link provided by the teacher. In session 2, Miquel made assumptions based in gender stereotypes; as a result, he did not consider asking certain questions to the Swedish girls

as he presumed to know their answers. In both sessions, only one student had visibly blocked the laptop's camera to ensure privacy.

Many of the technological and "soft" skills already discussed in this dissertation would also appear when analyzing those fragments, such as critical thinking, techno-collaboration or critical digital literacy. Other skills that were not mentioned in this study would also appear, for example, techno-ethic awareness or empathy. Future researchers could analyze these fragments as well as the rest of the data used in this dissertation. If possible, they could also analyze what are the learning outcomes in those classes where the tasks take into account the reasons why the tasks in the two sessions analyzed did not succeed in developing as many skills as they could have potentially developed.

6. Conclusions

To conclude this dissertation, the research questions stated in the introduction will be answered. For each activity, the evidence of the development of technological, "soft" and language skills will be reviewed. Then, the possible reasons why some tasks failed at developing those skills will be identified. Finally, the suggested modifications for those activities will be summarized.

In session 1, students had to dictate a summary to the teacher to post it in the project's blog. In the fragment analyzed, evidence of social engagement and a collaborative disposition were found in the attitude of the students from the second group as those students who were not dictating the summary helped their classmate to find the words he needed. Moreover, one student of this group used his cognitive flexibility to

improve his oral production in English at the same time that he answered the teacher and remained receptive to his classmates' help.

Unfortunately, the class took place in no different way than if the students had not had an individual computer. At least two of them became distracted from the task as they had to wait for their classmates to finish their dictation. In addition, the task did not require the students to adopt a critical position towards the information they were receiving.

In order to make this activity more profitable, the following modifications are suggested. With the purpose of developing techno-collaborative skills, fostering critical thinking, language learning and avoiding distractions, students could have been asked to add corrections, comments and suggestions to their peers' texts while each group dictated their summaries. In fact, rather than just summarizing information, students could have been asked to include a reflection on the topic under discussion.

Providing their point of view would have helped to develop language skills and tolerance for ambiguity as they would have had to defend with arguments their statements from the possible discrepancies of their classmates. Furthermore, students should have been asked to provide and analyze their sources of information, as digital literate citizens should be able to identify and use reliable sources to avoid any biases.

In session 2, students had to prepare a message for their peers in Sweden. One group of students demonstrated they had basic foundational computer skills and techno-collaborative skills. One student, Antoni, was able to interact in English with the researcher by mediating his target language use with his computer first. Another student, Oscar, showed a variety of "soft" skills: decision making, leadership, pro-activity, problem solving and collaborative skills.

However, the display of all of these skills was not motivated by the task design, as the other group carried out the task while barely using their computers or collaborating. This second group was also the one who showed the most pronounced indifference towards the Swedish culture. Students had no examples or guidelines to decide what kind of message they wanted to record. As a result, they did not prepare questions related to Sweden until the researcher and the teacher had insisted several times.

As it was previously stated, students need to develop intercultural knowledge as well as intercultural communicative skills. The outcomes of this activity could have been improved by drawing attention to the Swedish culture before that session or providing topics and example questions that created an interest in the Spanish students in regards to their partner culture. Moreover, if students were allowed to use Google Translate as Antoni did, it would be interesting to ask the students to reflect on the language they were using as part of the task. In this activity, making students reflect on their language choices or asking them for specific strategies to ensure understanding would have been especially interesting as ignoring interculturality can easily lead to miscommunication.

Hopefully, this dissertation will help other teachers as it has helped the researcher to reflect on the interconnection and the role of technology, "soft" skills and language learning in the 21st century. Furthermore, designing or modifying tasks, taking into account the suggestions given in this paper, should prevent the loss of opportunities of educating more technologically, socially and linguistically competent students. This paper has also helped to find more evidence for the fact that bringing technology or people from other cultures into the class does not necessarily mean that students develop technological or intercultural skills, so preparation to ensure this must be included in the task design.

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8. Annex

Key for transcription. Adapted from the Jefferson Transcription System (2004).

Code	Use
/	Rise in intonation
\	Fall in intonation
:	Prolonged sound
(.)	Micropause
(#)	Timed pause
[text]	Overlapped speech
(())	Non-verbal activity
xxx	Unclear speech
Underline	Stressed or shouted speech
Bold	Utterances in Catalan or Spanish
Italics	Translation