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CICLO XXV

Negotiating a transcultural place in an English as a *lingua franca* telecollaboration exchange: a mixed methods approach to the analysis of intercultural communicative competence and third space in an online Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The study presented in this thesis was designed so as to explore the impact of an ELF (English as a *lingua franca*) telecollaboration exchange on its participants' intercultural learning and negotiation of shared spaces and subject positions (Kramsch 2009a). After describing the two groups of students involved in the project - one from the University of Padova (Italy), and one from the University of Innsbruck (Austria) - as well as the tasks, topics and tools that were used to prompt discussion on issues related to culture, identity and representation, the study adopted a mixed methods approach to respond to two research questions. The first of these (*RQ1*) aimed at searching for evidence of intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997) in the personal texts that the Italian students had produced over the course of the project: in particular, the primary source of data for this investigation were the participants' weekly diaries, seen as a valuable and uncontaminated source of information about the students' feelings and experiences (Pavlenko 2007). The second research question (*RQ2*) explored the emergence of a transcultural "third space" (Kramsch 1993) among the two groups of participants, as well as the construction of fluid and hybrid subject positions within it. For the purposes of this investigation, all the students' reflective diaries were taken into account together with their posts to online forums and comments to the exchange activities. Overall, the study presented in this thesis offers a new lens through which to look at the nature of intercultural communicative competence, and provides insights into its strict relationship with third space as it emerges in an online Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Furthermore, the study highlights the complexity and variety of subject positions that are activated in online intercultural encounters, and which mirror the transnational and transcultural essence of third space. Finally, the study also suggests the utility of combining qualitative and quantitative research

approaches so as to gain deeper and more comprehensive understanding of intercultural learning and negotiating processes.

Lo scopo dello studio presentato in questa tesi è investigare gli effetti di uno scambio di telecollaborazione in *lingua franca* (ELF, ovvero *English as a lingua franca*) sui processi di apprendimento interculturale e sulla negoziazione di spazi condivisi e di identità (Kramsch 2009a). Lo studio vede coinvolti due gruppi di studenti, uno dall'Università di Padova ed uno dall'Università di Innsbruck (Austria). Dopo una descrizione delle due classi, delle attività, degli strumenti e degli argomenti utilizzati per stimolare la riflessione e la discussione, lo studio si avvale di un approccio *mixed methods* per rispondere a due fondamentali domande di ricerca. La prima di queste (*RQ1*) ha come obiettivo l'analisi della competenza comunicativa interculturale (Byram 1997) e della modalità con cui essa emerge dai testi composti dai partecipanti italiani nel corso dello scambio. In particolar modo, l'analisi si concentra sulla fonte primaria di dati, ovvero i diari settimanali degli studenti, considerati come una importante fonte di informazioni incontaminate sulle esperienze e sui sentimenti dei soggetti individuali (Pavlenko 2007). La seconda domanda di ricerca (*RQ2*) esplora invece l'emergere di un "third space" (Kramsch 1993), ovvero di uno spazio condiviso e transculturale, tra i due gruppi di partecipanti, nonché la negoziazione e la creazione di identità fluide e ibride al suo interno. A tal fine, l'analisi si concentra non solo sui diari scritti da entrambi i gruppi di studenti, ma anche su tutti gli altri contributi testuali alle attività dello scambio (e.g. commenti ai forum di discussione).

Complessivamente, lo studio presentato in questa tesi offre una nuova prospettiva sulla competenza comunicativa interculturale, e rende esplicito il suo legame con la nozione di *third space* e del modo in cui esso emerge in una Comunità di Pratica online (Lave and Wenger 1991). Inoltre, lo studio evidenzia la complessità e varietà delle identità che vengono attivate in incontri interculturali, e che rispecchiano la

natura transculturale e transnazionale del *third space*. Infine, questo lavoro suggerisce anche l'utilità di adottare un approccio *mixed methods* alla ricerca, attraverso il quale si può accedere ad una migliore e più completa comprensione dei processi di negoziazione ed apprendimento interculturale.

Ad Anselmo, Marcella e Maria,

che mi hanno insegnato il valore

dello studio e della conoscenza

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Slipping the moorings: preliminary definitions

This thesis is an attempt to navigate the challenging yet fascinating waters of intercultural competence, lingua franca communication and telecollaboration so as to cross the borders between these various disciplinary fields and explore their potential benefits on intercultural and foreign language study. By drawing on a variety of research areas, as well as on my personal experience as both a participant in and an organizer of telecollaborative activities, this work will try to emphasize how a combination of practices and approaches from the above-mentioned disciplines can provide foreign language students with enhanced opportunities for intercultural learning and negotiation of shared spaces in transcultural settings.

Before embarking on such a project, I believe it is essential to specify what I mean by some of the words and concepts that appear in the title to this work and that will constantly reappear in the following chapters: in this brief introduction, I will briefly outline the meanings assigned to terms such as 'transcultural', 'lingua franca', 'intercultural communicative competence' and 'telecollaboration'; a more detailed description of these concepts will be provided further on in my work, in the hope that their essence will gradually become clear.

1.1.1 Transcultural

Throughout this thesis, I will use the term 'transcultural' as intended by Pennycook (2007) and, therefore, with an emphasis on the "constant processes of borrowing,

bending and blending of cultures, to the communicative practices of people interacting across different linguistic and communicative codes, borrowing, bending and blending languages into new modes of expression" (ibid.: 47). In this light, 'transcultural' refers to any cultural practice that transcends national borders and that is constructed and negotiated in intercultural processes of knowledge sharing, communication and collaboration. Originating from the mutual fertilization of cultural practices and languages, therefore, 'transculturation' is to be understood as a "phenomenon of the contact zone" (Pennycook 2007: 7) and can be related to the notion of "transnationality" (Risager 2007; 2008; 2010) in the way it is fostered and stimulated, in the sense that it shows an "awareness of the contingent nature of the national" (Risager 2008: nd) and of the increasing role played by transnational phenomena and meanings.

In this work, the notions of transnationality and transculturality will intertwine in a twofold way. Firstly, a transcultural/transnational approach informed the choice of the topics that were adopted to stimulate discussion within the multicultural group of participants in the telecollaboration project described in this study: instead of focusing on cultural issues within a national framework – in which values, practices and artefacts are presented as circumscribed within national borders - , the topics selected for this online collaborative context aimed to "transcend national boundaries" (Starke-Meyerring 2005: 469) by encouraging the students to address the issues under discussion (culture, identity, representation and discrimination) gradually moving from a personal, local and national perspective to a transnational view that could embrace a variety of global approaches beyond those who were familiar to the speakers. Second, the notion of transculturality inspired one of the main research domains proposed in this work, namely the investigation of whether the collaboration and the relationships established in the telecollaboration

exchange led to the emergence of a 'shared space' among the students involved in the project: as will be suggested in Chapter 7, particular attention in the analysis was paid to identify the potential seeds of transculturality growing in the interstices of the cultures and languages at play in the interaction process.

1.1.2 English as a Lingua Franca

Lingua franca is a term widely used in a variety of research fields, from linguistics to management, and refers to any "contact language" (Firth 1996) used by people who do not share a common native language. Although any language can potentially be a *lingua franca*, English is the most widely used contact language at this time in history, a success largely due to its tremendous diffusion at the global level (Crystal 2003): across the world, English is not only spoken natively or as a second language in a variety of countries and continents – what Kachru (1985) referred to, in his pioneering yet problematic (Bruthiaux 2003; Hülmbauer, Böhringer and Seidlhofer 2008) three-circle model, as Inner and Outer Circle countries – but is nowadays increasingly used by non-native speakers worldwide with the purposes of communicating internationally for personal, academic or instrumental reasons (Alptekin 2002). In his 2003 overview of the spread of English at the global level, Crystal estimated that roughly one out of three of the world's users of English was a native speaker (2003: 69), thus implying that ELF (English as a *lingua franca*) communication among non-native speakers had become the norm. This is further reinforced by Seidlhofer, who remarks that "most ELF interactions take place among non-native speakers of English" (2005: 339) or at least within heterogeneous groups in which both non- and native speakers are present, and where functional effectiveness is far more important than formal correctness (Hülmbauer, Böhringer and Seidlhofer 2008: 28).

Although the concept of ELF has been expressed in several distinct ways by researchers - "English as an international language" (Widdowson 1997; Jenkins 2000), "Global" (Toolan 1997) and "English as a medium of intercultural communication" (Meierkord 1996) just to mention a few -, throughout this thesis I will adopt the term 'English as a *lingua franca*' so as to include all other definitions, in order words implying that English was used, in the specific context described in the following chapters, as a means of interaction within a group of young people from different language backgrounds engaging in *international* and *intercultural* communication.

1.1.3 Intercultural Communicative Competence

A further term which needs to be specified for the sake of clarity is 'intercultural communicative competence', a concept that has recently become one of the pillars of modern foreign language education (Sercu 2004). At the European level, for instance, the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe 2001) - a document which constitutes the basic set of guidelines for foreign language educators in Europe - originates from an intercultural view of language learning, in which a central objective of education is "to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture" (2001: 1). Within and outside Europe, and both in traditional classroom contexts and in online learning settings, there has been an increasing awareness of the need to include in the objectives of modern foreign language study, alongside the learning of specific writing, reading, listening and speaking skills, the ability to "reflect on what it means to cross borders, to see [oneself] from the outside, and to have 'the familiar landmarks of [one's]

thought' shattered through the confrontation of 'the Same and the Other' (Foucault xv)." (Kramsch 2002: np).

This ability to see and analyse one's own culture as well as the others' from an outsider's perspective is what constitutes *intercultural communicative competence* (henceforth ICC): although there exist several interpretations of the word (Balboni 2006; Byram 1997; Byram and Zarate 1997; Fantini 2005), the most widely accepted definition is the one proposed by Byram (1997; 2000), according to which ICC is the ability to interact effectively in a foreign language with people from cultures different from one's own, seeing relationships between them and showing an ability "to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other" (Byram 2000: 9). In this light, ICC involves a variety of attitudes, skills and knowledge that can help learners approach otherness from a critical and "decentred" (Byram 1997) perspective. The final outcome of applying these skills and competences to intercultural communicative situations is what Byram and Fleming define as the "intercultural speaker" (1998b: 8), in other words a learner who is able to recognize, evaluate and interpret other mindsets and values. A more exhaustive picture of the skills, knowledge and attitudinal dimensions that make up ICC will be outlined in Chapter 3.

The term ICC has often been used interchangeably with 'intercultural competence' in a variety of different contexts (Byram 2003; Deardoff 2006 and 2009; Dervin 2010; Guilherme 2000; Risager 2000), although in my opinion a clear difference should be drawn between the two: while the latter is the ability to communicate "appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardoff 2006: 247), and can therefore be manifested in situations within the same speech community or when the speaker interacts with people from another culture using his/her first language, intercultural

communicative competence implies the ability to approach people, values and mindsets from different cultures and languages using a foreign language. Throughout this thesis, I will therefore use the term intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to indicate the interplay of communicative competences (linguistic, discourse and sociolinguistic competence) that are needed when using a foreign language, and intercultural competences that should be activated when dealing with 'otherness'. Given the specific context from which this work originates – a telecollaboration project between Italian and Austrian students for whom English was a foreign language – my choice of solely using the term ICC should become clear.

1.1.4 Telecollaboration

Telecollaboration is certainly one of the principal shores that will be touched during this journey. In the literature on foreign language teaching, several interpretations of the word have been proposed (among others, Warschauer 1996c; O'Dowd 2006; O'Dowd and Ritter 2006; Dooly 2008): in her foreword to the 2003 special issue of *Language Learning and Technology*, for instance, Belz describes telecollaboration as

> the application of global computer networks to foreign (and second) language learning and teaching in institutionalized settings. In telecollaborative partnerships, internationally-dispersed learners in parallel language classes use Internet communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat, threaded discussion, and MOOs (as well as other forms of electronically mediated communication), in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange (2003a: 2).

This definition appears to be incomplete for several reasons: firstly, the reference to "parallel language classes" implies that participants in telecollaborative partnerships

are learners of each other's languages, and therefore excludes forms of telecollaboration between, say, students learning the same foreign language and using it as a *lingua franca*. Second, the definition appears to be rooted in a pre-Web 2.0 era, as it ignores the potential benefits of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikispaces and social-networks in telecollaborative contexts. Despite these limitations, Belz's definition is a first step to grasp what is to be understood by telecollaboration, as some of its keywords - "institutionalized", "internationally dispersed", "electronically-mediated communication" and "intercultural exchange" - highlight the nature and setting of telecollaborative partnerships. The following definition, taken from Guth and Helm (2010), seems to offer an apparently less detailed, yet more comprehensive, picture of telecollaboration; what is particularly effective in their definition is the explicit emphasis on the main aims of telecollaborative projects: in the authors' view, telecollaboration is to be intended as

> Internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (as defined by Byram 1997) through structured tasks (2010: 14).

Interestingly, throughout Guth and Helm's volume telecollaboration becomes "telecollaboration 2.0", a term which clearly owes to O'Reilly's expression "Web 2.0" (2005) and which indicates the role that new online participatory mindsets and tools have in modern telecollaborative activities (for a more detailed account of Web 2.0 and its impact on telecollaboration, see Chapter 2).

Like Belz's description, the definition offered by Guth and Helm emphasizes the institutionalized character of telecollaborative partnerships. Seen in this light, telecollaboration should be distinguished from independent learning by

means of Web-based tools: for sure, the Internet and other digital technologies have radically changed the way language learners can access, generate and share information with other learners and/or native speakers outside their traditional classrooms and in a variety of different contexts (blogs, social networks, virtual worlds, games and mobile phone applications). More importantly, Web 2.0 allows for the establishment of relationships across countries, languages and cultures through the creation of online communities of users who share common interests and who are now empowered to contribute to the building of their own platforms (Bleicher 2006). This radical change, referred to as not only "information revolution" but even more "relationship revolution" (Schrage 2001), opens us immense possibilities for independent learning: a simple example of this is EduNation, a fictional space in the Second Life[1] virtual world in which any registered user – or, better, their avatars – can attend seminars and courses on a variety of disciplines, including learning a foreign language.

Although all Web 2.0 tools, including virtual worlds, can potentially be adopted in telecollaboration, their use for independent learning, I would argue, is different from the scopes and nature of telecollaboration as intended by Guth and Helm (2010). As suggested above, telecollaboration covers institutionalized and structured activities that are tailor-made for specific groups of students with the aim of helping them achieve precise learning goals, namely enhanced language skills and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Both these aims are by no means new to foreign language education: as Sercu states (2006), "the main objective of language learning is no longer defined strictly in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language", as teachers are now increasingly required to foster intercultural communicative competence (2006: 55) as a

[1] http://secondlife.com/

consequence of a renewed awareness of the important relationship between language and culture - something that will be outlined in Chapter 3. Yet, in telecollaboration the combination of language and intercultural skills takes on an innovative dimension: unlike ethnographic work during study-abroad periods or independent study (Byram 1997; O'Dowd 2006), telecollaboration expands upon traditional learning practices by offering participants the possibility to explore cultures by means of new online technologies and with no need to leave their homes. In this sense, telecollaboration adds a further dimension to the study of languages and cultures: as suggested by Guth and Helm (2010), a third aim of telecollaboration activities should be that of equipping learners with "new online literacies"[2], a concept derived from Lankshear and Knobel (2006) that comprises new operational and critical knowledge to master the potential of online artefacts so as to create, evaluate and share content while at the same time negotiating and respecting the conventions of online intercultural communication.

Defined by Lankshear and Knobel (2006: 64) as "socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses (or, as members of Discourses)", online literacies are "new" as they imply both "new technical stuff" and "new ethos stuff". While the former refers to the practices that involve the use of "digital-electronic apparatuses" and of "different kinds of applications" (ibid.: 7) to create and process multimedia texts, animations, music files and much more, "new ethos stuff" stands for what Lankshear and Knoble call a

[2] The concept of 'new online literacies' has been approached and interpreted from a variety of perspectives: Warschauer, for instance, uses the term "electronic literacies" (1999), while Gilster opts for the expression "digital literacy" in his 1997 book. Drawing on Toffler (1982), Tella (1991) prefers the term "tri-literacy", which comprises print, media and computer literacy, while Jenkins *et al.* (2006) suggest the use of "new media literacies", and Starke-Meyerring (2005) chooses the comprehensive expression "global literacies". Guth and Helm's use of the concept "new online literacies" (2010), however, seems to me the most adapt to the context of telecollaboration, since it emphasizes Lankshear and Knobel's idea of the interplay of both "new technical" and "new ethos stuff" (2006).

new mindset for Web 2.0, one which is more "participatory, collaborative and distributed" than that of conventional literacies (ibid.: 9).

Given the complex nature of new online literacies that users are expected to activate in online participatory contexts, I agree with Guth and Helm in that telecollaboration practices should have as one of their primary aims that of providing learners with opportunities to activate and develop these competences. This clearly contrasts with Prensky's rather rhetorical claim that today's students belong to what he calls the "digital natives" generation (2001; 2005; 2005-2006), in other words the generation of "native speakers of technology, fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet" (2001: 8). In my view, there exist at least two main reasons why an emphasis on the need of enhanced new online literacies is at odds with Prensky's claim: firstly, not all the people born in the last two decades of the 20th century, that is in the digital era, are necessarily digital natives. Some of them may not have access to new technologies for a variety of reasons, including socio-economic status and cultural factors (Bennett, Maton and Kervin 2008), while others might not be interested in having "computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging [as] integral parts of their lives" (Prensky 2001: 1). In this sense, the persistence of a "digital divide" (Warschauer 2003; van Dijk 2005 and 2008) among people regardless of their social status and their geographical location[3] already limits the claimed universal validity of the "myth of the digital native" (Selwyn 2009) .

A further reason for challenging Prensky's statement is evident in the fact that there exists no necessary link between frequency of use of digital tools and degree of "digital competence" (European Commission 2007: 7): despite being regular users of new online technologies, not all "digital natives" are necessarily

[3] Digital divide exists in highly developed countries, and therefore does not necessarily depend on geographic location. See van Dijk (2008) for an analysis of digital divide in Europe, and Crawford (2011) for an overview of Internet access in the USA

fully competent in coping with the potentialities and challenges of online tools when it comes to searching, evaluating, processing and sharing content online and engaging in "communities and networks for cultural, personal and/or professional purposes" (ibid.). The fact that not all students are necessarily "as net savvy as we might have assumed" (Lorenzo and Dziuban 2006: 2), emphasizes the importance of helping learners become aware of the way information and relationships should be best shared and handled in online environments, including telecollaboration.

1.2 Nature and significance of this study

As seen above, over the past few years language instructors have become increasingly aware of the potential of networked technologies in achieving the goals of foreign and second language education. Thanks to the inexpensive and quick way of communicating that they offer (Crystal 2006: 266), the computer and above all the Internet have profoundly changed the way language learners come into contact and interact with learning partners worldwide in a way that seems to foster their communicative and intercultural competence (Liaw 2006) as well as their new online literacies (Guth and Helm 2010; Hauck 2010). As a consequence of this renewed awareness, a growing number of studies on telecollaboration in foreign language settings have been produced and shared within the community of researchers and practitioners.

Among these studies, different approaches to telecollaboration can be identified on the basis of the language(s) involved: from this perspective, what is interesting to observe is that a predominant number of projects described in the literature have been set up among students from two different cultures/countries studying their partners' respective languages. Examples of this kind include reports by Barson and Debski (1996), Belz (2003b), Belz and Vyatkina (2005), Furstenberg

et al. (2001), Guth and Marini-Maio (2010), Kern (1996), Kötter (2003), Kramsch and Thorne (2002), O'Rourke (2005), O'Dowd (2003; 2006; 2007a), Schneider and von der Emde (2006) and Ware (2005) among others.

An example that perfectly illustrates bilingual telecollaborative activities is the *Cultura* project[4]: first developed in 1997 by Furstenberg, Levet and Waryn, this Web-based project initially involved American and French students but was soon adopted in other institutions in Germany, Italy, Spain, Mexico and Russia. Its aim is to provide foreign language learners with an opportunity to "observe, to compare and to analyze parallel materials from their respective cultures" and languages (Furstenberg *et al*. 2001: 58). As described by the authors, the project "calls for two groups of students (…) to work together in their respective language classes, with the goal of better understanding each others' cultures" (ibid.: 59) through the analysis and comparison of cultural materials, values and artefacts from their respective environments. What is peculiar in the *Cultura* project is that the participants write in the online forums of the exchange in their native languages, so as to "express their thoughts in all their complexity as fully and as naturally as possible" while at the same time providing their partners with "access to an extraordinarily rich, dynamic, and totally authentic language" (ibid.: 97). The *Cultura* project has been an inspirational source for a large number of subsequent practices in telecollaboration, in that its comparative approach has proven successful in stimulating discussion and exploration of societal and cultural issues among participants. As will be seen later on, the telecollaborative project described in this thesis also owes to Furstenberg, Levet and Waryn's work.

While the vast majority of telecollaboration studies described in the literature are of the bilingual type, a rather smaller number of projects have involved only one

[4] http://cultura.mit.edu/

of the partners' languages: O'Dowd, for instance, described a project between Spanish learners of English and Irish native speakers (2006), and an exchange involving advanced English learners at a German university and a group of American students attending a course on intercultural communication (2007a). Spanish, on the other hand, was chosen by Jauregi and Bañados (2010) for their telecollaboration exchange between Chilean pre-service native speakers and a group of Dutch students of Spanish as a foreign language.

Interestingly, in the literature on telecollaboration what still seems to be scarce is a clear focus on the potential of telecollaborative practices in which English is used as a *lingua franca*. Yet, *lingua franca* communication has indeed been recognized as one of the types of intercultural communication by a vast number of researchers (among others, Alptekin 2002; Baker 2009; Canagarajah 2005; Fiedler 2011; House 1999; Huelmbauer, Böhringer and Seidlhofer 2008; Jenkins 2006; Keckses 2007; Luk 2005; Meierkord 1996 and 2000; Nunn 2011; Pölzl 2003; Sharifian 2009a; Seidlhofer 2009). Being heterogeneous by nature, ELF interactions occur in "fluid communicative contexts" (Canagarajah 2007: 923) in which the various cultures brought in by the interlocutors intertwine to shape hybrid, fluid and liminal spaces that stretch between the local, national and global levels involved in the instances of communication (Baker, W. 2010). Such 'transcultural spaces' – also called "third places" using an expression adopted by Kramsch (1993; 1996; 2009b) to indicate the results of the interplay of various cultures - open up enormous possibilities for the interlocutors to compare their sets of values and cultural standpoints, as well as to explore the hybrid culture(s) that they have created in interaction (Baker 2009). In this sense, therefore, ELF communication can be a valuable resource for intercultural learning in relation to a potentially vast variety of cultures. It may be objected, however, that an ELF telecollaboration project set up in

educational contexts in which English is taught as a foreign language runs the risk of moving the focus away from the development of language skills in favour of sole communicative effectiveness: in other words, it may be feared that participants will solely aim at getting their meanings across without actually paying attention to formal correctness. Yet, these two aspects should not be seen as dichotomous and incompatible dimensions: as the project described in this thesis will attempt to demonstrate, ELF telecollaborative activities can provide opportunities to focus on both communication of meaning and formal accuracy insofar as their tasks are explicitly structured to foster both dimensions.

The apparent scarcity of studies on ELF telecollaboration projects is at odds with a further interesting aspect, namely real practices in the context of European higher education: recently, the team of the EU-funded Erasmus Multilateral Project INTENT (Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education)[5] has conducted a survey among 102 European university educators with experience of telecollaboration, and has revealed that – besides bilingual and monolingual exchanges - a fifth of the respondents had implemented lingua franca partnerships (Helm, Guth and O'Dowd 2012). Although the report on the survey does not specify the languages used in this kind of telecollaborative practices, the fact that, according to the responses, English was by far "the most commonly reported language used in exchanges" (ibid.: 19) leads to conclude that a quite relevant number of practitioners are attracted by ELF online partnerships.

Despite reported current practice and the growing interest in ELF as one of the sites for intercultural communication, however, very few published studies have addressed the educational outcomes of telecollaboration exchanges among "speakers

[5] As indicated on the official website, the INTENT project aims to "raise greater awareness among students, educators and decision makers of telecollaboration as a tool for virtual mobility in FL education at the Higher Education (university) level and also on achieving more effective integration of telecollaboration in Higher Education Institutions" Available at http://www.intent-project.eu/

of different first languages" (Seidlhofer 2003a: 339) for whom "English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth 1996: 240). Some exceptions are represented by Al Jarf's 2006 pioneer project with Saudi, Ukrainian and Russian students, which focused on the development of language skills and motivation through online intercultural contact, and Basharina's analysis of communication breakdowns among Mexican, Russian and Japanese students of English (2007). With a more specific focus on the intercultural aspects of learning, the exchange described by Keranen and Bayyurt (2006) examined whether participants from Turkey and Mexico had gained any intercultural understanding from participating in online discussion boards. Further works which specifically look at the intercultural aspect of telecollaboration include Guarda, Guth and Helm's analysis of intercultural communicative competence in an online exchange among students of different nationalities/cultures (2011), Genet's report of the implementation of the international Soliya Connect Program in a French university (2010), Kohn and Warth's description of the "icEurope: Intercultural Communication in Europe" project for intercultural and language learning (2010), Liaw's 2009 analysis of the way American, French and Taiwanese participants positioned themselves within their online collaborative environment, as well as Helm, Guth and Farrah's exploration of potential hegemonies in an ELF exchange with students from Jordan, Palestine and Italy (2012).

Given theses premises, the work presented in this thesis aims to situate itself in the still limited but growing body of literature on ELF telecollaboration exchanges by looking at their impact on intercultural learning and at their implications on the negotiation of cultures and identities. The thesis describes a three-month project between students majoring in *Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale* at the University of Padova (Italy) and students attending a course in Cultural Studies at the University of

Innsbruck (Austria). For both groups English was the foreign language of their studies. In line with the goals of other telecollaboration practices, the aims of the project were three-fold: providing students with opportunities to develop and/or manifest intercultural communicative competence through interaction with people from a different cultural, national and language background; perfecting the learners' language skills through content-based interaction in English; and fostering their 'new online literacies' through the use of a variety of Web-based tools. Prior to the beginning of the exchange, the Italian instructor – the author of this thesis - met both groups of participants to outline the goals of the project and provide essential logistic information.

All the activities of the project were hosted on a dedicated wikispace[6] called 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011', and had been developed to prompt meaningful discussion on issues related to identity, culture, representation and discrimination. Interaction between the students took place by means of weekly Skype sessions in small groups of 3 or 4, reflective posts on the wikipages, and written discussion forums set up on a private Facebook Group page. Every week, the participants were encouraged to prepare on the topics of their next Skype meeting through prompts agreed upon by their instructors, and to leave their comments on the various issues on dedicated forums in the wikispace. To participate in the synchronous Skype meetings, all the students were required to meet at the computer laboratories of their respective universities, where technical and logistic support from their tutors was guaranteed. After each Skype session, they were asked to write a diary entry on their personal page hosted on the wikispace so as to keep track of their intercultural encounters and feelings toward them. Besides discussing the various topics of the exchange, the students also collaborated in three groups to produce and present a final project,

[6] http://padovainnsbruck2011.pbworks.com/w/page/40657333/Padova-Innsbruck%202011

namely the analysis of three films which dealt with intercultural issues. In addition to these joint activities, the Italian students had two separate in-class meetings with their language instructors - the author of this thesis and her supervisor – during which they were guided into corpus-based analyses of their written output so as to pinpoint expressions that could hinder communicative effectiveness, both from an ELF and an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) perspective. Once the exchange was over, all the participants were asked to carry out a self-assessment based on Byram's model for intercultural communicative competence so as to give evidence of episodes in which they had been able to put their ICC skills into action: to do so, they were encouraged to re-read all their diary entries so as to refresh their memories of relevant episodes and of their feelings towards the experience. In addition, a final questionnaire was also distributed to all the participants with the twofold aim of collecting their comments on the exchange so as to inform further practice, as well as to give them the opportunity to rate the extent to which the project had triggered any change in terms of language development, intercultural learning and confidence in the use of Web-based tools. While the Italian students were not given any mark for attending the exchange, but only received three ECTS credits for their active participation, the Austrian students' written output was considered for assessment by their instructor, since the telecollaboration project was an integral part of their course in Cultural Studies.

1.3 Research questions and methodology

As my role in the telecollaboration project was that of both instructor and researcher, throughout the course of the exchange I was able to access all the participants' written output – reflective diaries, posts to the weekly activities and comments to the Facebook forums - and collect it for my research purposes. At the end of the

exchange, I also gathered the students' self-assessment and their responses to the final questionnaire, which I compared with their answers to an initial survey I had asked them to complete before embarking in the project so as to obtain preliminary information on their previous intercultural experiences, their perceived level of English proficiency, and their degree of familiarity with Web-based tools.

Given this variegated set of data sources, my research aims were twofold: analysing the Italian learners' intercultural communicative competence as it emerged from their written output; and investigating how both groups of participants positioned themselves in relation to their peers and the experience they shared. It is important to point out here that, given the prominent role played in this study by the dimensions of intercultural communicative competence and negotiation of shared spaces, a thorough analysis of the development of the students' language skills and online literacies was not the focus of this work, although fostering these dimensions was one of the desired aims of the telecollaboration project. Except for a brief overview of the participants' perceived levels of improvement as it emerges from their responses to the final questionnaire, therefore, the analysis discussed in this thesis will solely try to provide evidence of the intercultural processes at stake in the online exchange. The following paragraphs are an attempt to briefly outline both research aims and the methodology that guided the collection and analysis of data.

1.3.1 Intercultural communicative competence

The first main aim of this study was to search for evidence of intercultural communicative competence in the specific telecollaborative context described in the thesis. Thus, the first research question guiding this study was as follows:

RQ1 *What evidence do reflective diaries and other forms of written output (forum posts) give of the Italian students' intercultural communicative competence and of its activation through the intercultural encounters and activities promoted by the exchange?*

In order to respond to *RQ1*, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) and thus combined the potential of both quantitative and qualitative methods. As will be better described in the methodology chapter (Chapter 5), the approach adopted to investigate intercultural communicative competence followed a *conversion multistrand mixed method design* (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006): this involves the collection and analysis of qualitative data, and their subsequent transformation into quantitized data with the aim of gaining more comprehensive insights into the phenomenon of interest. The primary source of qualitative data consisted in the Italian students' weekly diary entries. However, in a second and identical process of data collection and analysis, the participants' comments in the Facebook forums were also taken into account so as to expand on and corroborate the findings from the investigation of the personal journals.

The choice of using the Italian students' weekly diaries as the primary source of data was due to the fact that personal journals represent a form of first person narrative that can unveil intimate learning processes and provide the researcher with "more natural, uncontaminated raw data" (Helm 2009: 4) than other more structured forms of elicitation. Personal narratives have often been used in research on second language acquisition and sociolinguistics as "the first source of information about learners' beliefs and feelings" (Pavlenko 2007: 165) towards their learning experience; in a number of cases, first-person introspective accounts have also been analysed to explore and/or assess the learners' intercultural learning as a result of either short-term sojourns (Callen 1999; Jackson 2005; Lewis and Stickler 2000;

Pearson-Evans 2006; Wagner and Magistrale 1999; Warden *et al.* 1995) or telecollaboration experiences (Guarda, Guth and Helm 2011, Helm 2009). In line with these and other previous studies on personal narratives (Alaszewsky 2006; Deardoff 2006; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Pavlenko 2007), I believe that diaries can offer useful insights into the learners' intercultural experiences as seen "through the eyes of the students themselves" (Jackson 2005: 175) and, even more importantly, following their own feelings and learning processes as they unfold over time.

In order to answer the first research question, Chapter 6 will first present the findings of the investigation of ICC as it emerged from the diaries and forum posts of the entire group of Italian participants. The decision to focus solely on the Italian students' experience and not also on the Austrian participants' voices was due to the fact that, as an instructor of the exchange, I had the chance to be present in the computer laboratory and in class during their activities, which facilitated direct observation and personal contact. In addition, as not all the Austrian students completed their weekly diaries and were less active on the Facebook forums and wikispace, the analysis would have made it difficult to reach any conclusions for each individual based on their sole written output – which was, in most of the cases, incomplete – also given the fact that I had little personal contact with them during and after the exchange, except for a few instances of email correspondence. In the discussion of the analysis of ICC for the entire group of Italian students, Chapter 6 will try to illustrate how the students' written output gives evidence of their abilities - or lack thereof - to engage with otherness, and how these emerge in relation to time, group dynamics and topics. Starting from Byram's model (1997) and adapting it to the specific telecollaborative context under investigation, the discussion will focus on each dimension of ICC (see Chapter 3 for a detailed description) taken singularly,

although links between the various components will be drawn in order to obtain a more holistic picture of the phenomenon.

As has been widely recognized by researchers and practitioners (among others, Byram 1997; Byram 2000; Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 2002; Dervin 2010; Liddicoat and Scarino 2010; Vogt 2006), assessing ICC is an extremely delicate challenge, as some of its dimensions are personal in nature and cannot be measured with precision. For the sake of clarity, however, it is important to specify that my analysis did not aim at assessing the students' ICC and its possible increase over time, something that would be too difficult and delicate to measure in a relatively short period of time such as a three-month online exchange. Rather, the purpose of my analysis was to investigate whether the Italian students manifested any dimensions of ICC over the course of the project and, if so, how these were conveyed in their diaries. Yet, this approach presents some challenges, too: this is why the risk of drawing generalizations from extremely personal processes will be suggested throughout this thesis, together with the awareness that this might represent one of the limitations of this study. To prevent generalizations from such a small amount of data, after an overview of how ICC was manifested in the weekly diaries and forum posts at the level of the whole Italian class, two instrumental case studies (Stake 2005) will be discussed.

As will be better explained in the methodology chapter, the case studies were undertaken to provide more detailed examples of the *savoirs* activated and manifested by two individual students, Ester and Matteo, over the course of the project. The case studies originated from the mixed methods design mentioned above, in that they principally relied on the qualitative and quantitized data that were analyzed after collecting Ester's and Matteo's personal journals and posts to the Facebook forums. In order to gain even more detailed and in-depth information on

the intercultural processes activated by the two students, further qualitative and quantitative data sources were used: these included the two participants' posts to the weekly tasks of the course, their responses to the final self-assessment, their answers to the pre- and post-questionnaires, their responses to semistructured interviews (Merriam 2009), as well as my own observations on their behaviours and attitudes during the exchange. In this sense, both case studies combined qualitative and quantitative strategies for data collection and analysis, with the aim of gaining the widest range of insights into the phenomenon under investigation. On the basis of this, the case studies assumed the form of mixed methods case studies, in which a variety of data and approaches were mixed together to increase the validity of my inquiry.

1.3.2 Third space and subject positions

A further aim of the analysis presented in this thesis was to investigate how the participants in the exchange viewed and experienced their intercultural encounters. Drawing on theories of thirdness and research on shared spaces in the context of both foreign language teaching/acquisition (Kramsch 1993; Bretag 2006; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat and Crozet 1999; Dooly 2011; English 2002; Helm, Guth and Farrah 2012; Pegrum 2009) and ELF communication (Baker, W. 2009 and 2010; Fiedler 2011; Meierkord 2000; Kecskes 2007; Pölzl 2003; Seildhofer 2009), this study aimed to answer the following set of questions:

RQ2 *Does the students' written output (diaries, forums, wiki posts) signal the co-construction of a shared space? If so, which discursive features did the participants adopt in their written production to convey this 'third space', and how did they position themselves in relation to it?*

In this context, the notion of 'third space' is used to refer to a fluid and constantly changing place which originates from the interplay and contact of a variety of cultures, a space in which "negotiation takes place, where identity is constructed and re-constructed, where life in all its ambiguity is played out" (English 2002). Furthermore, *RQ2* entails the notion of subject positions, intended as the ways in which "the subject presents and represents itself discursively, psychologically, socially and culturally through the use of symbolic systems", in other words through language (Kramsch 2009a: 20), thus signalling their identity.

In order to answer this set of questions, an investigation was carried out by embracing corpus linguistics, a methodology which integrates both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, and that can be therefore considered as rooted in mixed methods research. As none of the existing mixed methods designs (see Chapter 5) was felt as suitable for the specific needs of a corpus-based approach, a novel design was designed to illustrate the plan of action that was followed in the study. This consisted in the collection of qualitative data from the exchange participants' written output and their initial, quantitative exploration by means of a corpus-based tool. After this phase, the data underwent the quantitative in-depth exploration of the contexts in which each discursive feature of interest was used, and the subsequent identification of the various meanings that were conveyed. Finally, the qualitative data were further quantitized and subjected to numerical and statistical counts so as to determine the frequency and relevance of the occurrences of the various meanings taken on by the discursive features under investigation. At that point, the inferences obtained from both the qualitative and quantitative observations were merged together to gain a holistic picture of the phenomenon. Interestingly, the process that has just been outlined was carried out on all the texts produced by the students over the course of the exchange. In this case, the written output of both

groups –Italian and Austrian– was taken into account: when investigating the emergence of shared spaces and subject positions, in fact, not considering the Austrian participants' voices would have meant failing to grasp the whole picture.

Drawing on the concept that subject positions are activated and expressed by language (Kramsch 2000 and 2009a; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004; Vollmer 2002), the analysis presented and discussed in Chapter 7 did not focus a great deal on what the students said in relation to the subjectivities that they activated throughout the project and the spaces that they constructed together, but first and foremost on *how* they used language to convey these dimensions. In this sense, therefore, the corpus-based investigation of their texts was useful to pinpoint the discursive features that were adopted to construct and represent their identities and signal shared spaces. Inspired by previous work by Bretag (2006), Clarke (2009), Pegrum (2009), Riodan and Murray (2012) and Guarda, Guth and Helm (2011), in-group identity markers, agreement/disagreement expressions, explicit reference to group members and group dynamics, as well as adjectives used to evaluate the experience were the discursive features selected as indicators of third space. In addition, the investigation of in-group identity markers also helped to define how the students positioned themselves in relation to the other members, thus providing some insights into the identities that they activated in their writing.

1.4 Overall organization of this work

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, including the introduction (Chapter 1) and the conclusions (Chapter 8): while this first chapter attempted to render the flavour of the work – outlining the territories that will be touched on during the journey the specific context under study and the research questions that inspired the whole work– Chapters 2 and 3 will go into more depth into the theoretical framework that

underpinned the planning of the telecollaboration project "Padova-Innsbruck 2011" and has informed its investigation, and will therefore include an overview of Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) as it has been integrated in foreign language education, and of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), seen as one of main goals of modern language teaching.

After a description of the disciplinary fields covered by this thesis, Chapter 4 will describe the context of the telecollaboration exchange, with particular attention to the setting in which it took place, the tools that were used, and the activities that were adopted to stimulate discussion between the two groups of participants. The fourth Chapter will also provide an overview of some of the outcomes of the project: thus, it will include the number of texts produced by the two groups of participants, the students' impressions on the project, as well as their feedback on the drawbacks of the exchange and suggestions for further improvement.

Chapter 5 will attempt to provide a description of the methodology adopted to respond to the two research questions: starting from the notions of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research, the Chapter will justify the use of a mixed methods approach in the present study, and will outline the ways in which this was implemented to investigate intercultural communicative competence, on the one hand, and the emergence of a third space and subject positions on the other.

After delineating the methodological features of this research, Chapter 6 will deal with the investigation of ICC, and will therefore try to respond to the first research question: more specifically, the Chapter will first present and discuss the findings for the whole group of Italian students, and then approach the phenomenon of interest in greater depth by describing two representative case studies.

In Chapter 7, the notions of 'third place' will guide the corpus-based exploration of both the Italian and Austrian participants' written output so as to

highlight whether any idea of a negotiated shared space emerges from their linguistic choices. In addition, the analysis presented in this Chapter will attempt to pinpoint which subject positions were activated and represented through language in both groups of students, thus responding to the second set of questions.

Finally, Chapter 8 will sum up the results of the investigation presented in the previous chapters: from there, I will try to consider the extent to which my analysis has been successful in answering the initial research questions and emphasize the implications for further practice and research in the field of telecollaboration.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TELECOLLABORATION

2.1 Introduction

In this Chapter, I will give a brief overview of one of the main disciplines that have informed my work and this thesis, namely telecollaboration. As outlined in Chapter 1, telecollaboration is to be intended as "international class-to-class partnerships" (Thorne 2008a: 331) set up in institutionalized settings with the aim of fostering foreign language skills, intercultural communicative competence and new online literacies. Telecollaboration is deeply rooted in the broader practice of Computer-Mediated-Communication (henceforth CMC), in other words "multimodal (…) Internet-mediated communication" (Thorne 2008a: 325) which comprehends a variety of activities that have also been adopted in the language classroom to enhance the learning process by means of new technologies.

Although the overall literature on CMC is vast and in constant expansion, especially in the broad field of education, in which Internet communication technologies are seen as introducing "unprecedented options for teaching, learning and knowledge building" (Harasim 1990: xvii), for the purposes of this study I will limit my review to the area of research on CMC as it has been applied to foreign- and second-language education environments and with a particular focus on contexts of Network-Based-Language-Teaching (NBLT). Section § 2.2 of this Chapter will be therefore entirely dedicated to an overview of previous research on CMC in an attempt to highlight its distinguishing features, its evolution over time due to both

technological advances and the emergence of a socioconstructivist approach to foreign language education, as well as its perceived benefits in terms of autonomous learning, equality, motivation, language development and authenticity of tasks. In the literature review, the role of computers and Internet-based tools will also be further discussed as positively influencing collaborative construction of knowledge and learning, thus revealing the socio-cognitive dimension that underpins CMC practices in language learning contexts.

The section that follows (§ 2.3) will explore in greater depth the realm of telecollaboration, seen as an institutionalized and structured form of NBLT characterized by a variety of different variants (tandem learning, peer tutoring, bilingual, monolingual and multilingual exchanges) and employing a wide range of diverse tools, yet with the common goal of providing learners with authentic opportunities for language and intercultural learning in online settings.

Inspired by the social dimension of CMC, section § 2.4 will attempt to describe how computer-mediated practices, with their emphasis on collaborative negotiation of meanings and of forms, are rooted in socioconstructivism, a theory inspired by the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978): according to a Vygotskian view, learning is a social process in which knowledge is constructed through the interaction with the members of a community, something which seems to be fully applicable to online collaborative activities.

A brief overview of socioconstructivism will be the starting point for a description – in section § 2.5 - of the notion of Communities of Practice, intended as groups of people sharing common interests and willing to learn from each other through shared practice and participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the same section, a new dimension will also be introduced, that of Online Communities of Practice (OCoP), in which interaction, knowledge sharing and problem solving take

place online through the use of blogs, wikis, videoconferencing systems and social networks. Also alternatively called Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP) by Dooly (2011) and Wong, Kwan and Leung (2011), the idea of an Online Community of Practice will be one of the *leitmotivs* of the analysis of shared spaces and identities proposed in Chapter 7 of this work.

2.2 Computer-Mediated-Communication and Foreign Language Education

Since the early 1990s, the increasing availability of the computer and the advent of the Internet have lead to a new form of communication which helps overcome the limits of time and space, namely that which researchers and scholars refer to as Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC). Broadly speaking, a clear definition of Computer-Mediated-Communication is the one provided by Herring (1996: 1), according to whom CMC is "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers". An even more exhaustive picture of CMC is provided by Trentin and Benigno (1997: 32), who posit that Computer-Mediated-Communication "embraces all those activities in which the computer is used for distance communication: access to and transfer of information, thematic conferencing via e-mail, audio- and video communication, etc.". Originally, CMC only involved tools such as electronic mail (email), online discussion forums and synchronous text chat (see section § 2.2.2 for a description); yet, with the rapid growth of Web 2.0, today's CMC also comprises communication by means of more interactive and participatory multimedia tools such as wikispaces, blogs, videoconferencing systems (e.g. Skype), photo- and videosharing applications such as Flickr and YouTube, virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), online gaming environments (e.g. World of Warcraft), social networks such as Facebook and

MySpace, and a growing number of mobile phone applications, many of which "have little to do with what has been conventionally referred to as a *computer*" (Thorne 2007: 442, italics in the original). Despite their different purposes and contexts of use, all these tools offer a convenient and quick way for users to come into contact, share information and, in the case of Web 2.0, produce and transform content with other online users, regardless of their geographic location (though, as Thorne observes, "completely dependent on access to the appropriate technologies" - 2010: 139).

2.2.1 Distinctive features of CMC

In 1997, Warschauer identified the revolutionary nature of CMC in a series of features, which differentiate it from other forms of communication, including face-to-face interaction, and which are still valid today in the Web 2.0 era. In his words, CMC has the unique characteristic of merging both the "interactional and reflective aspects of language" (1997: 472) in a single medium: before the advent of computers and the Internet, these roles of language were seen to a large extent as separate dimensions – the former being mostly associated with speech and the latter with the written medium. CMC, instead, has favoured the emergence of new communicative and reflective practices. Thus, for instance, thanks to both the asynchronous and synchronous forms of CMC offered by emails, discussion forums and online chats, "human interaction now takes place in a text-based form - moreover, a computer-mediated form that is easily transmitted, stored, archived, reevaluated, edited, and rewritten" (ibid.). In this sense, written forms of CMC have great potential in fostering interaction, in that they allow online users to socialize, exchange ideas and share content without the need to meet face-to-face or talk over the phone. At the same time, the fact that online written texts can be stored, edited and re-transmitted

opens up new opportunities for reflection, correction and revision, which enhance the reflective nature of the written mode. A similar comment can be made in relation to the new tools for synchronous and asynchronous voice communication such as audio- and videoconferencing systems and online podcasting: as, in most cases, interactions by means of these tools can be easily recorded and stored to be further listened to, analysed and edited, speech should no longer be solely considered as a resource for interaction, but as a medium that nourishes the seeds of a more reflective dimension.

Another feature that, in Warschauer's view, makes CMC innovative in comparison with other modes of communication is the fact that it allows for many-to-many interaction (ibid.: 473) which, in turn, appears to be more egalitarian and less intimidating than face-to-face communication – something confirmed by previous studies in the field of foreign language education, including Warschauer (1996a) and Kern (1995). The emergence of a less threatening environment is also stressed by further research on CMC that extends beyond foreign language education *per se*: the lack of nonverbal clues in some of the mostly used modes for computer-mediated interaction (e.g. email), for instance, has been highlighted as one of the factors that stimulate increased spontaneous participation (Ahern 1994; Rheingold 1994) also on the part of minority groups (Graddol 1991). In relation to teacher-student relationships in online communicative environments, Salmon (2003: 19) further indicates that the context of CMC may favour the natural shift of authority and control from teachers to students, thus empowering the latter, temporarily changing existing hierarchies and creating comfort zones of equality.

Linked to many-to-many communication is the fact that CMC can count on space-independency: thanks to the computer and the Internet, people no longer have to be in the same place, but, in the case of synchronous communication, can access

information and/or interact with one another from anywhere. Considering that, in the asynchronous mode (e.g. emails), CMC also allows for time-independency, and therefore makes a total "separation of time and space" (Giddens 1991: 20) possible, the added value and potential of this form of communication emerge with even more clarity.

The final feature that, in Warschauer's view, makes CMC unique is the fact that "it allows multimedia documents to be published and distributed via links among computers around the world" (ibid.: 476): this means that online users now have the chance to access a larger amount of information in the form of multimedia, and to navigate between multimedia resources through hypertext navigation systems. Besides surfing the Web, users of CMC environments are now able to produce and share their own multimedia documents, thus participating in the construction of the knowledge stored and made available online.

2.2.2 CMC tools and the Web 2.0 revolution

As suggested above, CMC involves the use of both asynchronous and synchronous modes of communication: among the first tools adopted for asynchronous interaction, **emails** have certainly had the most powerful impact on the way information is transmitted and shared. Crystal refers to email as "the use of computer systems to transfer messages between users" (2006: 10) in a quick and totally inexpensive way. Emails are now used for personal, professional, or social reasons, and can be sent to a single recipient or a variety of people at the same time, thus allowing one-to-one as well as one-to-many transactions. Compared to traditionally writing, email seems to allow for a "wide range of stylistic expressiveness, from formal to informal" (Crystal 2006: 128), and is therefore suitable for a variety of different purposes including those of modern foreign language education, in which

awareness of different registers, genres and style is regarded as important. Being a quick and easy tool, and given the fact that it seems to encourage personal disclosure (Baron 2001), email has been extensively used to establish and maintain social relationships, often among geographically dispersed people with common interests or goals. Given its multifarious nature and its potential in making communication possible beyond time difference, it is no wonder that emails were among the first tools adopted for CMC in foreign language contexts, as will emerge from the literature review proposed in section § 2.2.4.

Another tool typically associated with asynchronous communication involves the participation of Internet users in **online forums**, in other words threaded discussions in which people contribute to the topic of the ongoing dialogue by posting messages at their own pace. Discussion forums naturally support "multi-participant discourse", although people contributing to the same forum do not need to know each other in order to be part of the same 'community' – unless, of course, the forum is set up in specific private environments. As with emails, what is interesting in this medium is the interpenetration of written and spoken language that can be found in the comments posted by the contributors: according to Crystal (2006: 147), for instance, even though online discussions lack some of the most essential features of conversation like turn-taking and floor-taking, the quotation of previous contributors' words and the possibility to give feedback link online texts together and make the interaction more similar to spoken conversation. The relative short length of texts is a further element which gives online discussion groups "a dynamic and conversational feel" (ibid.: 151), and highlights the great communicative potential of electronic messaging. What is more, the use of extensive lexical repetition helps contributors identify and maintain the thematic threads of the discussion, so that they can effectively fulfil their communicative tasks. As the presence of oral traits in this

kind of written communication mode clearly aims to achieve communicative effectiveness, forum texts seems to be a suitable medium for fostering interaction among students in educational contexts, and to shift the focus away from the formal quality required in other types of written texts such as, for instance, argumentative essays (Ackerley, Dalziel and Helm 2008: 24). Compared to written academic genres, online forum contributions are also characterised by a higher degree of authenticity, since they are produced in a real social context of interaction which allows for more spontaneous and natural output. Despite this trait, however, Montero, Watts and García-Carbonell (2007: 567) also suggest that in online forums participants – as in emails - can still make coherent contributions, dense with meaning and adapted to the audience, since non-real-time communication allows some time to formulate adequate responses to the topic under discussion. The combination of formal vs informal register and carefully crafted vs spontaneous writing process is certainly one of the features that make discussion forums a valuable resource for online interaction and learning. Some drawbacks in the use of online forums in educational contexts, however, have been pointed out as well: previous research has highlighted, for instance, that reading through lengthy forum posts might represent a time-consuming, and therefore, disengaging activity for some learners (Levin, He and Robbins 2004; Rourke and Anderson 2002). The difficulties that students may encounter while using online forums seem to call for an integration of this tool that is guided by full awareness of both the benefits and potential challenges that it offers.

If one thinks of synchronous CMC, **chatgroups** will probably be the first image to come to mind: similar to forums in the sense that they are threaded discussions on a particular topic and that they can potentially involve a high number of participants, chatgroups are characterized by the fact that interaction takes place in

real time, with contributors typing their comments on the main chat box. From there, anything that is posted will be visible instantly to everyone. Give the speed of interaction, it is clear that the messages posted in a chatgroup will be generally shorter and more spontaneous than, say, emails of forum texts, and that the language used in chat discussions will be characterized by elements which remind of the "interactive immediacy of speech" (Leech, Deuchar and Hoogernraad 2006: 143), such as hesitations, interruptions, monosyllabic expressions, repetitions and "violations of sequential coherence" such as irrelevant messages (Herring 1999: 9). Even more so in synchronous CMC than in face-to-face conversations, silence in chatgroups is "ambiguous" (Crystal 2006: 165), as it may be interpreted as a "temporary inattention" or as "physical absence". To avoid this, participants in a chatgroup usually tend to make their presence 'heard' by continuously posting messages, something which might "resemble a cocktail party in which everyone is talking at once" (ibid.). Despite this apparent confusion, chatgroups can be seen as a useful resource in foreign language teaching for at least two reasons: first, authentic chats in the L2 offer learners the possibility to see written dialogue in its most "spontaneous, unedited, naked state" (ibid.: 176). Moreover, active participation in chatgroups may provide them with an opportunity to engage with a communication mode in which quick responses need to be produced and posted 'on the spot', without much planning nor careful formulation of the message.

With the advent of the Web 2.0, new tools have shown "considerable potential (…) to build on the previous generation of CMC technologies" (Guth and Thomas 2010: 41). First coined by O'Reilly and his colleagues (O'Reilly 2005), the term "Web 2.0" refers to a revolutionary set of principles that guide the way people use and interact on the Internet, and that result in new practices in which collaboration, sharing, and 'bottom-up' production and transformation of content are

opposed to the mere fruition of ready-available online resources produced by webmasters following a 'top-down' approach, as was the case in Web 1.0 practices. Drawing on O'Reilly, Guth and Thomas (2010) sum up the differences between Web 1.0 and the new principles that underpin the Web 2.0 "attitude" (O'Reilly 2005) in a way that highlights the dynamic and cooperative nature of the Web. As Table 1 illustrates, Web 2.0 is seen as a platform where content is created and shared by users, applications are open and dynamic, "authors agree to reciprocal forms of ownership and licensing for creative work in the public domain" (Guth and Thomas 2010: 42), subscriptions become a reality, and social relationships can be established and maintained through social networks and blogs.

Web 1.0	**Web 2.0**
Web as Read-only	Web as **Read-Write**
Web as Medium: where content is transmitted from a webmaster or company to an audience.	Web as **Platform**: where content can be stored, created, shared, remixed and commented by users.
Web of large documents.	Web of small pieces of data.
Web of Software: If a user buys and downloads a piece of software but doesn't use it, the company still makes a profit.	Web of **Content**: If people do not the use the Web-based application, the application does not exist (nor the company or start-up behind it).
Web of geeks and techies: HTML knowledge needed.	Web of anyone willing to try: Web-based publishing platforms (e.g. blogs, wikis), no need of technological language.
Web as Broadcast: One to many.	Web as **Conversation**: Many to many.
Web as Static: Applications and websites are closed.	Web as **Dynamic**: Applications are open and remixable, recombining and deconstructing Web.
Web of Search Engines: You go to the Web to find what's out there.	Web of **RSS**: Content and data can be subscribed to and 'delivered' to the user.
Web of Copyrighted Content	Web of **Copyleft** and **Commons**: Content can be licensed for re-use and

	derivative works.
Web of Categories: Content organized and stored in large and fixed categories by webmasters. Top-down.	Web of **Tags** and **Folksonomies**: Smallest units of content tagged by anyone in the online community. Bottom-up.
Web of Forums	Web of **Blogs** and **Social Networks**
Web of Stable Releases	Web of Beta Releases

Table 1. Web 1.0 vs Web 2.0 (from Guth and Thomas 2010: 43)

As suggested in Chapter 1, the new Web has not only marked the beginning of an "information revolution" (Schrage 2001), but first and foremost it has opened the door to a real revolution in the way people are linked together regardless of age, ethnic group, geographic location and social class. To this radical change have certainly contributed – in a relationship of mutual influence - the new tools that Web 2.0 has made available, notably wikispaces, blogs, videoconferencing systems, social networks and virtual worlds. However, as warned by Dohn (2010: 144), the revolutionary aspect of Web 2.0 does not only reside in the tools and facilities *per se*, as these could still be used within a traditional 'one-way' publishing approach which was typical of Web 1.0. Rather, what is new in Web 2.0 is the set of beliefs and principles that inform online behaviour, and that place collaboration at the centre of the production and sharing process. The following paragraphs are an attempt to sum up some of the main features for each Web 2.0 tool, and to suggest their possible implications in the context of foreign language learning.

Wikispaces, or wikis, are Web-based environments which enable users to "collaboratively write, edit and link HTML-based documents" (Kear *et al.* 2010: 219). Based on the principle of collaboration and creative-common, wikis "challenge the notion of authorship" (Thorne 2007: 437) that was typical of Web 1.0 resources by proposing a process of continuous peer-review and peer-editing in which any user is potentially empowered to modify the content of the page. Thanks to the history

function, all the modifications to the wikispace are stored in the memory, so that any inappropriate change can be reversed to a previous version if this is felt necessary. The integration of multi-media content including audio, video and pictures makes wikispaces a perfect site for collaborative work in social, professional and educational contexts. As for the latter, previous research has highlighted that the use of wikis as shared collaborative environments can potentially offer a more democratic, equal and student-centred way of learning (Kear *et al*. 2010: 219). However, the same setting has been found to be the cause of frustrations for some students, particularly those who do not feel comfortable with editing other people's content (Hemmi, Bayne and Land 2009; Kear *et al*. 2010), something that suggests for the need to discuss norms of behaviour and expectations with the students prior to the use of wikispaces for collaborative activities. In the context of language learning, working together on shared themes in the same collaborative environment can be an interesting starting point to discuss aspects of language use and, in the case of telecollaborative partnerships, cultural perspectives on the same topic (Guth and Marini-Maio 2010).

In Thorne's words (2007: 438), **blogs** are Web applications that display "serial entries with data and time stamps" in a chronological order, with the most recent entry at the top of the page: bloggers – people who blog – write about a huge variety of topics, from personal narratives to Italian or French cuisine, news and politics, social and technical issues, hobbies and sports etc. Blog entries usually also embed multimedia content such as photos, videos and links to other Web-based resources. Each entry usually allows to be commented on by visitors to the blog, something which establishes some sort of relationship between the blog author and his/her readers. In education, blogs have been adopted for a variety of reasons: to engage students with the topics under study using an engaging tool; to support

student interaction and collaboration; and to foster reflective practice through the process of writing blog entries (Beale 2007; Bryant 2006; Fiedler 2003).

Social networking sites mark the new era of socialization on the Web. Used to establish and maintain communities of friends or other unknown users sharing the same interests, social networks such as MySpace[7], Twitter[8] and Facebook[9] share a common aim: networking. On social networks, users connect, collaborate, create new content, share multimedia resources or simple thoughts with other people belonging to the same network. Among all social networks, Facebook is certainly one of the most popular sites: with 901 million monthly active users at the end of March 2012 (Facebook 2012), the site is considered "the leading social networking site" (Hew 2011: 663) by a highly heterogeneous audience of both young people and adults. In his review of research studies on Facebook, Hew (2011: 663) emphasizes how the ubiquity of the social network amongst students has attracted the attention of practitioners and researchers in the field of education, who feel stimulated by its potential in creating new learning and collaborative opportunities. Recent reports have stressed various effects of the use of Facebook in educational settings: the site was found to play a positive role in increasing student motivation in classroom and collaborative work (Roblyer *et al*. 2010; Haverback 2009; Mills 2009; Lampe *et al*. 2011; Wong, Kwan and Leung 2011), in developing foreign language learners' linguistic and socio-pragmatic competences (Blattner and Fiori 2009; Kabilan, Norlida and Abidin 2010), as well as in fostering teacher-student and student-student interaction (Munoz and Towner 2009). Up to date, only a few studies have also addressed the impact of the integration of Facebook into network-based activities between classes of geographically-distant learners, and have suggested that the social network can provide foreign language students with enhanced

[7] www.myspace.com
[8] https://twitter.com
[9] www.facebook.com

opportunities for authentic interaction (Aoki and Kimura 2009) and for intercultural learning (Guarda 2012b).

Further tools that have become increasingly popular among different generations of Web users are **virtual worlds** (e.g. Second Life) and **multiplayer online games** (e.g. World of Warcraft[10]), in which interaction takes place by means of voice, chat and digital characters called *avatars*. Used for a variety of different purposes, including socializing, playing games and doing business, both sets of tools have also been argued to provide opportunities for linguistic and cultural learning through the immersion in virtual task-based settings (Thorne and Black 2008: 147). For this reason, virtual worlds and online games have attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners in the field of education: in a study examining a multilingual dialogue occurred between two players on World of Warcraft, for instance, Thorne (2008b) found that the setting positively stimulated linguistic cooperation, reciprocal assistance and the establishment of an enduring social relationship between the two interlocutors. In a review of some of their previous practices with Second Life in language learning settings, Panichi, Deutschmann and Molka-Danielsen (2010) highlighted how the virtual world was considered as a place of "experiential and intellectual exploration of learning and teaching" which allowed for a "variety of tasks, including pair work, group work, individual research projects and research, and for tasks that focus on the affective, social and physical dimensions of foreign language learning and intercultural communication" (2010: 180).

This section has tried to describe some of the tools used for CMC, from the traditional email to the new realms opened up by virtual worlds and social networking environments, and their potential in providing enhanced opportunities for collaborative work, socialization and learning in educational contexts. While the

[10] http://battle.net/wow

description outlined so far still offers a quite general view of CMC and its features, and only touches some of its implications for language teaching practices, the paragraphs that follow will have a more explicit focus on the way CMC has been integrated into the context of foreign language education over the past few decades, with specific reference to some of the studies that have unravelled its potential benefits on the learning process.

2.2.3 CMC in the foreign language classroom: CALL and NBLT

In the context of foreign language education, CMC has brought about a "shift in L2 education, one that moves learners away from simulated classroom-based contexts and toward actual interaction with expert speakers of the language they are studying" (Thorne 2007: 424). In this sense, CMC has rapidly become synonymous for potentially enhanced learning opportunities. In 1999, before the advent of Web 2.0 and widespread broadband access, Kramsch and Andersen commented that computers and the Internet "seem to realize the dream of every language teacher--to bring the language and culture as close and as authentically as possible to students in the classroom" (1999: 31). As Salaberry remarks (1996: 22), the revolution that Web-based technologies have brought about in the language classroom is not rooted in "the nature of the technological medium per se", but in the new approach to learning that it promotes, one in which the learner occupies a central position: by personally engaging in "socially, mediated construction of knowledge through CMC" (ibid.: 19), learners are now in charge of their learning and, are empowered to take actions without necessarily having to rely on 'top-down' instruction.

Given its nature, CMC has often been encompassed in the notion of Computer-Assisted-Language-Learning (CALL). Broadly speaking, CALL refers to "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and

learning" (Levy 1997: 1): emerging in the 1960s, the first practices of CALL were mostly based on a behaviouristic approach to language learning (Warschauer 1996b), according to which learning takes place through mechanical production, memorization and repetition of given grammar patterns (Richards and Rodgers 1986). Traditional behaviouristic CALL practices, therefore, took the form of rather repetitive language drills (Levy 1997) which aimed to help learners master the foreign grammar and vocabulary by responding to the stimuli made available through technology. In this context, computer-mediated human-to-human communication was not encouraged, since the use of computing facilities was primarily meant to carry out drill-based tasks. The CALL practices of that time, therefore, were based on the concept that the computer functioned as a *tutor*, in other words as "a vehicle for delivering instructional materials to the student" (Warschauer 1996b: 4).

Despite its wide popularity in the 1960s, the behaviouristic approach soon started to receive criticism: practitioners and theorists noted that learners were often unable to transfer the skills acquired in the classroom into authentic contexts outside of it, and thus felt that drill and pattern-based exercises had fallen short of expectations (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 59). The growing influence of the theories proposed by Chomsky certainly helped pave the way to a rejection of methods and pedagogic practices grounded in behaviourism (ibid.: 59): Chomky's theory of transformational grammar (1957), in fact, advocated a view of language as generated from the learner's innate competence and not as a habit structure. In this light, learning was no longer seen as the fruit of sterile imitations and repetitions, but the result of the actualization of unconscious abstract rules. As a consequence, teaching practices had to move away from the simple manipulation of prefabricated forms (Jimin 2007: 109), and attempt to provide learners with new opportunities to mentally construct the foreign language on their own.

As Richards and Rodgers note (1986: 60), despite the deep impact of Chomsky's theories, the period that saw behaviouristic approaches rejected at both the theoretical and pedagogical level did not witness the rise of any particular method based on this view of learning, neither in off-line or on-line contexts. Instead, what followed was a "period of adaptation, innovation [and] experimentation" (ibid.: 60), which led to the emergence of a variety of CALL practices which were rooted in more communicative approaches to language learning – thus inaugurating what Warschauer calls "the second phase" of computer-assisted language learning (1996b).

In the 1970s and 1980s, communicative CALL attempted to provide learners with real opportunities to benefit from the communicative potential of the language, also thanks to the increased availability of computers. One of most influential scholars of the time, Underwood, defined the new approach to language learning by identifying 13 key features, or premises, which included the following (1984: 52): a focus on the actual use of language forms; the need to stimulate learners to generate original utterances rather than manipulate prefabricated ones; an emphasis on creating an environment in which target language use feels natural and in which students are encouraged to explore and experiment with the language without being judged on what they have produced.

As suggested by Warschauer (1996b), this second phase of CALL stimulated the implementation of a wide variety of programs for language learning. Skill practice was still adopted, yet no longer in the form of drill exercises: instead, new language games, text reconstruction and paced reading programs aimed to provide learners with enhanced opportunities for choosing and controlling their own responses. Other practices, on the other hand, radically moved away from a view of the computer as tutor, and proposed activities in which the technological tools were

used more as a *stimulus* to the learning process. As Warschauer puts it, the purpose of these activities was not so much "to have the students discover the right answers, but rather to stimulate students' discussion, writing, or critical thinking" (1996b: 4). Among the programs used for these purposes, popular software tools of the time included the simulation games *Sim City*[11] – which allowed users to orchestrate the building of a virtual city - and *Where in the World is San Diego*?[12] – in which players tried to pursue the notorious Carmen and her criminal gang. A highly sophisticated simulation designed for foreign language learning was *À la rencontre de Philipe*[13], an interactive video program which allowed learners to improve their French skills by helping their friend find an apartment in Paris, reading advertisements, deciphering the city plan, and using a variety of authentic resources in the target language.

A further use of computer tools in communicative CALL approached the computer as a *tool* for learning (Warschauer 1996b: 5): instead of providing students with language materials, the computer functioned as a means to access, gather and process information through hands-on experiments, hypothesis testing and problem-solving. Word processing tools and grammar checkers are among the programs that were used – and are still used – to enhance learning opportunities by means of technology. Another practice that started to emerge at that time was corpus-based analysis, thanks to which learners engaged in the exploration of authentic computer collections of texts to draw conclusions on patterns or rules of language use. This principle, also called Data-Driven-Learning (Johns 1991), put learners in the new position of researchers (Leech 1997: 10), while the teacher became more of a facilitator, coordinating and guiding the research process (Bernardini 2004: 16).

The communicative approach to CALL was favoured by the increasing influence of the theories proposed by Hymes (1972) and Halliday (1973): in

[11] http://www.simcity.com/en_US
[12] http://www.carmensandiego.com/hmh/site/carmen/
[13] http://web.mit.edu/fll/www/projects/Philippe.shtml

particular, Hymes' theory of communicative competence, with its emphasis on the sociocultural component of language, offered a more comprehensive view of language learning and use than Chomsky's notion of abstract grammatical competence (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 70). As for Halliday, his emphasis on the study of language as it is used to perform a variety of functions – from an instrumental to an imaginative function – helped place increased emphasis on the communicative and functional dimensions of language use. Although both theories primarily looked at first-language acquisition processes, proponents of the communicative approach viewed them as offering powerful insights into second language development (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 71).

This perspective was fertile ground for the emergence of a sociocognitive approach to foreign language teaching and learning, one in which the language to be taught was no longer seen as a mere set of grammatical competences but also as implying discourse and sociolinguistic and strategic competence (Canale and Swain 1980). In a sociocognitive paradigm, authentic tasks and projects begun to be adopted in CALL activities in which the development of communicative competence was believed to occur through social interaction in authentic social contexts. As Kramsch and Thorne highlight (2002: 85), this brought about a radical change in the way technologies were used in the foreign language classroom, "moving many language arts educators from cognitivistic assumptions about knowledge and learning as a brain phenomenon, to contextual, collaborative and social-interactive approaches to language development and activity". In Warschauer and Kern's words, (2000) the emergence of a sociocognitive dimension in language learning paved the way to what they call Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT), which will be focus of the following sections.

As can be inferred from this brief introduction, CALL evolved over the years as a wide range of practices which do not necessarily involve CMC *per se* – from the traditional drill-based vocabulary and grammar activities of the 1960s and 1970s to the use of corpus concordancing tools for the exploration of authentic texts (Johns 1991). Yet, with the advent of the Internet, the greater availability of affordable computers, as well as the influence of new theoretical approaches, scholars writing in the disciplinary field of CALL could not ignore the tremendous potential of computer-mediated communication on language learning processes. This is why, for instance, Warschauer and Kern have adopted the term Network-Based Language Teaching (NBLT) to indicate "language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks" (2000: 1). In previous works, Warschauer (1996b; Warschauer and Healey 1998) had used the term *integrative* CALL to define the third, new phase of computer-assisted language learning that had been made possible by networked technologies.

In order to draw a distinction between CALL and NBLT, Warschauer and Kern asserted that "whereas CALL has traditionally been associated with self-contained, programmed applications such as tutorials, drills, simulations, instructional games, tests, and so on, NBLT represents a new and different side of CALL, where human-to-human communication is the focus" (ibid.). NBLT, therefore, gains value and relevance to the learning of a foreign language as long as it shifts the focus from mere interaction with the computer to interaction with other language users by means of computer networks, in contexts in which the machine only serves to support collaborative activity and enhance the learning process both on-line, during the interaction, and off-line, in reflective practices (Meskill and Ranglova 2000: 23). As suggested above, the reasons for this shift are to be found not only in the technological advances of the time, but also in the new approaches to

educational theory and practice that started to emerge under the influence of socioconstructivism, a theory which "emphasized the social and cultural construction of knowledge, the importance of collaboration among individuals and groups, and a learner- and problem-based approach to pedagogy" (Kern, Ware and Warschauer 2008: 281). As the body of literature on computer-networked language teaching practices has attempted to demonstrate since the early 1990s (see section § 2.2.4), a computer-mediated approach to language learning can potentially nourish all these dimensions, insomuch as NBLT has been defined as a sociocognitive activity (Warschauer and Kern 2000: 11) in which "cognitive and social dimensions overlap" (ibid.: 5), and meaningful interaction and construction of knowledge in authentic discourse communities play a central role in the learning process. The influence of socioconstructivism on CMC in relation to educational contexts will be the focus of section § 2.4.

As its definition suggests, NBLT activities can take place in "local or global networks": local networks are set up at the classroom level to foster interaction within the group of learners by means of synchronous of asynchronous CMC, and have often been employed to compare the effects of computer-based and face-to-face communication on the learning process. Examples for local NBLT activities are studies by Beauvois (1998a), Chun (1994), Kelm (1996), Kern (1995), Sullivan and Pratt (1996) and Warschauer (1996a; 1997), which will be commented on in the literature review on the potential benefits of CMC.

Global computer networks, on the other hand, are what constitute the basis for telecollaborative practices which involve distally located learners interacting via "internet communication tools to support dialogue, debate, collaborative research and social interaction" (Belz 2001: 213): in line with previous research (Belz 2001; O'Dowd 2006; Ware 2005), therefore, I view telecollaboration as one of the forms of

NBLT stretching beyond the local boundaries of the classroom and potentially reaching an enormous number of language users and learners in the 'digitalized world'. Besides its global nature, what distinguishes telecollaboration from other NBLT activities is the specificity of its purposes: although language development remains at the core, telecollaboration is now vocationally oriented towards intercultural learning, with the specific goal of helping participants develop and manifest intercultural awareness and critical thinking skills. Culture, in telecollaboration, becomes therefore central to the learning process alongside or, in some cases, even more than language development. A third element of clear specificity is represented by the growing importance of acquiring and refining new online literacies that learners need to interact in an increasingly complex and digitalized world.

2.2.4 Potential benefits of CMC in foreign language education

Much of the research carried out since the 1990s has pointed out a wide range of potential benefits of CMC - in both local and global networks - on language learning processes. **Authenticity** of tasks has been highlighted as one of the main potentialities of CMC: as suggested by O'Dowd (2006: 81), by bringing learners into contact with an authentic audience and by empowering them to interact on topics that are relevant to their own lives, language learning activities acquire new value in the eyes of the learner, who sees the genuine purpose of his/her practices. In this with this, for instance, Montero, Watts and García-Carbonell (2007) describe their use of a number of discussion forums among a group of EFL students of computer science at a technical university in Spain: the fact that the forums were open to anyone interested, from professionals and experts to novices in computer science, seems to have given a feeling of authenticity to the online discussion, with students engaging

with language use in real social contexts and with the aim of sharing information on topics of interest (2007: 576). What is more, a corpus-based analysis of the language used in the same online forums was described by the authors as a stimulating way to engage learners in the exploration of authentic materials to help them notice problematic areas of language use within the tenets of data-driven-learning (Johns 1991).

The use of authentic materials derived from contributions to online forums also underpins Guarda's (2012a) analysis of agreement and disagreement strategies in a corpus of texts composed by Italian learners of English while participating in a number of discussions with a class American students. Her study stresses the importance of developing pedagogic materials from authentic texts, so as to provide EFL learners with access to "authentic real-world contexts of language use" (Kramsch and Thorne 2002: 83) and consequently learn from them.

Authenticity of tasks is also what emerges from Barson, Frommer and Schwartz's (1993) report on a number of email-based exchanges among learners of French at three different American institutions, namely Harvard, Stanford and the University of Pittsburgh. Asked to collaborate to produce and publish student newspapers and videotapes in the language of their studies, the participants in the projects reported to feel more motivated by the authentic purposes of the exchanges, the genuine opportunities that these offered to communicate beyond classroom activities, and the authentic social relationships that were established over the course of the projects.

In some studies, authenticity of tasks is provided by the awareness of having a real audience read and comment on texts produced by foreign language learners: Kramsch, A'Ness and Lam (2000), for instance, focus on two case studies in which foreign language learners (of Spanish and English respectively) found in the

Internet a site to express themselves, create and disseminate their multimedia artefacts, and confront a broad public audience with their versions of reality. The group of Spanish learners, for example, engaged in the creation of a CD-ROM for the teaching of Latin-American culture, making use of digitalized data in the form of videos, images and hyperlinks. For the participants in the project, authenticity was interpreted at several levels: first, as their final product was addressed to an audience of "unknown professors and their students" (2000: 95), the creation process *per se* was felt as real. A further element of authenticity was given by the inclusion of moving images and sounds in the materials selected for the CD-ROM: as the authors suggest (2000: 85), the use of multimedia generated in the students a feeling of enhanced authenticity in the representations of Latin-America as opposed to the ones proposed by traditional books. Finally, one student also seemed aware that the process of manipulating objects and texts for the creation of a final product naturally affects authenticity: from this perspective, therefore, it was the "experience of making a multimedia document on Latin American culture rather than the document itself" that gave the project an air of authenticity.

In their report on the different approaches and practices of four French language learners who participated in an online forum related to the newspaper 'Le Monde', Hanna and De Nooy (2003) almost take the concept of authenticity to extremes by stressing the importance of empowering learners to take part in public Internet discussion forums – as opposed to the 'safer' educational spaces set up in institutionalized collaborative contexts - and deal with authentic reactions and stimuli provided by other forum contributors. Although the authors' choice to use public online discussion forums among language learners may be debatable, since exposure to and participation in public sites naturally raises ethical issues on the part of the

teacher, their report is sincerely inspiring as it emphasizes the need for authenticity in educational contexts.

In the body of literature on CMC, several reports have addressed the fact that electronic communication seems to bring about more **equality** in student participation: in his 1996 study, for instance, Warschauer (1996a) compared face-to-face discussion and electronic synchronous interaction in a multicultural class of 16 ESL students at a community college in Hawaii, and found that the latter showed a tendency towards more equal participation than face-to-face communication. This applied to quiet and shy members as well, who went from almost total silence in the face-to-face mode to equal levels of participation in the electronic discussions. As suggested in the discussion of the distinctive features of CMC (section § 2.2.1), increased equality in electronic interaction seems to be favoured by the lack of nonverbal clues, which make the environment less intimidating in terms of social presence. In addition, as in CMC the traditional distinction between 'host' and 'guest' that characterizes face-to-face interaction tends to disappear (Ma 1996: 177) levelling differences out, electronic communication is often perceived as a very "lean" channel (ibid.: 175) that allows for more equal levels of contributions.

This aspect seems to be effectively illustrated by Sayers' (1995) description of a bilingual email exchange between a group of American students from francophone background and a class of learners of English based in Quebec, Canada. The partnership was established with the aim of providing the American students with opportunities to recover their linguistic and cultural heritage through authentic contact with native speakers in Quebec, while at the same time offering the latter the possibility to improve their English skills. Through email correspondence, the students successfully and enthusiastically engaged in several parallel learning projects including the creation of a student magazine at the end of the year. Only

when the participants met in person at the very end of the project did the American students realize that their Canadian partners, "upon whom they looked as competent and highly-proficient models for learning French" (1995: np) were deaf and had Sign Language as their primary tongue. Although the way the exchange was conducted leaves ample space for criticism, in that it hindered important aspects that could have triggered dialogue at an even deeper level while at the same time challenging stereotypes and prejudices (O'Dowd 2007d: 29), what Sayers attempts to demonstrate in his report is that CMC allows for equal participation even beyond physical inabilities.

What electronic interaction also seems to foster is an increased level of **participation** overall. Besides fostering more equality, therefore, CMC has been found to stimulate participation both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Kern (1995), for example, analyzed the language production of a group of French learners participating in synchronous, written communication by means of a local-area computer network application, and compared it with the language produced in oral face-to-face interaction. His results showed that the students had over twice as many turns and produced a higher number of sentences in the technology-mediated context than they did in the oral mode.

Similarly, Sullivan and Pratt's (1996) research on a local-area communication network composed of ESL learners attending a writing course showed that overall student participation reached 100% in the electronic mode, against the 50% reported in traditional classroom discussion (1996: 496). From a qualitative point of view, the study indicated that writing quality improved in the computer-assisted classroom, with the role of the teacher fading into the background and the students providing more focused comments to their peers. This seems to be in line with Beauvois' (1998a) observations on the use of CMC among third-

semester learners of French, in which she found evidence of greater student participation, as well as of enhanced production in the foreign language both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

Increased levels of participation were also highlighted by Kelm (1992) in his report on the adoption of synchronous computer networks among learners of Portuguese: as the author highlights, in the specific context under study the communication mode seems to have decreased anxiety and fostered motivation in the students, thus fostering more active participation.

Motivation is certainly one of the main dimensions on which research into CMC has focused since its origins: increased motivation has been reported on as the fruit of exposure to stimulating and authentic learning contexts (Kern 1996; King 2010; Soh and Soon 1991; Thorne 2008b; Warschauer 1996d), of collaborative work in a less-threatening environment (Beauvois 1998b; Blake and Zyzik 2003; Kelm 1992), and of a perceived feeling on the part of learners of having control over their own learning (Warschauer 1996d). In particular, in the analysis of the responses of 167 ESL and EFL learners in the USA, Hong Kong and Hawaii to a survey on their feelings towards the use of computers, Warschauer (1996d) identified three common factors that seemed to enhance motivation: communication, empowerment and learning. The former refers to the fact that the students who responded to the questionnaire showed a strong willingness to communicate with native speakers and other L2 learners via computer networks. As the author suggested, "the benefits of this communication are seen as many: feeling part of a community, developing thoughts and ideas, learning about different people and cultures" (1996d: 39), as well as learning from each other. The second motivational factor, empowerment, relates to the feeling that computers can enhance personal power, help overcome isolation and reduce anxiety while contacting other online users (ibid.). Finally, the third

factor implies that respondents perceived computers and computer networks as useful tools to learn faster, better and more independently (ibid.).

Independence in the learning process, in other words **autonomy**, is another element that seems to be stimulated by the integration of CMC into the language classroom: in Little's words (1991: 45), autonomy is "the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning - a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". In the context of CALL, Schwienhorst further suggests (2003) that autonomy can be promoted by stimulating individual reflective processes through writing practices, social interaction with other learners or native speakers, as well as by encouraging learners to become responsible for their own learning. In CALL practices in general, autonomy has been claimed to arise from a variety of contexts, including the ones in which learners solely interact with the technology, e.g. in the use of concordancers to identify useful language patterns (Aston 1997) or in the choice of adopting a word processor to write and manipulate texts, something which has been perceived as supportive of "cognitive and metacognitive autonomy" (Kenning 1996: 128).

In NBLT, however, autonomy is not only given by the tools used for communication, but most and foremost by the nature of the tasks themselves, which naturally includes the social dimension illustrated by Schwiegenhorst by promoting direct interaction with other humans, be they other learners or expert/native speakers. A few studies reported here serve to illustrate this point: in her report on the way global communication networks and email were introduced into the L2 practices of Finnish secondary schools to improve language proficiency, for instance, Tella (1991) noticed that the communication mode and the way activities were carried out online allowed "more room for students' own pacing" (1991: 109), and gave them more autonomy in their work. Kelm (1996) described synchronous CMC as not only

encouraging greater participation from class members overall, but also as allowing "instructors to fade into the background" (1996: 22), thus leaving ampler space for students to self-direct their interactions and learning. More recently, Cloke (2010) reported on a bilingual telecollaboration project between students of Italian at an Australian University and learners of EFL at the University of Padova (Italy), and noticed that the activities carried out online by means of wikipages successfully fostered both "student-centered interaction and learner autonomy" and "collaborative learning" (2010: 383).

One NBLT practice that is deeply grounded in the principle of learner autonomy is tandem learning: organized "around the pairing of individuals in complementary dyads where each is interested in learning the other's language" (Thorne 2010: 141), tandem learning has been described as an activity that, besides promoting language development and intercultural learning, has a high potential in fostering learner reciprocity and autonomy (Brammerts 1996; Kötter 2002; Little and Ushioda 1998; O'Rourke 2005; Schwienhorst 2003, Ushioda 2000).

Promoted to help L2 learners improve their language skills, communication through computer networks has been researched to find evidence for actual **language development**: in line with this, Cononelos and Oliva (1993) described a course of Italian language and culture in which advanced learners interacted with native speakers of the language by means of a newsgroup and email. The autonomy fostered by the environment played an important role in encouraging students to rely on each other for feedback on their writing. At the end of the course, the learners reported enhanced confidence in using the language for communicative purposes as well as the feeling that their overall writing skills in Italian had improved thanks to the exposure and participation to the electronic newsgroup.

In a longitudinal research study, Chun (1994) analysed the discourse produced in synchronous class discussion by first-year German students, and provided evidence of increased interactive competence and more varied communicative proficiency over time, expressed in the form of clarifications, requests for feedback, topic initiation and leave-taking speech acts etc. The author also suggested that the complexity of sentences composed by the students increased over time, and that peer-to-peer interaction was preferred over student-teacher communication.

In a more recent study, Kost (2008) explored the way beginning learners of German used communication strategies to compensate for gaps in linguistic and sociolinguistic proficiency while participating in a local synchronous CMC environment. Her results show that the students were able to use a variety of direct and indirect strategies, from code-switching, requests for clarification and self-repair to the use of fillers and repetitions. Her report concludes with the claim that, overall, synchronous CMC "seems to be highly beneficial with regard to students' language production, their ability to notice and repair mistakes, and their use of a variety of communication strategies" (2008: 178).

CMC in NBLT environments has also been found to encourage the learning and consolidating of specific areas of language use and pragmatics which might seem problematic to L2 learners: an example of this is offered by Thorne (2003) in his description of an American student's reaction to the participation in a French-American telecollaborative exchange which involved the use of email and instant messaging. The American student, a learner of French as L2, reported that the interaction with her French peer over the course of the exchange had helped her gain command of the appropriate uses of the pronouns *tu/vous*, something that she had never been able to fully grasp from dictionaries or grammar books before.

Pragmatic strategies were also at the core of the series of studies proposed by Belz and Kinginger (2002; 2003) and Kinginger and Belz (2005), in which the authors addressed the use of the *tu/vous* and *du/Sie* formulae both in French and German. All the NBLT exchanges involved American learners of French and German, interacting with native speakers through synchronous and asynchronous CMC. Thanks to peer feedback and to direct observation of pronoun use in their partners' written output, the American students were able to modify their usage in a substantial and systematic way. According to Kinginger and Belz (2005), the approximation to native speaker language norms was also stimulated by the social relationships that were established during the exchange, which encouraged the American students to use pragmatic forms appropriately so as to maintain positive face (as defined by Brown and Levinson 1978) and feel part of the community.

Influenced by socioconstructivist theories of language learning, several researchers have investigated online learning practices in order to understand whether these can lead to **collaborative construction of knowledge**, thus departing from more traditional teacher-centred approaches. All the studies reported in the paragraphs above, if seen in the context of socioconstructivism, would appear to be in line with Vygotsky's (1978) principle that learning occurs in interaction. By providing learners with opportunities for authentic goal-oriented tasks in which they are in charge of negotiating meanings, linguistic forms and content, CMC activities become meaningful to the learning process insofar as they place the learner at the centre of his/her own psychological and cognitive development. Among the studies cited above, an effective example of learner-centred activities that foster co-construction of knowledge is given by a tendency which has emerged in tandem learning partnerships (O'Rourke 2005 among others), in which learners provide

feedback on one another's language even when no communication breakdown occurs, in a way that potentially stimulates participation, equality and empowerment.

Yet, while the potential benefits of CMC on co-construction of knowledge, negotiation of meanings and increased peer feedback have been suggested in the literature, some researchers still remain sceptical about the assumption that CMC interaction can actually lead to improved language skills. As Lee observed in her study on online interaction between learners of Spanish and native teachers participating in a Spanish-American telecollaboration project (2006), the results of her report only shed some light on the way feedback prompted negotiation of meaning and form in the specific instances of interaction, but did not completely address "whether responses to implicit feedback led to L2 development" in a substantial way (2006: 171), an aspect that she also pointed out in later research on CMC (Lee 2008). A similar remark was expressed by Tudini (2003), who analysed the online asynchronous interactions of a group of intermediate learners of Italian and native speakers participating in a public chat room: although the author found evidence of both negotiation of meaning and modification of interlanguage forms in the transcripts of chats, her paper concluded by suggesting that further research should be carried out to probe whether "these negotiations and modifications lead to acquisition in the longer term" (2003: 149).

From a different angle, Ware and O'Dowd (2008) recognized that, although the students participating in a bilingual exchange did provide their peers with individualized feedback, their corrections and observations were not always "equipped with a strong enough understanding of the structure of their native languages to provide quality metalinguistic explanations" (2008: 55). In addition, the authors also pointed out that, although the students did appreciate this practice, feedback was given only if explicitly requested by the language instructor. This

seems to be in line with Schwienhorst's conclusions on his study of a synchronous online exchange between learners of German and English (2000): although encouraged to provide each other with feedback on language use, the students saw their online experience as primarily communicative, and gave therefore very little importance to grammatical correction.

All these observations seem to suggest the importance of developing *ad hoc* activities to help learners **focus on form** within the context of online collaboration. A term coined by Long to refer to the practice of "draw[ing] students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (1991: 46), focus on form can help students combine reflection and metalinguistic awareness with the effectiveness of negotiation of meaning, thus not only satisfying their desire for feedback but also encouraging them to fulfil their communicative aims more effectively (Ackerley, Dalziel and Helm 2008: 22). According to Ware and Perez Cañado (2007), a focus on language should be an integral part of online collaborative practices, as these offer the advantage of working with authentic texts: for this purpose, they suggest a series of activities that could be adopted to stimulate curiosity and metalinguistic reflection in the students. These include translation and genre transformation practices (2007: 114), direct exploration of the language produced in the online environment and - especially in contexts in which learners interact with native speakers or more expert L2 users - peer feedback on a wide range of areas of language use, "from grammatical mistakes to stylistic and usage choices" (ibid.: 117).

A practical example of form-focused activities set up by the teachers is offered by Levy and Kennedy's article (2004) on a technique called "Stimulated Reflection" that was used within a class of learners of Italian engaging in audio-conferencing sessions with classmates and Italian native speakers: drawing on

Cumming's (1993) distinction between task and reflection, seen as two separate yet complementary levels of the learning process, the authors alternated the audio-conferences – in which the learners' focus was on negotiation, effectiveness of communication and fluency – with "Stimulated Reflection" sessions, in which the teacher and the students analysed recordings of the sessions so as to "focus on accuracy and complexity of their language, and on their strategies for understanding and conveying meaning and maintaining appropriate social behaviour in a conversation" (2004: 55). The study showed that the students successfully engaged in focus-on-form work in areas of language use that were relevant to them, since the materials used for the reflection sessions were derived from their own language production.

In a more recent paper, Dalziel and Helm (2012) compiled a corpus from the contributions that Italian first-year undergraduate students of English made to online discussion forums set up in a local-area CMC environment. The learner corpus was then analysed against a reference collection of texts obtained from a comparable public discussion forum, so as to pinpoint lexical and pragmatic areas that were problematic for the English learners. On the basis of this, awareness-raising activities were implemented and carried out in class so as to encourage the students to "notice the gap" (Granger 2002: 26) between their own output and that of participants in the public online forum. As suggested by the authors, the activities stimulated the learners' motivation and language awareness, in that they provided an authentic way to engage with form-focused tasks using authentic materials that the students themselves had produced.

Within a focus-on-form pedagogy, Belz writing alone (2006; 2007a) and with Vyaktina (2005) suggested for the adoption of learner corpus analysis as a way to stimulate data-driven development of pragmatic and linguistic competence in the

foreign language. To demonstrate this, the authors showed that teachers can profit from the materials produced by the students in telecollaborative settings by using them in contrastive corpus analysis, keeping track of the learners' linguistic development over time and designing *ad hoc* pedagogic interventions that tackle misused language patterns. In their joint 2005 article, for instance, Belz and Vyatkina used contrastive learner corpus analysis to investigate the written productions of a group of German learners against the texts composed by native speakers during a nine-week telecollaboration exchange. As the analysis showed that the learners significantly underused modal particles (*ja*, *doch*, *mal*, and *denn*) in their writing, three pedagogical interventions were developed at different stages of the telecollaboration process in response to the students' emerging needs, so as to stimulate their critical reflection and awareness of L2 pragmatics. A similar form-focused approach was that adopted by Guarda (2012a) in a small case study on the pragmatic strategies used by a group of Italian learners of English in their contributions to asynchronous online discussions with American native speakers. Informed by contrastive learner corpus analysis, the author identified misused interlanguage patterns and developed pedagogic interventions to be used in the classroom to stimulate reflection on authentic language use.

Section § 2.2 has tried to describe the distinctive features of CMC, the tools that it employs, and its evolution through time in relation to foreign language education, a field in which CMC seems to have shown a great potential in terms of skills development, enhanced motivation and participation, fostered equality and higher levels of authenticity than traditional face-to-face classroom activities. The section that follows will address the role of culture in global network-based foreign language teaching, and will look at how CMC has been used to offer new

opportunities for intercultural learning. This will lead to a more exhaustive discussion of telecollaboration, its forms and the rationale behind them.

2.3 The cultural component of CMC in NBLT: paving the way to telecollaboration

As the previous section has attempted to demonstrate, most of the early research into CMC in foreign language education since the 1990s has focused on the potential benefits of online communication in enhancing task authenticity, levels of participation, equality and language production, learners' motivation and autonomy, and overall language development. Many of the descriptive reports illustrated above belong to the set of global NBLT practices which involve students from different cultural and language backgrounds participating in communicative networks (among the ones cited above, Belz and Kinginger 2002 and 2003; Cloke 2010; Cononelos and Oliva 1993; Little and Ushioda 1998; Kötter 2002; O'Rourke 1995; Sayers 1995; Tella 1991; Thorne 2003; Ware and O'Dowd 2008). What clearly represents an added value in these exchanges in comparison with local-area, classroom-based networks is the possibility to build relationships and establish meaningful dialogue across cultures and languages, with the potential of offering learners enhanced opportunities for intercultural learning. The word 'intercultural' is used here in the sense attributed by Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012), namely under a paradigm which sees different cultural groups as *interacting* and directly engaging with one another, and not as separate entities "considered independently of any form of social interaction" as is the case in what the authors define "cross-cultural communication" (2012: 17).

It is the potential of global NBLT to create opportunities for intercultural learning that inspired Kern, Ware and Warschauer (2004: 244) to define this kind of

online practice as belonging to a "second wave of online language learning", one in which the focus on culture is emphasized by the interplay of different cultures and the broader discourses at stake. In line with this, Thorne used the term "intercultural turn" to define the emergence of online intercultural practices whose goals "extend beyond, linguistic and pragmatic development of the sort that comprise the preponderant focus of most instructed L2 settings" so as to include intercultural awareness (2010: 142).

Among the plethora of global NBLT projects described in the literature, many of the early reports originated with the ambitious aims of challenging stereotypes and fostering intercultural understanding alongside language skills (among others, Cononelos and Oliva 1993; Cummins and Sayers 1995; Galloway 1995; Ham 1995; Meagher and Castaños 1996): however, as noted by Müller-Hartmann in 2000, only a minority of these studies also attempted to evaluate critically the extent to which international learning networks facilitated intercultural learning among participants from different cultures (2000: 129), a remark that was later reinforced by Belz (2002) and O'Dowd (2003 and 2006). In some cases, the lack of a thorough investigation of intercultural learning was driven by the rather superficial assumption that, as stated by Keranen and Bayyurt, the advantages of using intercultural NBLT in building cultural and social understanding were "obvious" (2006: 3), to the extent that many reported exchanges resulted in "little more than superficial pen-pals projects" (O'Dowd 2006: 89) where information about food, institutions, holidays and daily routine was exchanged without leading to any reflection or renewed awareness of one's own and the other culture. This unrealistic assumption has been challenged by many researchers in the field of NBLT (Belz 2002 and 2003a; Kern 2000; Kramsch and Thorne 2002; O'Dowd 2003 and 2006; Thorne 2003; Ware 2005), who have questioned whether and how online

intercultural communication can actually lead to real understanding, also taking into account the various social, institutional contexts and cultural approaches at stake in global NBLT.

A number of studies, in fact, have highlighted how different expectations and approaches to the purposes and mode of online communication in NBLT settings can generate communication breakdowns and misunderstanding among the participants: Kramsch and Thorne (2002), for instance, found that differing "genres of discourse", in other words sets of values that guide social and cultural use of discourse, were the cause of communication breakdown between American and French students engaging in a bilingual telecollaboration project. While the French class approached the exchange as a rational activity of information sharing, and used "factual, impersonal, dispassionate genres of writing" (2002: 98). The American students, on the other hand, saw in the telecollaboration project the possibility to engage in a social activity and build up relationships of trust. Unaware of "the larger cultural framework" (ibid.) within which they were operating, the students experienced difficulties in their interaction which negatively affected the outcomes of the exchange despite their initial goodwill and personal investment.

In a later analysis of the same online context (2003), Throne addressed the issue of conflicting expectations and online behaviours by showing how learners approaching online communication are affected by "cultures-of-use" of Internet-mediated tools, which derive from daily communicative practices. According to the author, technologies themselves are *culture*, and have therefore "variable meanings and uses for different communities" (Thorne 2007: 440) .

In the same year, Belz published an article in which she linguistically analysed an online NBLT exchange between German and American students (2003b). Inspired by Halliday's (1994) systemic functional linguistics, Belz used

appraisal theory to investigate how three participants used language in their email correspondence to show and negotiate valuations, feelings and opinions. What she found was that the two German students and the American participant had very differing styles, the former leaning more towards negative appraisal, while the former using positive appraisal in his writing. Belz identified these tendencies as linked to broader culture-specific communicative patterns - directness in the case of the German learners, indirectness for the American – which the students were not able to decipher and which led to an ever growing sense of frustration on both sides.

Further studies have also highlighted the impact of social and institutional contexts on differences in the learners' approaches and online behaviours. Belz (2002), for instance, found that differing institutional conditions in factors such as computer access, academic calendars and accreditation systems, as well as national differences in computer access and technological know-how, negatively influenced the establishment of relationships among the participants of a German-American collaboration project, thus hindering effective collaboration between the two groups. Ware (2003 and 2005), on the other hand, found that time pressures and institutional constraints had a negative impact on the way learners interacted in a German-American online project and were the cause of "missed communication" and disengagement.

What emerges from the above-mentioned reports is that intercultural learning is by no means an "automatic benefit of (…) exchanges between groups of learners in different countries" (O'Dowd 2003: 118): rather, in multicultural CMC a variety of dimensions including culture-specific communicative styles, genres of discourse and "cultures-of-use" (Thorne 2003), as well as institutional factors, come into play and affect the way learners respond to the stimuli provided by the online environment. In this light, practice in NBLT should address these issues to make

students more aware of the potentially differing styles and socio-institutional contexts that can co-occur in online partnerships, and to help them grasp the cultural value orientations that lie behind them. In Kramsch and Thorne's words (2002: 100), it is the teacher who should "prepare students to deal with global communicative practices that require far more than local communicative competence", so that participants in online intercultural communication can mediate between their own and their partners' behaviours. Similarly, but from a different angle, research on global NBLT should avoid coming to enthusiastic, yet simplistic conclusions based on the mere fact that students from different cultures and language backgrounds share information on their daily lives and traditions, since – as Wanner observes -"it takes more than just a platform to create a community" (2008: 145).

It is in line with this belief that recent research has approached the value and significance of the intercultural dimension of NBLT. As remarked by O'Dowd (2007c: 6), the first decade of the 21st century has seen an increase in publications on less anecdotal and more systematically-conducted studies into online student intercultural interaction. The attention to the intercultural dimension of NBLT has led researchers to analyse a variety of different approaches in this area, and to group them under the umbrella terms "Internet-Mediated Intercultural L2 Education - ICL2E" (Belz and Thorne 2006), "telecollaboration" (Warschauer 1996c; Belz 2003a; Helm and Guth 2010) and "Online Intercultural Exchange – OIE" (O'Dowd 2007a and 2007b; Helm, Guth and Farrah 2012). Although these terms have often been used interchangeably, in some cases their use has generated discussion as to the appropriateness of terminology: in his description of the rationale behind the choice of the term "ICL2E", for instance, Thorne (2006: 3) suggested that the word 'telecollaboration' fails to make the intercultural dimension of online collaborative practices explicit. Yet, in my view, the expression 'Internet-Mediated Intercultural

L2 Education' gives too much emphasis to the dimension of foreign language learning, while 'telecollaboration' seems to embrace a much more varied range of possible variants that go beyond the involvement of L2 learners. In recent years, in fact, telecollaboration practices have been extended to a variety of educational contexts so as to connect, for example, students in other disciplines (i.e. Communication Studies in O'Dowd 2006) and trainee teachers (Lee 2006; Dooly 2011): in this light, the use of the umbrella term 'telecollaboration' seems to me the best solution to include a variety of different practices which do not solely involve groups of L2 learners on both sides of the partnerships. For the purposes of this study, therefore, I will opt for the sole term 'telecollaboration', intended as a comprehensive expression which refers to any use of NBLT (including bilingual and monolingual exchanges, e-tandem and e-tutoring) whose aim is to develop intercultural communicative competence through interaction in a foreign language.

As has been seen in Chapter 1, most of the telecollaborative exchanges described in the literature are of the so-called bilingual type, with students interacting in both the languages involved, each of which will be the mother tongue of one of the groups. A smaller number of studies have also explored the potential of monolingual projects and of exchanges which involve the use of a lingua franca. As a brief overview of the three kinds of exchanges has already been presented in Chapter 1, the following paragraphs will expand upon it by providing further examples of how bilingual, monolingual and lingua franca telecollaboration projects have been implemented over the past few years.

Among the group of bilingual exchanges, an interesting form of telecollaborative partnerships is the one which involves more than two cultures in practices that Helm and Guth call "multilateral" (2010: 15): an example for this is the *Tridem* project described in Hauck (2007) and Hauck and Lewis (2007), in which

French learners from the UK and the USA interacted with French native speakers to complete a series of collaborative tasks which involved the use of both languages and the exploration of a variety of cultures.

A further interesting set of bilingual practices is represented by tandem partnerships, also called e-tandem: as has been outlined in section § 2.2.4, tandem exchanges connect dyads of distant learners – each learning the other's native language - and offer them the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue to widen their linguistic skills. Although much of the research on e-tandem (Brammerts 1996; Kötter 2002; Little and Ushioda 1998; O'Rourke 2005; Schwienhorst 2003, Ushioda 2000) has highlighted its potential benefits on learner autonomy and reciprocity in relation to L2 learning, this form of bilingual telecollaboration has great potential in helping participants access a variety of cultural dimensions through interaction. With this aim, for instance, the Language Centre of the University of Padova in collaboration with the Boston University Program in Padova has recently launched a six-week e-tandem project[14] involving future incoming exchange students from the American institution and students at the University of Padova interested in improving their language skills and increasing their cultural knowledge. Besides these goals, the project also aims at providing students with an opportunity to socialize online, with the further chance to meet in person once the American students arrive in Padova for a short study-abroad period. Participants in the project interact through emails, video-conferencing systems, social networks and forums, and are asked to keep a weekly diary which should help them reflect on their learning process. The exchange leaves participants ample space to decide when to meet online and which topics to talk about, thus offering an opportunity for autonomous and teacher-independent learning. Although no studies have explored the outcomes of this project yet, the way

[14] http://www.cla.unipd.it/cetest-firstpage/autoapprendimento/tandem-learning/en-e-tandem/

it is organized and the positive feedback that it received from the participants seem to suggest that this kind of pre-mobility partnerships has a great potential for both intercultural and language learning.

An interesting implementation of the monolingual type of telecollaborative partnerships is represented by e-tutoring exchanges (Blake and Zynik 2003; Thorne 2008b; Ware and O'Dowd 2008), in which one group of participants offers linguistic support in their native tongue to a group of learners of that language, in a context that can also potentially stimulate the exploration of cultures. A particular example of e-tutoring that blends language and culture learning is offered by King (2010) in a paper which describes a telecollaboration project involving teenage school pupils from three different schools in the UK and volunteer university students. While the school pupils were learning either Russian, German and Spanish as a foreign language, the university students were native speakers of the languages (in the case of Spanish and German) or more advanced learners (in the case of Russian). Although the project primarily aimed to stimulate the youngest participants' motivation in using a foreign language and at fostering language development, intercultural competence was soon fostered by the nature of the interactions taking place between the students in the virtual learning environment chosen for the activities. Each school pupil was paired with a university student, who helped the younger peer by providing support with the language as well as sharing cultural and personal information. According to the author, a distinctive feature of this exchange - which positively affected its outcomes in terms of motivation and language/culture learning – was the peculiar role played by the university students: occupying "an interesting position between student and teacher" (2010: 448), the tutors were able to use their "near-peer" relationship to engage the pupils and motivate them in several ways.

Among *lingua franca* exchanges, the Soliya Connect Program[15] has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners over the past few years: developed and run by the NGO Soliya, this telecollaboration project involves university students from more than 90 institutions worldwide and aims to foster constructive dialogue, knowledge and understanding across cultural and religious divides, and with particular attention to the relationships between the 'West' and the 'Arab and Muslim world'. The interaction among participants takes place in small groups of 9-10 people by means of a specifically-designed videoconferencing platform (Figure 1). All communication is in English, although knowledge of Arabic is welcomed given the primary aim of the project, namely that of building virtual bridges of knowledge between people from the Middle East and the so-called 'Western world'. The topics of the online discussion sessions include culture, religion, social relationships and conflict. Although the project is primarily designed for students in International Relations, Conflict Resolution and Political Sciences, several foreign language instructors have integrated it into their EFL curriculum or have proposed it as an optional learning activity for students in a variety of different disciplines, including Foreign Languages and Computer Sciences. Consequently, a few studies have recently appeared that report on the way the Soliya Connect Program can foster both foreign language development and intercultural awareness through authentic exposure to and interaction with a variety of different cultures in a highly stimulating context in which English is used as a *lingua franca* (Genet 2010; Guarda forthcoming; Guarda, Guth and Helm 2011; Helm, Guth and Farrah 2012).

[15] http://www.soliya.net/?q=what_we_do_connect_program

Figure 1. The Connect Program interface

2.3.1 The role of the teacher in telecollaboration

As remarked by O'Dowd (2007c: 8-9), teachers embarking on telecollaboration projects are often unsure of the role they should occupy in online exchanges and to what extent they should intervene in their students' written or spoken correspondence. Some instructors might opt to get involved significantly in the discussions so as to guide and motivate the learners, while others may give the learners more freedom and independence to manage their interaction. A similar ambivalent approach to the role of the teacher can be found in the research literature. Some studies, especially in the early research phase, have emphasised the benefits of online communication networks on students' autonomy and reciprocity, and have therefore suggested that the role of the teacher become that of "guide on the side" (Tella 1996: 6), in other words a "consultant and co-learner" (ibid.) who assists his/her students almost at a distance, empowering them to take control of the activities and learning process as discoverers, collaborators and team builders. Certainly, the role of teachers in telecollaborative practices differs from that which

they occupy in more traditional classroom settings: no longer responsible for imparting knowledge, in online intercultural exchanges instructors indeed function in a variety of new roles, from the designer of online activities to the "coach, guide, mentor and facilitator" (Kelm 1996: 27).

Yet, this is not the whole story: other researchers in the field of telecollaboration have argued for a more complex role of the teacher (Belz and Müller-Hartmann 2003; Furstenberg and Levet 2010; Kramsch and Thorne 2002; O'Dowd 2007c; Thorne 2010), one in which instructors are not solely guides but critical mediators (Thorne 2007: 428) of the intercultural encounters that learners experience online. If learners are to become "intercultural speakers" (Byram 1997), in other words be capable of mediating between different cultures and perspectives, the teacher's support in negotiating meaning is essential: in this light, it is the teacher who should "push students further" (Furstenberg and Levet 2010: 333) when they tend to oversimplify or interpret aspects of the other cultures without looking at them from a critical standpoint.

Given the nature of computer-mediated communication and the risks that different expectations, "genres of discourse" (Kramsch and Thorne 2002) and "cultures-of-use" (Thorne 2003) may generate in online collaborative environments, it is up to the teacher to be able to "discern, identify, explain, and model culturally-contingent patterns of interaction" (Belz 2003b: 92) so as to limit disengagement and frustration. As, however, disagreement, miscommunication and even conflict may still arise in discussions involving people from different cultural backgrounds (Schneider and von der Emde 2006; Helm, Guth and Farrah 2012), students should be made aware that tensions can indeed be "a valuable resource for intercultural learning" (Schneider and von der Emde 2006: 178). Rather than recommending learners to try to avoid open conflict, therefore, teachers should help them find

common tools and rules for communication to deal with tensions in a constructive way and to create an environment of trust and openness within the group.

To sum up, the role of the teacher in telecollaborative settings requires a complex set of skills, knowledge and sensitivity: put another way, instructors embarking on intercultural online projects should be intercultural speakers themselves, so as to guide their students towards more critical and constructive ways of engaging with the 'other'. Even more so than in off-line classroom contexts, therefore, the teacher's role in telecollaboration should not be "to 'teach culture' in the traditional sense but to help students bring patterns to light and gradually put together the culture puzzle - in other words, to teach the students to ask the right questions themselves and to facilitate the experience of self-learning" (Furstenberg 2010: 330-331).

2.4 Socioconstructivism and CMC

As has been seen above in the description of the potential benefits of CMC and NBLT, online technologies empower learners to take control of their learning process through the participation in authentic discourse communities in which negotiation of meaning and of language forms – if adequately stimulated – can foster collaborative construction of knowledge.

In this light, computer-mediated collaborative practices have often been seen as mirroring a socioconstructivist approach to online learning (Alavi and Dufner 2004; Dooly 2010; Helm and Guth 2010; Kern, Ware and Warschauer 2008; O'Dowd 2006; Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen 1998): rooted in the writings of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), socioconstructivism assumes that learning is a social process that originates from interaction with other individuals within the same community. This approach can be seen as combining the constructivist notion

that "individuals learn better when they develop meaning through direct interaction with information rather than when they are told the information" (Alavi and Dufner 2004: 192) with Vygotsky's idea that learning occurs through the interaction with others. In this sense, therefore, socioconstructivism emphasizes the role of the social environment in fostering direct discovery and negotiation of information with others. This perspective also reconceptualises the role of the teacher (Dooly 2010: 280): already having the cultural tools that are needed in a certain context, the teacher is seen as a mediator who helps the learner develop and acquire new psychological functions and abilities. The concept of mediated internalization is better illustrated by the notion of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), which is defined by Vygotsky as

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978: 86).

As Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen suggest (1998: 27), the ZPD implies the idea that "what the learner can do with the adult [or more capable peer] today, he or she will be able to do on his own tomorrow", and that this process should be seen within a state of continuous evolution towards higher levels of development. In addition, the ZPD highlights the crucial role of dialogue in the learning process, one in which "tutor and learner are engaged in an exchange which aims at creating a consensus regarding, among other things, the goal-structure of the problem at hand and the actions most apposite to the problem's solution" (Cheyne and Tarulli np, in Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen 1998: 29).

Although Vygotsky did not write in the era of computers and online technologies, his theories seem to apply to CMC as well: with their emphasis on collaborative, learner-centred social practices, CMC and telecollaboration in particular can be seen as a pedagogical application of the socioconstructivist approach, with which they share important features (Dooly 2010: 280) including the role of teacher as mediator and "agent of change"; the importance of the learning community in the construction of knowledge; and the empowerment of the learner, who is now "responsible for his/her own learning process".

As already suggested in the discussion of Web 2.0 tools, it is important to note that the socioconstructivist nature of telecollaboration does not simply lie in the availability of new Internet-based tools through which learners can connect with wider discourse communities beyond the traditional classroom: recalling a personal email correspondence with one colleague, Dooly highlights that, in Web 2.0 communication, it is "the new way of approaching social interaction online and knowledge access/construction online" that have contributed to put socioconstructivist theories into practice (2010: 277).

2.5 (Online) Communities of Practice

The social aspect of learning that is at the core of socioconstructivist approaches to learning also emerges from the notion of Communities of Practice as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). As Wenger suggests (1998: 8), learning is an inevitable and integral aspect of everyday life, and people naturally belong to several Communities of Practice – in the family, at work, at school, in their hobbies – at any given time. Communities of Practice, therefore, are natural sites for collaborative learning and construction of knowledge, in which people come together

around mutual engagement "in a shared domain of human endeavor" (Wenger 2006. np).

In Lave and Wenger's view (1991), a Community of Practice is a group of people who share a common interest and collaborate together, learning from each other and contributing to the community they belong to. In doing so, members of a CoP engage in joint activities and discussions, negotiating meanings and experiences, and build relationships that favour the learning process (Wenger 2006: np). Wenger (ibid.) also distinguishes a CoP from mere communities of interest, in other words groups of people who simply share a common passion: what defines members of a CoP is that they are practitioners, who develop and co-construct shared repertoires of behaviour through extended joint practice over time.

The process of developing as a member of a CoP resembles in many ways the process of learning illustrated by the concept of ZPD: becoming a core member of a CoP requires learning, which takes place through interaction with other members. What is interesting in the notion of CoP is that every member, including more experienced peers, is involved in the learning process, so that learning is not limited to novices only (Wenger 2006: np). In this sense, a CoP is a dynamic and dialogic site for collaborative and reciprocal learning, and can be therefore seen as part of a social approach to learning, in which "identity, practice, community, learning and meaning are all interconnected" (Clarke 2008: 35).

In a CoP, the fundamental role played by the social component of learning is best illustrated in the three dimensions defined by Wenger (1998: 73-85), namely mutual engagement, joint negotiated enterprise, and shared repertoire of negotiable resources. The first dimension, mutual engagement, involves regular participation in the CoP so as to build relationships that can sustain the community. Joint enterprise refers to the processes of negotiated practices that underpin the development of the

CoP: according to Wenger (1998: 82), an enterprise is a "resource of coordination, of sense-making, of mutual engagement" – something that can be compared to the role of rhythm in music. A joint enterprise, therefore, has to be seen as a process which "pushes the practice forward" while at the same time monitoring it. Finally, shared repertoire, as anticipated above, relates to the set of "resources for negotiating meaning" (1998: 82) that the CoP creates over time through joint practice. These include linguistic resources, specialized terminology, gestures and rules of behaviour that have become part of the practices of the community.

With the advent of the Web and online technologies that "facilitate the convergence of content and networks of people" (Wenger, White and Smith 2009: xi), the "social nature of the Internet has been greatly expanded by the many new ways to publish, interact, express individual identity, and form groups" (ibid. 17). From this perspective, thanks to the computer and the Internet, Communities of Practice can now be built independently from geographic location and time difference. As Wenger remarks (2001), however, the risk of generalizations on the nature of a CoP is higher in today's digital era, since the availability of space- and time-independent spaces for communication and sharing can lead to the tendency of calling a 'community' every group that shares an interest on a blog, forum or social network. Yet, as has been outlined above, Communities of Practice are a specific kind of community which – irrespective of the tools used for interaction - are grounded in the notions of mutual engagement, joint practice and shared repertoires negotiated over time.

In digital environments, Communities of Practice - often called Virtual or Online Communities of Practice (Clarke 2009; Dooly 2011; Wong, Kwan and Leung 2001) - can take advantage of the plethora of multiple channels and forms of communication: emails, videoconferencing systems, forums, wikis and virtual worlds

now allow for collaborative brainstorming and problem-solving, exchange of ideas and application sharing in a way that fosters the development of shared enterprises and repertories (Wenger 2001). Through the Internet and Web 2.0 tools, a CoP can also have access to a wider range of information in the broader world, which can positively stimulate the community's practice towards higher levels of practice and development.

In institutionalized settings, it is often hoped that students engaging in online communication build their own Community of Practice through mutual engagement and collaborative learning, so as to benefit more fully from the learning environment that they themselves have created. In their joint paper, for instance, Wong, Kwan and Leung (2001) described a research project in which two groups of students attending a course on information technology were asked to use Facebook to complete given tasks. The aim of the project was to see whether and in which way the social network was used to promote and maintain a virtual Community of Practice. Although no findings are presented in the paper, the authors' description of the project is an interesting attempt to shed some light on the way highly popular tools such as Facebook can support learning approaches through online CoPs. The study presented by Dooly in 2011, on the other hand, was conducted on a telecollaboration exchange between trainee teachers in Spain and in the USA, in which Moodle (a social learning network), Voicethread (an online video collaboration tool) and Second Life were used for communication. Besides promoting critical thinking and knowledge sharing, the goals of the exchange included the creation of a virtual CoP that could become relevant to the trainee teachers' professional lives. The analysis of the participants' transcripts, online posts and final feedback highlighted that, over the course of the project, the trainee teachers had experienced feeling part of a learning community: despite some

uncomfortable moments and misunderstandings and the difficulties encountered in using some of the online tools at hand, the participants were able to "engage in the shared repertoire of a community of practice of experienced teachers, displaying more 'experienced practitioner' knowledge, tools, resources and ways of addressing problems than when the exchange had begun" (2011: 323).

The notion of Online Community of Practice (OCoP) is of relevance to the study presented in this thesis, in that the analysis of shared spaces and identity positions (Chapter 7) will attempt to define whether the students participating in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' telecollaboration exchange felt part of a Community of Practice and adopted shared repertoires to engage with it. Following Seildhofer's (2009: 238) and Jenkins' (2009) view that ELF plays an important role in fostering the creation of Communities of Practice with a "common communicative purpose" (Jenkins 2009: 211), the investigation proposed in this study will try to identify whether and how English, the *lingua franca* of the project, contributed to the emergence of a feeling of membership and mutual engagement in shared practices within the students' community.

2.6 Summary

In this Chapter, I tried to give a general outline of the features that distinguish CMC from face-to-face interaction (section 2.2). In doing so, I also described some of the tools - from emails and forums to the new opportunities offered thanks to the Web 2.0 revolution - that make CMC possible regardless of geographic location and time difference.

In order to gain greater insight into the role of CMC in foreign language education, in section § 2.2. I presented a brief literature review of research into the way computer-based activities have been integrated into teaching practices since the

1960s: this led to a description of CALL practices and, in particular, of NBLT and the potential benefits that this offers in terms of learner autonomy, motivation, equality, participation and overall language development.

In this context, telecollaboration was described as one of the forms of global NBLT whose main goals are fostering language skills, enhancing new online literacies and stimulating intercultural communicative competence. Besides providing some examples of bilingual, monolingual and *lingua franca* exchanges, I tried to define the challenging role of the teacher in telecollaborative partnerships, in other words in situations in which learners need not only a guide and consultant but also an interculturally-competent mediator that can help them engage with different worldviews, approaches and values in a critical, yet constructive way.

Finally, section § 2.4 of this Chapter tried to outline the socioconstructivist approach that would appear to underpin telecollaborative practices, and which emphasises the central role of collaboration, co-construction of knowledge and social relationships in the learning process. These values are also mirrored in the notion of Community of Practice (CoP), intended as a group of people who concur to build knowledge and negotiate meaning, both in off-line and on-line environments (§ 2.5).

While the previous sections only briefly touched on the role of culture in telecollaborative practices, the following Chapter will be entirely dedicated to the exploration of the cultural component of foreign language learning, in an effort to describe intercultural communicative competence as one of the main goals at the core of modern language teaching.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND THIRD SPACE

3.1 Introduction

The main aim of this Chapter is to outline the role played by the cultural component in the teaching and learning of a foreign language, and to define the set of skills and competences that L2 learners should develop and activate when approaching a different culture using a foreign language. In order to do so, in section § 3.2 I will first briefly outline the complex and multifaceted relationship between language and culture, and then proceed to a description of how this has been dealt with in L2 education over the past five decades. In particular, emphasis will be placed on the problematic tendency – which emerged in the 1970s - to associate the teaching of the foreign language with the acquisition of the sociocultural norms of its native speakers (NS), as well as on the criticism that has challenged this dominant view by proposing a more realistic model, namely that of the "intercultural speaker" (Byram 1997; Byam and Zarate 1994; Kramsch 1993).

In the same section, the issue of the NS' authority over language and sociocultural norms will be also approached from the perspective of *lingua franca* communication, in an effort to describe the main ideas that have underpinned research in the field of ELF and its concerns about the linguistic and cultural norms at play in groups interacting using a "contact language" (Firth 1996).

Section § 3.3 will represent the core of this second Chapter: all the concepts and ideas presented above will converge into a description of Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997), intended as an approach to L2 teaching which gives importance to the cultural component of the learning process while at the same time rejecting NS supremacy over the appropriateness of sociocultural and linguistic behaviours. Drawing on previous research (Dooly 2011; Helm and Guth 2010; O'Dowd 2003), the section will also look at the main reasons why Byram's model has been widely accepted as an effective approach to a description of the competences that learners should develop when dealing with intercultural communication. Despite its widely recognized merits, however, Byram's ICC model also presents some limitations: section § 3.3, will therefore also attempt to describe why ICC as outlined by Byram fails to embrace the complexity of intercultural learning in an increasingly globalized and digitalized world, while the section that follows (§ 3.4) will provide an overview of how the concept of ICC was adapted to the specific context from which my study originates.

In the realm of research on intercultural communication, an interesting role has been played by the notion of shared spaces among people interacting in multicultural groups. Section § 3.5 will try to sum up some of the most influential ideas underpinning the notion of 'third space/third place', intended as a negotiated and fluid site which originates in the interstices of the cultures involved in the instances of interaction (Kramsch 1993), and in which identities and values are re-imagined and co-constructed within the community of interlocutors. In the description of third space, a distinction will be made between shared spaces in foreign language education – in both off-line and on-line contexts – and in broader contexts in which a *lingua franca* is used.

Finally, the Chapter will conclude by highlighting the relevance of both ICC and third space to the study proposed in this thesis, and the way the two concepts may intertwine in a relationship of mutual dependence.

3.2 Language and culture

Over the years, the relationship between language and culture has been central to many different fields of enquiry, including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and foreign language teaching: far from aiming to provide an exhaustive picture of the debate around language and culture, the following paragraphs will sum up some of the ideas that have tackled this relationship and have influenced theories and approaches in a variety of areas or research.

As suggested by Hua (2012: 2), the centrality of the relationship between language and culture can be traced back to the pioneering work of anthropologist Franz Boas (1940), who saw in communication the core of each culture, and in language, the key to accessing the values and beliefs of a community. This concept was later reinforced by Edward Hall, who summarized the complementary two-way relationship of culture and communication in the famous statement "culture is communication and communication is culture" (1959: 191). The work of anthropologist Goodenough also aimed to explore the role of language in transmitting ideas and values of a society, and his research helped to reinforce the idea that the language of a community nourishes and expresses its culture, insomuch as the "relation of language to culture, then, is that of part to whole" (1964: 8).

Among other scholars in the field of sociology, Berger and Luckmann posited for similar conclusions, suggesting that language had be seen as "the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations" (1966: 35). In their

view, mastering a language meant gaining access to the "collective stock of knowledge" (ibid.: 64) of that community.

In linguistics, one of the most frequently cited hypotheses in the debate on the relationship between culture and language is the so-called "linguistic relativity" hypothesis originating from the work of Benjamin Whorf (1959) and his mentor Edward Sapir (1929). According to this hypothesis, language and thought are in a relationship of influence, so that, for instance, people perceive and understand the world because the language system of their community "predisposes certain choices of interpretation" (Sapir 1929: 69). Although the hypothesis does not directly mention the cultural dimension of language and its effects on thought, many researcher have highlighted the complex relationship between language, thought and culture. Halliday, for instance, defined culture as an "infinitely complex network of meaning potential" (1978: 5) that helps people make sense of the world. From this perspective, language is to be seen as a "systemic resource of meaning" (Halliday 1985: 192) that allows for both establishing and transmitting values and knowledge within a society. Similar observations can be derived from Samovar, Porter and Jain's claim that culture is inseparable from communication, since it helps to "determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted" (1981: 24). In this sense, familiarity with a cultural system gives access to the meanings of utterances produced within that culture in a similar way that knowledge of the language can help understand the cultural values that underpin its use.

In order to interpret the language used by a given community, Hymes (1962; 1964; 1989) proposed adopting an ethnographic approach to the study of language in context: rejecting the Chomskian view of the universality of grammar (1965), Hymes

advocated an "ethnography of speaking" which could unveil the relative and arbitrary nature of language through the investigation of the social sets of values, knowledge and meanings of the community in which that language was spoken. A similar approach was proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2001) as well as Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012): drawing on the idea that language is ambiguous and relative by nature, and is therefore one major source of difficulties in intercultural/interdiscourse communication, the authors emphasised the fact that knowledge of the cultural, personal and discourse background of one's interlocutor will help to "make fewer wrong inferences about what the other means" (Scollon, Scollon and Jones 2012: 16). They therefore suggested the importance of understanding the contexts in which language is used – which they defined "grammar of context" – so as to contextualize utterances within a framework of reference.

Scholars working in applied linguistics and second language acquisition have also addressed the fascinating issue of the relationship between language and culture. The most comprehensive description in this sense is provided by Kramsch, according to whom (1998a: 3, italics in the original):

> [L]anguage is the principal means by which we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. To begin with, the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Words also affect their authors' attitudes and beliefs, their point of view, that are also those of others. In both cases, *language expresses cultural reality*. But members of a community or social group do not only express experience; they also create experience through language.

> (…) Through all its verbal and non-verbal aspects, *language embodies cultural reality*. Finally, language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity. (…) Thus we can say that *language symbolizes cultural reality*.

The three functions of language – expressing, embodying and symbolizing cultural reality – seem to encompass all the definitions and approaches listed above: language is shaped by culture and at the same time concurs to shape and convey the way the members of a social group interpret and construct reality, thus influencing the nature of knowledge of that community and providing a framework to decode the meanings expressed by words. Acknowledging the importance of culture as a component of language, and of language as a guide to understand cultural reality, opens up new fascinating ways to approach the teaching and learning of a foreign language, seen not only as a set of grammar norms, but also as the key to entering the cultural, social and linguistic world of the 'other'. But how have foreign language teaching (FLT) practices incorporated the cultural dimension of language? The following subsections will attempt to briefly sketch some of the approaches and trends that have had an impact on teachers' practices over time.

3.2.1 Language and culture in foreign language education

In the context of foreign language teaching, the link between language and culture was somehow neglected until the 1980s, so that the exploration of culture as a way to grasp the values and worldviews of a social group as expressed and constructed through its language was, at best, relegated to the very background of teaching practices. In his overview of the developing role of culture in FLT (2006: 13),

O'Dowd remarks that, until recently, the teaching of culture was merely seen as the imparting of knowledge about facts and figures about a country's history, geography, political situation and high-culture works of literature and arts. Best known as 'Landeskunde', this approach permeated the FLT scene before and after the post-war era despite the growing efforts from a variety of disciplines, in particular sociology and anthropology, to suggest the importance of a renewed awareness of the relationship between language and culture.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of a methodology which emphasized the role of the sociocultural component in first language acquisition and use (Hymes 1972) as well as in foreign language teaching (Canale and Swain 1980; van Ek 1986). Challenging Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence (1959) – seen as innate and free of any sociocultural dimension - these approaches introduced the concept of "communicative competence" to refer to the ability to use language in a way that is appropriate to the sociocultural contexts in which communication takes place. From the perspective of first language acquisition, Hymes (1972) described competence in the language as interdependent with sociocultural aspects of the community in which an individual grows up in. In his words, a child "acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate" to the sociocultural contexts he lives in, and becomes therefore able to "accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others" within those situations (1972: 60).

More specifically for the FLT field, Canale and Swain (1980) in North America and van Ek (1986) working for the Council of Europe transformed the concept of communicative competence into two methodological frameworks which aimed at offering a comprehensive view of the importance of both language skills and sociocultural context in the overall development of the learner's personality. The

framework proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) has had a great impact on the design of classroom practices especially in the USA (Alptekin 2002: 57). The model comprises four competencies, namely *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, *discourse* and *strategic* competence. The former involves knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language, in terms of "morphology, syntax, sentence grammar semantics and phonology" (1980: 29), and the ability to produce words and sentences according to these rules. Sociolinguistic competence involves the ability to understand the social contexts in which the language user operates, and to deal with social constructs such as rules of behaviour, norms and values associated to the language use. Added by Canale in 1983, discourse competence refers to the ability to produce coherent and cohesive texts. Finally, strategic competence comprises the "verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (1980: 29).

van Ek's model of "communicative ability" involves a slightly more complex range of competencies, which he defines as different, yet complementary facets of the same thing (1986: 36) to be treated as interrelated and not as discrete and independent dimensions. *Linguistic competence*, in his words, is "the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances" in accordance with the rules defined by native speakers of a given language (ibid.: 39). *Sociolinguistic competence* is defined in the framework as "the awareness of ways in which the choice of language forms (…) is determined by such conditions as setting, relationship between communication partners, communicative intention etc. etc." (ibid.: 41). Appropriateness of use of linguistic forms falls into sociolinguistic competence, while the use of appropriate strategies to allow for the construction and interpretation of texts is seen as part of a broader *discourse competence* (ibid.: 47). *Strategic*

competence is described in this model as the ability to use communication strategies such as repair, request for clarification and comprehension check, to compensate for linguistic and sociolinguist gaps (ibid.: 55). *Socio-cultural competence* refers to the use of forms that are appropriate in the sociocultural context of the foreign language, and which may differ from that of the learner (ibid.: 59). The last component of the model, namely *social competence*, involves "both the will and the skill to interact with others" (ibid.: 65) and therefore relates to the set of attitudes and feelings which reside in the learners' personalities and affect they way they approach social situations.

The frameworks developed by Canale and Swain (1980) and van Ek (1986) certainly have the merit of reflecting "the view that linguistic performance depends on more than linguistic knowledge" (Little 2006: 175), thus emphasizing the sociocultural component of language learning. Despite the positive contribution that they offered to FLT practices, however, both models have also received some criticism for failing to fully grasp the importance of exploring the values and mindsets of the culture associated to a given language. Drawing on Byram and Esarte-Sarries (1991), for instance, Sercu notes that the aim of the communicative approach that underpins both frameworks, rather then seeking to foster real intercultural understanding and awareness, still remains that of achieving native-like linguistic appropriateness so as to avoid linguistic and non-verbal cultural errors (2000: 29).

Furthermore, and even more importantly, both frameworks have been seen as perpetuating the idea that the native speaker (NS) is the element "crucial to the success of the teaching model" (Alptekin 2002: 58). This is exemplified, for instance, by the continuous emphasis on that fact that foreign language learners should behave linguistically "in accordance with the rules of the language concerned and bear their

conventional meaning" (van Ek 1986: 39). From this perspective, the learner is not only expected to gain full mastery of target language forms, but also to become familiar with the native speaker's linguistic and sociocultural values and practices, whose fundamental role remains unquestioned (Kramsch 2002).

3.2.2 Challenging the Native Speaker model

In the years that followed the publication of Canale and Swain's and van Ek's models, researchers and practitioners have argued for a very different approach, which questioned the 'power' and authority of the NS in imposing rules concerning linguistic and sociolinguistic competences. Following Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993; 1998b), the emphasis on NS norms can be objected to from a variety of different, yet complementary standpoints: firstly, the notion of the NS is problematic, in that it does not clarify who the native speaker is, especially in highly multicultural and multilingual societies. Kramsch illustrates this point by remarking that "recent historical developments have made it more difficult to ascertain who is and who is not a native speaker" (1998b: 23): in the case of English, for instance, Kramsch observes that its emergence as an international language, together with the effects of colonization and migration, has helped to detach it from Anglo-Saxon practices, thus "disassociat[ing] native speakership of English from its traditional geographic locations" (ibid.). As a result of "an increased diversification in language use among native speakers" (ibid.: 24), native varieties of English now include the English used in Singapore, Nigeria and South Africa, "where syntax an vocabulary can sometimes vary considerably from so-called standard English" (ibid.). Authentic uses of the language, therefore, challenge the traditional assumption that attributes native speakership only to those people born or educated within the realm of standardized linguistic forms, thus problematising the whole concept of the native speaker's

"ownership" of the language (Widdowson 1994). This raises the question of which social variety should be taken as the model of language teaching (Kramsch 1998b: 25), which in turns makes the contours of '*the* native speaker' more blurred and in need of reconsideration.

A further reason why a NS model for language teaching is problematic is that it represents an "impossible target" for foreign language learners, as it fails to acknowledge "the different conditions under which learners and native speakers learn and acquire a language" (Byram 1997: 11). The insistence on setting the goal of reaching NS language proficiency, therefore, can be "intimidating" for non-native speakers (Kramsch 1993: 9), as this may risk turning learners into 'failed' examples of missed opportunities, who are defined more "in terms of what they are *not*, or at least *not yet*" (Kramsch 1998b: 28) than of what they have already achieved.

Third, such a view implies "that a learner should be linguistically [and, I would add, culturally] schizophrenic, abandoning one language in order to blend into another linguistic environment" (Byram 1997: 11) so as to behave according to specific external – in the sense of not originating from one's own system – norms. "This schizophrenia", Byram further suggests, "also suggests separation from one's own culture and the acquisition of a native sociocultural competence, and a new sociocultural identity". The same criticism is offered by Alptekin in a more recent article, in which he critically remarks how the NS model inevitably turns foreign language learning into a sort of "enculturation", in other words a process in which learners acquire "new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language" (2002: 58) and, I would add, ignoring those from which the learners themselves come from.

This remark leads to a further point of criticism of the models of communicative competence illustrated above: failing to take into account the

learner's cultural and linguistic background, the potential that this offers in the construction of a shared space between the cultures involved in the interaction – a 'third space' in which meanings and identities are negotiated, and in which collaborative learning is stimulated - is completely lost. Without any chance to bring in their own worldviews and cultural frames, learners seem to be deprived of their own voice, while they have to take on that of the other. In this light, therefore, adopting and adapting *in toto* and *a priori* to another's linguistic and cultural "reference frame" (van Ek 1986: 35) to be accepted as worthy member of the NS community is not only impossible and constrictive but also damaging.

The focus on the danger of setting the NS standard as the model for foreign language teaching was also what prompted scholars such as Phillipson (1992), Prodromou (1998) and Christensen (1993) to argue that, especially in the case of English, such a view would promote and reinforce existing hegemonic relationships by spreading the culture and language of dominant groups. Christensen (1993), for instance, proposed an approach to FLT that promotes the teaching of language solely as a linguistic system emptied of any native sociocultural references: in his view, FLT should provide learners with a methodology and the skills necessary to approach other meanings and worldviews in any potential social encounter, so as to value the cultural capital of each interlocutor.

To fill the gaps of the communicative approaches proposed by van Ek and Canale and Swain, Kramsch (1993; 1998b) and Byram writing alone (1997) as well as with Zarate (1994) and Fleming (1998a), postulated for a new model, that of the intercultural speaker, in other words someone who is able to "understand different modes of thinking and living, as they are embodied in the language to be learnt, and to reconcile or mediate between different modes present in any specific interaction" (Byram and Fleming 1998c: 12), yet without striving to acquire native-like

sociocultural and linguistic identities. Paraphrasing the Byram and Fleming (1998b: 6), this implies that foreign language learning should lead to an increased understanding of both the society and culture of the native speakers, and of the learner's own society and culture, placing particular emphasis on the relationships between the two. In this light, setting the intercultural speaker as the new target of foreign language education would mean to empower learners to use the foreign language maintaining their own sociocultural identities, so as to become active mediators, rather than imitators of NS linguistic and cultural norms, in social interactions. Becoming an intercultural speaker means therefore being able to question one's own – often taken for granted - assumptions and values, show openness and curiosity towards the other culture, and take a critical stance in relation to both. Put another way, an intercultural speaker is someone who is able to display intercultural communicative competence while approaching the 'other'.

3.2.3 Native Speaker authority and English as a Lingua Franca

The problematic issue of NS authority over language and sociocultural norms is felt to be particularly true in the case of English when one looks at its global use as a *lingua franca*. Although the debate among scholars has recently focused on whether ELF should be rather seen as an alternative way to use English (Seildhofer 2011), a "language use mode" (Kecskes 2007) or a "mode of communication" originating from different varieties of English (Cogo 2008), the emerging view of ELF considers it as a language variety in its own right with its own formal lexicogrammatical, phonologic and syntactic features (Alptekin 2012).

In terms of its linguistic forms, research on ELF communication has radically challenged the centrality of the native speaker by suggesting that effective ELF intercultural interactions "are not dependent on adherence to native-speaker

norms but on the result of on-line negotiations of meanings between speakers" (Hülmbauer, Böhringer and Seidlhofer 2008: 25). In this light, ELF is defined on the basis of its functional effectiveness since ELF speakers are empowered to appropriate and shape the language "for their own purposes without any over-deference to native-speakers norms" (ibid.: 27). Their use of the language, therefore, would appear to unveil an emerging belief among ELF users, namely that "English now represents the language of the 'world at large'" (Dörney, Csizér and Németh 2006: 110) rather than the code used by a well-defined community. This apparently explains why, in ELF interactions, idiomatic expressions and semi-preconstructed phrases that derive from NS forms are often perceived as problematic by non-native speakers (Prodromou 2008), something that Seildhofer calls "unilateral idiomaticity" (2004: 220).

The fact that English is used internationally has even led some scholars to claim that native speakers no longer have the authority to express judgments or intervene in lingua franca interactions (Widdowson 1994), in that these have "ceased to be the only 'true repository' of the language" (Jenkins 2009: 209). This constitutes a clear challenge to the centrality of the native speaker that emerges, for instance, from Kachru's (1985) highly influential categorization of English use into three circles (Figure 2): in the model, the Inner Circle represents those countries where English is spoken as the primary language - e.g. the USA and the UK - and therefore includes English varieties that have historically been seen as providing the norms for appropriate language use. The Outer Circle, on the other hand, includes societies in which English is used in a wide range of domains and at different levels of society, from education to administration, both as intranational and international linguistic code: in this light, the Outer Circle includes countries such as Nigeria, Singapore and Hong Kong. Finally, according to Kachru's model, the Expanding Circle

encompasses all those areas in which English is regarded as a foreign language, thus including countries such as Italy, Saudi Arabia, China, Israel and Brazil.

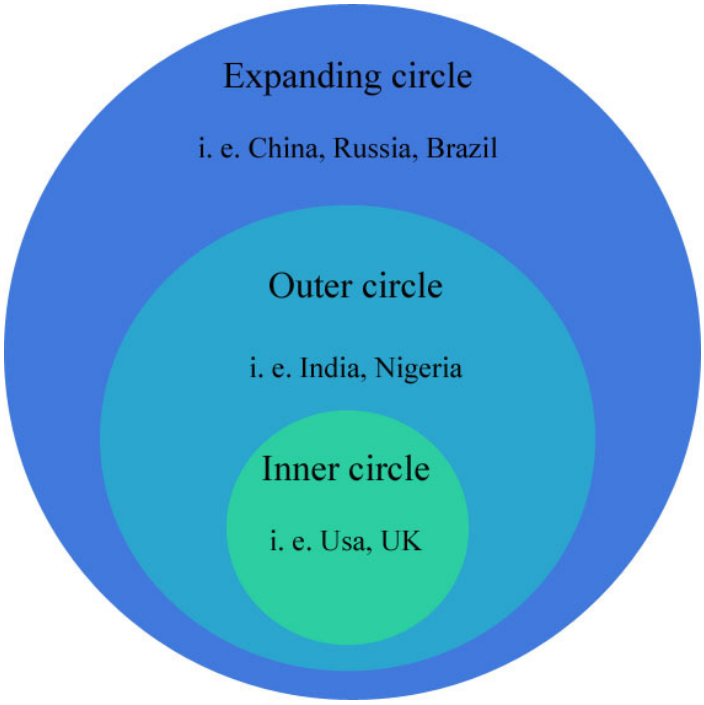


Figure 2. Kachru's three-circle model (1985)

English in the Expanding Circle is claimed to be dependent on the norms imposed by the Inner Circle and developed by the varieties of the Outer Circle: yet, given the increasing number of non-native speakers and the growing non-conformity of ELF uses to NS norms (Hülmbauer, Böhringer and Seidlhofer 2008: 27-28), the idea that emerges from Kachru's model appears inaccurate and obsolete, and therefore in need of re-consideration. According to ELF scholars, a more updated and realistic view would be to consider English as no longer "owned" by its native speakers, but rather as composed of a multiplicity of different voices (House 2001).

In recent years, efforts have been made to observe and describe the regularities of formal ELF features stretching beyond NS norms: this has been favoured by the compilation of corpora of non-native speakers Englishes such as the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (Seidlhofer 2001) and Mauranen's Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (2003). In the area of

research on phonology, for instance, Jenkins (2000) identified some of the phonological and phonetic items which ensure intelligibility of pronunciation among ELF speakers. Research on lexicogrammar, on the other hand, has focused on a variety of dimensions: Seidlhofer (2004), for instance, pinpointed several features of ELF that tend to occur with a certain regularity in the Vienna corpus, including: the omission of -s in the third person in the present tense; a heavy reliance on verbs which have high semantic generality such as *take* and *make*; the pluralisation of nouns that are usually considered uncountable by NSs such as *information* and *advice*; the omission of the article where NS would see its use as obligatory, and its overuse in contexts in which it would not be needed according to NS norms; and the overuse of prepositions in comparison with NS language uses, so that, for instance, the verb *discuss* is often followed by the preposition *about*.

More recently, Cogo and Dewey (2006) drew a parallel between lexicogrammatical tendencies in ELF and its pragmatic uses: investigating two small-case corpora of ELF interactions, the authors found that pragmatic motivations often led to modifications in lexicogrammar, and viceversa. In the data they analysed, efficiency of communication, enhanced explicitness and reinforcement of proposition were among the reasons for such interrelatedness: in the case of the omission of the third person singular, for instance, their investigation suggested that the use of the "zero option" occurred "as the result of efficiency of communication and exploited redundancy" (2006: 87).

Other research studies have highlighted how small talk in the form of formulaic language, pauses, overlaps, and turn taking helps ELF speakers to negotiate and create their own particular conversational and pragmatic style, which derives not simply from their interlanguage but also from their willingness to cooperate so as to compensate for language deficits and save each other's face

(Meierkord 2000). From a different angle, Kecskes (2007) reached the conclusion that the 13 ELF users that took part in his study tended to avoid formulaic language so as to use the linguistic code more directly in order to ensure mutual intelligibility and understanding. This led him to claim that "lingua franca communication can be best explained as a third space phenomenon" (2007: 212), in which "ad-hoc rules" are created in the instances of interaction.

From the point of view of the cultural norms involved in ELF communication, several scholars have recently questioned the NS authority over the culture(s) at play in contexts in which a lingua franca is used. Dörney and Csizér (2002: 453), for instance, argued that ELF was loosening its ties with national culture and was increasingly becoming associated with a "global culture". A similar point was raised by Alptekin, who looked at ELF as potentially embracing "the world itself" as its culture (2002: 62), thus suggesting that no fixed culture can permeate ELF communication.

Pölz advocated that English is a "native-culture free" code (2003: 5), in that ELF users do not activate the primary culture(s) associated with the code. Instead, ELF speakers have "the freedom to either create their own temporary culture, to partly 'export' their individual primary culture into ELF or to reinvent their cultural identities by blending into other linguacultural groups" (ibid.: 5). In this sense, therefore, ELF allows speakers to express their own primary culture and to "co-create a new inter-culture" (ibid.: 6) together with their partners in communication. Within this co-constructed culture, ELF users can appropriate or re-invent their cultural identities, while at the same time signalling their primary cultural membership: identities in ELF communication, therefore, are seen as fluid and created in a given communicative event. According to Pölz (2003: 20-21), one way to convey one's own primary culture and cultural identity is through the use of the

L1 – the speaker's native language – within ELF: in her view, the choice of the code to be used in ELF interactions does not necessarily signify a "supposed lack of language proficiency" (ibid.: 21), but cultural identification, and, when speakers take up their co-participants' native language, politeness and a desire for co-operation.

In a recent study, Fiedler (2011) challenged and complemented the notion of a "native-culture free" code proposed by Pölz (2003): in her investigation of the use of English idioms among ELF speakers, the author found that phraseological units traditionally associated with the culture(s) of the lingua *franca* were adopted to respond to communicative needs, together with transfers of idioms linked to the speakers' native cultures as well as specific-ELF phraseology resulting from the particular character of the interaction. As the author suggests, these findings are somewhat unexpected, as they seem to confute the general assumption that ELF lacks idiomatic expressions (something confirmed, for instance, by Kecskes 2007 cited above). Nevertheless, Fiedler's analysis sheds some light on the fluid nature of ELF interactions, where speakers have the chance to be both productive and innovative by adapting, negotiating and creating new communicative forms, also drawing on English native language and cultures.

The notion of a co-constructed ELF culture that emerges from both the studies cited above – despite their differences - has been linked by some researchers to the concept of 'third space' (Baker, W. 2009 and 2010; Canagarajah 2007; Fiedler 2011; Jenkins 2006; Kecskes 2007), intended as a place where language users construct and negotiate hybrid and fluid identities. The concept of 'third space' appears to respond to the ongoing debate as to whether ELF should be seen as a language for "communication" or for "identification" (Hüllen 1992): while a language for communication is used for practical communicative purposes and is therefore functional in nature and neutral with respect to a specific culture (Knapp

2008: 133), a language for identification is that which expresses and symbolizes an individual's cultural identity. On the basis of what emerges from her analysis of ELF interactions, Pölz appears to advocate the view that ELF is a language for communication only, in that its users "do not identify with the cultural norms of English as a Native language" (2003: 6). A similar view is shared by House, both writing alone (2001) and with Edmondson (Edmondson and House 2003): in her eyes, ELF is "nothing more than a useful tool" (2001: np) for communicating, which is not necessarily identified as a cultural symbol. A rather different perspective is that proposed by Fiedler (2011), which can be ascribed to the other researchers mentioned above: according to Fiedler, it is the hybrid nature of ELF as a third space growing at the intersection between different cultures and identities that allows it to occupy an "intermediate space between communication and identification" (2011: 90), thus nourishing both a functional and an expressive dimension and reconciling Hüllen's dichotomy.

3.2.3 Which culture in FLT?

Which culture should be conveyed in FLT then, given the fact that all languages are potential *lingua francas* and can be used in contexts in which an infinite variety of cultures converge stretching beyond native speakers norms? Integrating Christensen's view that language learning should be emptied from any sociocultural references, (1993 – see above), Byram (1997: 19-20) proposes a combination of 'content' and 'method', where content is the "beliefs, behaviours and meanings which make up the practices of the group" (intended as the NS group) and method is the set of skills and methods that learners should be provided with to cope with any communicative situation. In this light, the "introduction to the national culture of a country where the language is spoken natively can serve as an example" for a variety

of further communicative encounters. O'Dowd (2006: 25) agrees with Byram's point by asserting that learners need to learn about specific cultures in order to develop the

> attitudes and skills necessary to recognize and deal with alternative behaviour. In other words, learners can take the skills, attitudes and understanding of cultural difference which they have gained from their work on, for example, Great Britain, and apply this to other intercultural situations.

To sustain his view, O'Dowd remarks that, even in contexts in which ELF is used, many learners continue to learn English because they are interested in countries such as Great Britain, the USA or Ireland" (ibid.).

The argument that content and method should go hand in hand in foreign language education is a valuable one in that it highlights the desirability of acquiring dynamic comparative skills, which can be activated in a variety of further intercultural encounters. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Byram's approach - as well as that of all the others who share the same view - still remains anchored in *the* national culture of the target language, which is clearly interpreted in its standard and dominant manifestations, and which therefore neglects both intra-national variation (Belz 2007b) and the increasing global cultural flows that transcend national borders (Pennycook 2007; Risager 1998; 2007; 2008; 2010). By insisting on the importance of the standard variety of national culture, Byram *de facto* weakens the strength of the intercultural speaker in that he restricts the content of culture teaching to solely one of the possible manifestations of culture in a given geo-political entity. As a more exhaustive discussion of the limitations of Byram's approach to the teaching of culture will be presented in the section devoted to his model of ICC, I will limit myself here to a very few reflections on the nature of culture in the foreign language classroom.

Especially in the case of English, which is nowadays acknowledged as a globally widespread code (Crystal 2003), a distinction should probably be made between those who learn it mostly and foremost as a foreign language (EFL) and those who aim to use it internationally, and thus see it as a *lingua franca*. Jenkins describes these two dimensions as "substantially different" (2006: 140): if seen as a foreign language, English is learnt to "communicate effectively with native speakers" (ibid.), so that any deviation from NS norms can be considered an error resulting from incorrect or incomplete acquisition. A view of English as a *lingua franca* "learnt and used in contexts where NSs are not [necessarily] the target interlocutors", on the other hand, rejects the notion of interlanguage (Selinker 1972) as a continuum towards native-like competence: instead of looking at ELF from a deficit perspective, such a view considers code-switching and code-mixing as "natural and entirely appropriate phenomena within the bilingual repertoire" (ibid.) which indicate the "third space" position occupied by the ELF speaker.

Taking into account this differentiation implies that we also look at the different goals that ELF and EFL teaching often have, both in terms of language skills and culture content, and that we ponder whether they can be seen as conflicting or converging poles. In the case of EFL, many teachers are still more likely to decide to focus on native culture as the content and object of their instruction, thus providing learners with the perspectives of the people who speak English natively, a view which partially reminds of Byram's nationalist approach exemplified above. On the other hand, ELF is more likely to opt for a more transnational approach, which, as postulated by Risager (1997) and Seidlhofer (2003b), shifts the emphasis away from the target culture so as to let a variety of cultural meanings come into play in the specific contexts of intercultural encounters. Culture learning in ELF, therefore,

can be seen as being situated in specific contexts since it originates from direct and authentic contact with members of other cultures and linguistic communities.

While the choice of many EFL teachers might be understandable, given the context and aims of their activity, it appears to me that raising learners' awareness of the sole target culture without integrating it within a broader view of the cultural phenomena that occur in English interactions at the transnational level would mean limiting the learners' understanding of what is going on in the world and of the unique status of English as a global language. Instead, since learners of EFL are very likely to use English in a variety of ELF contexts (Seidlhofer 2003b: 159), they should be provided with opportunities to approach culture from both apparently dichotomous poles. It should be the aim of FLT, therefore, to help learners acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to approach culture in all its facets and manifestations and from a transnational perspective, something that Byram – in his model of ICC – did not contemplate. Despite this limitation, I believe that his description of intercultural communicative competence effectively encompasses the knowledge, skills and attitudes that should form the basis of modern FLT. These will be the focus of the following section.

3.3. Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) draws on van Ek's (1986) framework of communicative competence illustrated above, but refines it in two main ways. Firstly, it replaces the model of the native speaker with the concept of the intercultural speaker, thus redefining the linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences proposed by van Ek. In Byram's view (1997: 48), linguistic competence should no longer be seen as the ability to produce utterances which

mirror the rules and the conventional meanings of the language concerned (van Ek 1986), but as "the ability to apply knowledge of the rules of a standard version of the language". Similarly, sociolinguistic competence becomes "the ability to give to the language produced by an interlocutor – whether native speaker or not – meanings which are taken for granted by the interlocutor or which are negotiated and made explicit with the interlocutor" (Byram 1997: 48). Moreover, discourse competence is interpreted in Byram's model not only as the ability to use appropriate strategies in the interpretation of texts, but also as the ability to discover and negotiate such strategies according to the conventions of the culture of the interlocutor. As these descriptions show, the model proposed by Byram places particular emphasis on the dimension of *discovery* and *negotiation* between the learner and the native speaker. No longer seen in a subaltern position, learners are empowered to negotiate "their modes of interaction, their own kinds of texts" (ibid.: 49) and their own meanings to accommodate and benefit from the interaction.

Secondly, Byram's model expands on the notions of social, strategic and socio-cultural competence proposed by van Ek by introducing the dimension of intercultural competence, seen as a conjunction of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The model, therefore, is the result of a variety of distinct but interdependent components, some of which are more explicitly related to language use, while others are more deeply grounded in the sociocultural dimension of intercultural encounters. Figure 3, adapted from Byram (1997: 73), illustrates the complete model of ICC:

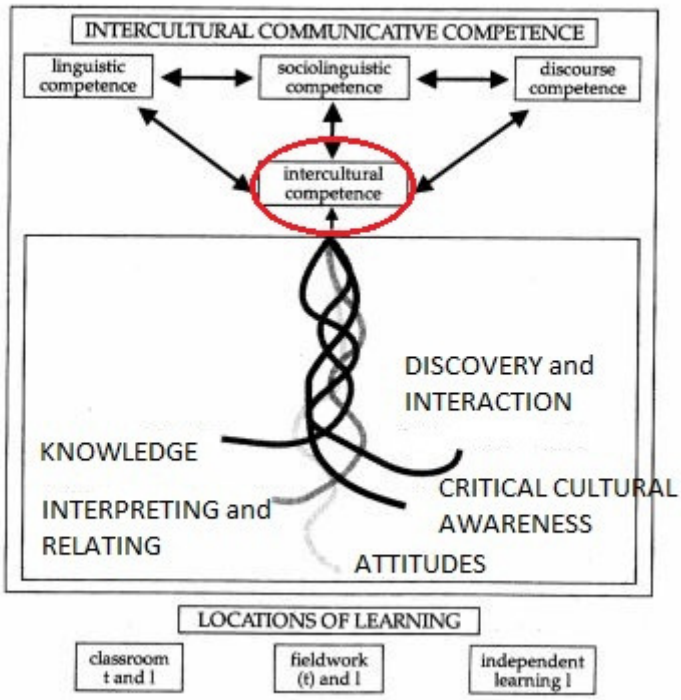


Figure 3. Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997: 73)

Given the variety of components, most writers – including Byram himself - generally describe ICC by emphasizing the dimension of intercultural competence (highlighted in red in the Figure above), while only implicitly referring to the linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse elements that make up the model. Yet, this does not mean that the fundamental role of communicative competence in intercultural communication is ignored: instead, the focus on intercultural competence and its components is justified by the fact that these constitute the core and the most revolutionary part of the framework. In line with this, the following description of ICC will explicitly refer to the features and components of intercultural competence, while the linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse dimensions will be intended as underlying the whole construct.

From this perspective, ICC consists of five factors, the first four of which are *attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction,* and *skills of interpreting and relating*. Although Figure 3 does not clarify it, *critical cultural awareness* is crucial to the model, as it is the desired result of the interplay of the four components

cited above (1997: 33). The following schema can be used to illustrate the various factors in intercultural communication, in an effort to highlight the centrality of *critical cultural awareness*:

	SKILLS of INTERPRETING and RELATING (*savoir comprendre*)	
KNOWLEDGE of self and other; of interaction (*savoirs*)	CRITICAL CULTURAL AWARENESS (*savoir s'enganger*)	ATTITUDES relativising self valuing other (*savoir être*)
	SKILLS of DISCOVERY and INTERACTION (*savoir apprendre/faire*)	

Figure 4. The factors in intercultural communication (adapted from Byram 1997: 34)

Briefly defined, the **attitudinal component** of ICC (also called *savoir être*) refers to curiosity and openness to other sets of values, experiences and beliefs, as well as to the readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement about other cultures. It implies the willingness to "suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging" (1997: 34). Put another way, attitudes are a fundamental precondition for intercultural communication, in that they require the readiness to "decentre" (ibid.) and accept that our point of view might not necessarily be 'the right and only one'.

A further component of ICC, **knowledge** (or *savoirs*), is divided into two broad categories. On the one hand, the term refers to the knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in the interlocutors' country. Knowledge of their cultures and experiences should also help the learner – or, rather, the intercultural speaker - reflect on his/her own culture from a new, and sometimes unexpected, standpoint. On the other hand, the term implies knowledge of "the processes of

interaction at individual and societal level" (1997: 35). In the first case, knowledge is usually acquired through education and formal or informal socialization, while knowledge of interactional values and practices is more likely to be stimulated by direct access to socialization contexts.

According to Byram, the knowledge component of ICC is strictly related to both the **skills of interpreting and relating** (*savoir comprendre*) and the skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*). The former refer to the ability to interpret a document, a set of values, or a cultural product from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents, sets of values and products from one's own. This ability is clearly dependent on the knowledge that the intercultural speaker already possesses of his/her own and the other's culture, and allows the intercultural speaker to draw parallels between the two cultures in a critical way. The **skills of discovery and interaction**, on the other hand, indicate the ability to refine and acquire new knowledge of a culture and its practices by eliciting "their meanings and connotations, and their relationship to other phenomena" (1997: 38). One way to manifest this set of skills is through interaction: in this sense, the skills of discovery and interaction also imply the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication, ask 'difficult' questions on controversial topics, and manage potential misunderstandings.

Finally, **critical cultural awareness** refers to the ability to "evaluate critically perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram 2000: 9). Instead of simply identifying with the culture/s they are being exposed to, intercultural speakers adopt a critical stance towards both their own and their interlocutors' cultures: in this sense, critical cultural awareness prevents them from agreeing unconditionally with their communication partners, but encourages them to evaluate critically all the various standpoints and experiences at

play in the interaction. In his description of critical cultural awareness, Byram recognizes a political dimension to foreign language education (1997: 44-46): far from involving the mere mastery of grammar and vocabulary, FLT should help learners develop as active and critical citizens, who are able to question cultural values, ideologies and behaviours and mediate between them. Given its central role in the model, critical cultural awareness can be seen as the sum of all the other dimensions illustrated above, and therefore the most crucial quality of the intercultural speaker.

3.3.1 Relevance of Byram's model in foreign language education

As can be inferred from the description presented above, someone who manifests ICC is not only a person with some degree of communicative competence in the language he/she is learning, nor someone who is expected to reject his/her own cultural reference points and take on those of the other (O'Dowd 2003: 120). Instead, an 'intercultural speaker' is able and willing to explore other sets of values and standpoints, to step back from his/her own, and to critically evaluate them without necessarily looking for unconditioned agreement. Put another way, an intercultural speaker is someone who is able to "see the world through the other's eyes without loosing sight of him or herself" (Kramsch 1993: 231). By adopting a curios, yet critical stance towards one's own and the other's culture, an intercultural speaker should be able to construct and occupy a "third place" (Kramsch 1993) between the two cultures, a space in which mediation and negotiation of meanings are central to the discovery and learning process.

Thanks to its accurate description of the skills, attitudes, knowledge and critical awareness that are needed in intercultural encounters, as well as of the emphasis on the learner as intercultural speaker, Byram's model has been widely

recognized as a valid framework for the teaching of language and culture in the classroom (see among others: Belz 2003b; Dooly 2011; Helm and Guth 2010; O'Dowd 2003). The relevance of the model to FLT is clearly explained by O'Dowd (2003: 120), according to whom one of Byram's greatest merits is that he not only offered a comprehensive approach to the components of ICC and their objectives, but also suggested "modes of assessment for each part" that facilitate "the teacher and action researcher's (…) task of operationalising and putting the model into practice in the classroom".

Aware that the increased emphasis on the cultural component of foreign language education has been accompanied by the old belief that "if it isn't tested, it isn't learnt" (2000: 8), Byram has also tried to outline possible ways to assess ICC so as to determine "how far learners have reached the competence described by the objectives" (1997: 87) for each dimension of the framework. An interesting point he makes is that the purposes of assessment and the setting of a threshold level should always be determined on the basis of the institutional and societal context in which learning/teaching takes place (ibid.), which include: the needs of a particular group of students; "the uses of the particular language for learners in the country in question" (ibid.: 80); the parameters of time, methods and materials available in the teaching situation (ibid.); and the nature of the contact with the other culture. Despite the differences that contextual variables may imply, Byram does suggest ways to assess ICC, with the awareness that some of its dimensions – e.g. the attitudinal component – are extremely difficult to evaluate since they cannot be quantified using traditional tests and examinations (Byram 2000). Among the methods suggested (tests, continuous assessment, simulations), he advocates the use of a portfolio, compiled by the learners themselves to keep track of and self-assess their own attitudes, knowledge and competences as they unfold.

3.3.2 Limitations of Byram's model

Despite having become "a common point of reference in the literature on intercultural learning" (O'Dowd 2003: 120), Byram's model of ICC also presents some limitations, each of which will be illustrated below.

One of the critiques that Byram's model has received over the years has to do with the fact that his use of word 'culture' refers exclusively to the national culture of the target country (Guth and Helm 2010). Indeed, throughout his 1997 book Byram talks about 'countries' as the core of his discussion on inter-language and inter-cultural communication. Although he specifies that 'countries' are not necessarily to be seen as nation-states as they might also include other geo-political entities such as minority groups with their own systems (1997: 54-55), the term does not seem to cover the diversity that is present in all cultural communities, even within the same geo-political group. On this point, an effective critique is that expressed by Belz (2007b: 137), according to whom Byram's operationalisation of ICC

> does not adequately recognise or value national-internal diversity (e.g. Germans of Turkish extraction or Frenchmen of North-African origin) or the existence of ideologically or ethnically bound groups that span national borders (e.g. the Muslim ummah or community), or who have no national borders (e.g. Sinti-Roma people; the Kurds),

and therefore limits the opportunities for learners to explore the variety of cultures that exist both within precise national boarders and across them.

Indeed, the idea of diversity is introduced by Byram (1997: 18) when he discusses Christensen's proposal (1993) of providing foreign language learners with methods for intercultural communication rather than with content about dominant

cultures (see previous sections). Although partially agreeing with Christensen, Byram insists that learners still need "knowledge about the (dominant) culture of a society" (2007: 19) as "the acquisition of a foreign language *is* the acquisition of the cultural practices and beliefs its embodies for particular social groups" (ibid.: 22, emphasis added). In Byram's view, diversity seems to emerge only in relation to the fluid nature of culture over time, and not as linked to national-cultural variation as described by Belz in the extract above: as Byram himself suggests, "the beliefs, behaviours and meanings which make up the practices of the group are what might be the 'content' (…) of FLT, provided that a means is found to ensure that learners do not perceive these as 'objective' and fixed, but changing and negotiated over time by members of the group" (ibid.: 19).

Byram's assertions can be challenged in two ways: firstly, the fact that learners should be provided with knowledge of the dominant culture remains a possible limitation in that it neglects the potential that diversity within the same community can offer. Secondly, although the idea that culture is variable and fluid over time offers a valuable interpretation of the diachronic change of cultural frames, Byram's statements still fail to grasp the complexity of cultures in that they do not recognize the existence, in any cultural system and at any point in time, of apparently dichotomous value orientations that "reinforce, and complement each other to shape the holistic, dynamic and dialectical nature of culture" (Fang 2012: 2). From this angle, therefore, Byram's idea of the importance of making learners aware of the fact that cultural values evolve over time is not accompanied by the notion that cultural systems naturally nourish paradoxical aspects and value orientations.

A further point of criticism of the apparent inseparability, in Byram's model, of target language and target (dominant and national) culture, derives from the fact that it does not take into account the possibility that learners of, say, English,

communicate in the target language in situations where only cultures other than the dominant native speakers' culture are present. This is particularly true in the case of any *lingua franca* communication, where several cultures potentially come into contact via a sole common language. Although Byram does mention *lingua franca* interaction as one of the ways to develop ICC (1997: 115), my impression is that he somehow dismisses the complexity of this issue by asserting that the question of which culture(s) learners should be exposed to in lingua franca communication should be answered by teachers and learners themselves according to their specific situation (Byram and Fleming 1998b: 9).

Byram's own writing contains two ambivalent standpoints that offer no clear solution to the issue. On the one hand, he stresses that ICC encourages a critical and open approach to other people and cultures, whatever they happen to be (Byram 1997: 113), and that *lingua franca* communication should take into account the "various social identities of speakers […] which operate in any interaction" (Byram and Fleming 1998b: 9). From here, he goes on to suggest that the intercultural speaker should be able to "discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly" (ibid.), thus highlighting the importance of 'method' in contexts in which not only the target culture is present. On the other hand, however, Byram's work seems to be oriented towards the idea that, even when it is used as a *lingua franca*, English should still be accompanied by the learning of its national culture, at least as a way to develop relating and interpreting skills. In this regard, he further suggests that

> the advantages of focusing on an English-speaking country where English is the subject rather than the medium for other subjects, is that western – especially American and British – cultures are so dominant even where learners will have no need or opportunity to interact with native speakers, that a *critical* study of

them and their relationships to learners' own is likely to be more beneficial than to ignore their presence (1997: 115, emphasis in the original).

Although the reasons for a critical approach to the target culture are understandable, and clearly such an approach is not aimed at perpetuating hegemonic power relations, Byram's explanation of the reasons why the culture of English speaking countries should be the focus of learning does not seem to satisfy the need for a clear answer to the problem. As already suggested above, his view of language, and of English in particular, appears to be still rooted in a traditional approach to FLT, according to which learning a language necessarily means studying the dominant culture(s) associated with it. In this light, language and culture seem to remain inseparable, even in contexts in which communication takes place by means of a *lingua franca*, and they both refer to national target entities – thus mirroring a view which is now clearly "out of sync with the complexity of the modern world" (Risager 2010: 2).

The same national paradigm also emerges from the way culture is seen and treated in the model: although, as also O'Dowd emphasises at various times in his description of the model (2006: 131-134), Byram highlights the importance of moving away from the old practice of simply learning about the facts and figures of the other culture, his approach still seems to support the idea that learners should acquire knowledge of the other culture's behaviours, institutions, ways of life, history etc: in Byram's words, "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices" (2007: 51) is one of the core dimensions of ICC. Yet, this approach conveys the idea that culture has to be seen as content, at the core of which we find topics related to "what is going on within the national state" (Risager 2010: 6) that reinforce the national paradigm in language/culture teaching.

As Risager suggests, this paradigm now appears to be obsolete in that it does not take into account the powerful transnational and global forces at work in our complex societies as a result of globalisation and internationalisation (2010: 2-3). Given the complex nature of our world, she postulates a radical change in perspective in language/culture teaching, one in which "the choice of contexts and contacts [content] are not naturally bound to the target-language countries, but can transcend them" (ibid.: 7). What she argues is that language and (national) culture can indeed be separated, and that language teaching has to take into account the variety of linguistic and cultural flows across the world: instead of teaching 'one language – one culture', she insists that "any topic could be chosen as thematic content of texts in a particular language. There can be texts in German about Argentina, and texts in Spanish about Denmark, and about any other topic in the world" (ibid.: 6).

Although this approach might be seen as emptying language from any cultural reference, Risager highlights that language is never totally neutral: yet, instead of being simply embodied by one national culture, it preserves its culturality through the variety of personal and collective "linguacultures" that language users carry with them (Risager 2007; 2008; 2010). Basing this concept on Agar's notion of "languaculture" – seen as the "the necessary tie between language and culture" (Agar 1994: 20) -, Risager advocates the study of linguistic practice "as an integrated part of (other) cultural and social practice and the general social context" (2008: np), something that can highlight the link between the word and both the *collective* frames of reference of a given community and the *personal* lives/cultural histories of individual language users. In her view, therefore, any language carries linguaculture – in other words "culture in language" - no matter in which contexts and with which topics it is used (ibid.).

The separability of language and (national) culture advocated by Risager leads to a further discussion on the relationship between language and culture as conveyed by Byram's model. As Risager puts it (2007: 121), the model does not offer any clue to understanding the relationship between the two dimensions, since "language and culture are treated as separate entities". In addition, as the author further observes (ibid.: 126), Byram "does not raise the discussion of what the relationship between language and culture looks like when the language is used as a lingua franca". Risager's remarks are further reinforced by Liddicoat and Scarino (2010: 52), who note that the model "does not elaborate on the important ways in which language affects culture and culture affects language and how this is understood by the learner". Thus, although it is to Byram's credit that he emphasises the need to integrate the teaching of culture into the foreign language classroom and that he suggests a change in perspective by putting the intercultural speaker at the centre of language learning, the model *de facto* does not explore the relationship between language and culture but takes it for granted. Without investigating this point, even the figure of the intercultural speaker becomes less powerful and meaningful in the eyes of the reader.

In the area of research on telecollaboration, one of the ways to compensate for this limitation has been that of including language in the analysis of intercultural learning so as to outline the way in which the language used by participants in online projects conveys both their own culture and cultural identities, and reveals something of their intercultural competence. Attempts of this kind can be described as focusing on "the identity-related dimension of languaculture" (Risager 2007: 201), in which languaculture is seen from both a collective and a personal perspective. Examples for this exist in the literature and include, for instance, Dooly's investigation of the identities constructed in an intercultural online community of practice (2011),

Kramsch's exploration of subject positions in an online context (2009a), the study conducted by Guarda, Guth and Helm (2011) on the way identities were negotiated in an online third space, and Belz's (2003b) analysis of the attitudinal component of ICC as expressed by the language used by some of the participants in an online telecollaboration project. All these studies are concerned with the study of *how* language learners use – both consciously and unconsciously - the foreign language to convey culture and cultural subject positions.

Besides being an area of investigation for researchers, the relationship between culture and language may also be addressed by the learners themselves in ways that stimulate their curiosity and critical awareness. This could be obtained, for instance, by including *metacultural* discourse into the topics and themes that should aim to stimulate ICC. Throughout this thesis, I will use the term 'metaculture' as defined by the critical theorist Mulhern (2000: xiv), according to whom metaculture is "discourse in which culture addresses its own generality and conditions of existence". Neglected in Byram's model of ICC (although it may be tacitly linked to the dimensions of knowledge, skills of discovery and critical cultural awareness), and not explicitly mentioned by other researchers and scholars[16], I believe that metaculture should be one of the topics that make up the thematic content of language/culture teaching: addressing topics which have the 'nature of culture' as their object, learners can be helped negotiate metacultural discourse, thus unveiling, clarifying and identifying what they mean by the definitions and assumptions that they use to describe culture and other related issues. By negotiating these meanings through language, and by exploring the impact that language has on culture and identity (and viceversa), the relationship between the two will be made explicit, and will possibly lead to increased metacultural and cultural awareness.

[16] The notion of "meta-cultural" competence appears in Sharifian (2009b), but is used in a different way, indicating the ability to understand a wider range of world English varieties, something which is "gained through familiarity with different cultural conceptual systems" (2009b: 15).

A further limitation of Byram's framework (1997) relates to the lack of reference to online contexts for intercultural learning. In his description of the model for ICC, Byram emphasises the "general need always to define models of ICC according to the requirement of the situation in which learners find themselves" (1997: 7). For the purposes of his work, he mentions classroom activities, independent learning and fieldwork – in the form of both short visits and longer periods of residence in the target culture – as the three categories of location for developing intercultural competence (1997: 64-70). Clearly, Byram's model is primarily focused on contexts which involve face-to-face encounters (Dooly 2011: 324), and is therefore not explicitly developed for telecollaboration settings where, on the other hand, fieldwork takes place online and assumes a different nature from face-to-face interaction (Helm and Guth 2010: 70).

In Byram's conceptualization of ICC, the lack of reference to the new variety of contexts in which language/culture learning may take place is evident in the figure of the learner as "sojourner" who, unlike a mere "tourist", should be able to challenge and be challenged by other sets of values and meanings (1997: 1-2). As Belz remarks (2003b: 93), the adoption of the term 'sojourner' subtly implies that the successful intercultural speaker will be the one who voluntary moves to the other country, a concept that ignores the variety of conditions under which learning takes place, including the possibility that learners might become 'sojourners' of, say, online intercultural communities.

A further limitation of Byram's model, therefore, is that it does not explore the potential of online-based collaborative activities, which - starting from private initiatives driven by the willingness to engage with other cultures online and moving on to educational contexts where these activities take the form of institutionalised and rationalized projects - are becoming increasingly widespread opportunities for

intercultural learning. Yet, this limitation should not ascribed to Byram himself: as Helm and Guth further remind us (2010: 70), "Byram's model was developed before the dramatic rise of Internet and Web 2.0" and could therefore not foresee the tremendous impact that new technologies and the Internet would have on educational practices.

Given the purposes of telecollaboration projects set up in educational contexts - in other words providing learners with opportunities to "communicate, collaborate, create and negotiate effectively" (Helm and Guth 2010: 72) in multicultural and, I would add, transnational and transcultural online networks -, Helm and Guth suggest that Byram's model be expanded by adding the notion of "new online literacies" to include the implications of Web-based communication. Discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the term "new online literacies" does not simply comprise purely computer literacy skills, but more importantly the ability to cope simultaneously with different communication modes (written, spoken and visual), positive attitudes towards online collaboration, as well as knowledge of differing online "cultures-of-use" (Thorne 2003). In Helm and Guth's view (2010: 73), the goal of such integration is to "come up with a broader framework for the definition of learning objectives" in telecollaboration contexts, a framework which comprises not only Byram's *savoirs* and foreign language competences, but also the ability to participate effectively in online activities. Although new online literacies will not be the focus of the present study, I agree with Helm and Guth's expanded framework (2010) to suggest that telecollaborative activities should also aim at fostering learners' new online literacies, including the development of positive attitudes towards online interaction and the activation of effective strategies to cope with problems and drawbacks linked to the computer-mediated-communication mode.

3.4 Integrating ICC into the specific context under study

Byram's model of ICC was adapted to the specific context of the study described in this work in several ways: firstly, as the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange did not primarily involve students learning about each other's language and culture, the project challenged the national paradigm by providing participants – some of whom with very little or no experience in extensive intercultural communication – with opportunities to engage with Cs3 (Cultures-three: other than C1 and C2, and including all the interlocutors' cultures). In this sense, the students were encouraged to move away from the rigid combination 'national language/culture' so as to explore several cultures at the same time by means of a single foreign language – a *lingua franca* for both groups - and acquire both content and methods to cope with intercultural situations.

Secondly – although both aspects are interrelated – the natural outcome of the choice of engaging with several Cs3 was that a variety of topics were adopted as thematic content of the course. The topics did not just centre around the two countries' institutions, ways of life and cultural products, but were of a much wider nature, since they aimed to engage participants in discussions on the very essence of identity and culture, as well as on the effects of power and discrimination. For each of these issues, the students were first asked to think about their own experiences and cultural standpoints, thus drawing on their personal linguaculture, intended as the way each individual attaches meanings to the language according to his/her personal and social experiences. Subsequently, they were encouraged to express their ideas on the topics in the form of a written post to a dedicated wikipage, and to share them with their peers during the Skype sessions so as to explore other personal and collective linguacultures. In the Skype meetings, the participants were also often asked to investigate and comment on the way the same topic was seen first from a

local and then from a national or global perspective – or viceversa: in a discussion on discrimination, for instance, the students explored the condition of women first in their respective communities, then in their countries and finally at the international level. In this light, the sessions were organized in such a way so as to set the topics free from any strict national boundaries, and to give the students the chance to engage with a variety of other linguacultures, both personal – their own and those of their peers – and collective – how the same concepts were seen at the local/national/global level. As can be inferred, the national component of culture was still present in the discussions, but was embedded in a much wider transnational and global vision.

Third, given the nature of the thematic threads that permeated the discussions, a transnational approach to language/culture learning favoured the selection of topics that, not necessarily linked to a specific national culture, could stimulate the learners' metacultural skills, in other words their ability to discuss about culture. By fostering reflection on and collaborative negotiation of metacultural discourse, the potential benefits on ICC were seen as being of three kinds: firstly, metacultural issues were introduced as a way to stimulate discussion and critical thinking while at the same time avoiding any strict link to national cultures. Second, reflecting on metaculture was believed to provide young adults with the cognitive and negotiating skills that are necessary to become active world citizens as well as cultural mediators who can "catch sight of transnational connections" (Risager 2007: 205) in an increasingly complex world. Finally, as suggested above, it was hoped that metacultural discourse could encourage learners to negotiate and explain the meanings and assumptions that they attributed to their language choices, thus making the tie between culture and language more explicit.

The relationships between language and culture will be also addressed in the analysis of subject positions and third spaces proposed in Chapter 7: by exploring the way the students used language to construct and convey their cultural identities within their online community, it is hoped that the investigation will shed some light on the role of language, intended as a semiotic system, in expressing cultural meanings.

More specifically in terms of the five dimensions explicitly described in Byram's model (1997), a few observations should be made to clarify how the framework adapted the components of 'knowledge' and 'critical cultural awareness' to the context of the project described in this study. While the descriptors for all the other dimensions can be easily applied to the telecollaborative setting, the adoption of a *lingua franca* as the only code for communication among the students seems to challenge and make the knowledge component of ICC more problematic, since learners cannot be expected to "acquire knowledge of all the cultures with which they may come into contact" (Byram 1997: 20). Yet, in my view this should not be seen as an obstacle to intercultural *lingua franca* communication: even in such cases knowledge of other practices, beliefs and sets of values can be stimulated through a process of discovery in interaction – thanks to the homonymous set of skills -, which in turn will be triggered by positive attitudes of curiosity and openness towards the other.

In Byram's model, critical cultural awareness relates to the "practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram 2000: 9), and does not therefore include the ability to critically elaborate and reflect on cultural issues related to the very notion of culture, identity and representation. With a constant focus on the practices and products which are typical of this or that culture, the ability to carry out metacultural reflection on what culture and identity are seems to

be left out from the dimensions of Byram's model. Nonetheless, I believe that a framework of intercultural communicative competence should include the ability to evaluate and reflect critically on the various interpretations of the concept of culture, as well as on the variety of values that concur to form identity. From this perspective, the aim of the telecollaboration project described in this study was not simply to share and evaluate factual information on the traditions, practices and products of a given cultural system, but most and foremost to stimulate the willingness to explore and critically reflect on the essence of culture itself, seen as both originating from and shaping cultural practices and value orientations. In the specific context under study, this process of metacultural reflection will be investigated as part of the dimension of critical cultural awareness (see Chapter 6).

3.5 Third space, third culture

As has been suggested above, the model of the intercultural speaker challenges the assumption that foreign language learners should approximate NS norms, both in terms of language and culture. From this perspective, the learner is no longer seen as an "imitation native speaker", but "a person who can stand between the two languages (…) and two cultures seeing both (…) in a new light" (Cook 1992: 583-584). Seen in this light, intercultural encounters no longer require learners to assimilate to one's interactant's cultural frame (Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco 1999: 15): instead, learners are now empowered to "find an intermediary place" (ibid.) between their own and the other culture, in other words a third space. Although the notion of third space – or, following Kramsch, third place - has already emerged at several points in this thesis, given its relevance to the purposes of the current study, I find that a brief section should be dedicated to its main theoretical underpinnings.

Drawing on the work of the cultural critic Homi Bhabha (1994), who theorized third space as the cultural space originating in the margins of dominant discourse and cultural practices, Kramsch (1993; 1996; 1998b; 2009b) proposed the concept of third place as a metaphor for questioning the traditional dichotomy native/non native speaker. Instead of focusing on the dichotomous poles, the notion of third place – or third culture, as Kramsch puts it – suggests emphasising the relation between the languages and cultures at play in intercultural interaction (2009b: 238), regardless of whether they are linked to a NS dimension or not; in doing so, it does not seek to bridge differences, but tries to promote a dialogic context (Kramsch 1996) in which identities and cultures are continuously questioned, relocated and re-imagined in interaction.

According to Kramsch (1993: 47), this process of re-construction and negotiation takes place through dialogue: her theory of thirdness (2009b), therefore, appears to be deeply rooted in the notion of dialogism – intended in Bakhtinian terms -, according to which knowledge of Self occurs only through contact with the Other. It is through dialogue and confrontation with unexpected meanings and worldviews that the learner can see his familiar meanings in a different light, abandoning the lens of his/her own – often given for granted - everyday life. In doing so, he/she is empowered to engage in the construction of personal meanings that are stimulated through the encounter with the 'other' (Kramsch 1993: 238-239). In Kramsch's view, in intercultural and multilingual contexts, dialogue allows participants "not only to replicate a given context of culture, but, because it takes place in a foreign language, it also has the potential of shaping a new culture" (ibid.: 47). This new, third culture is not a "static place between two dominant cultures" and languages (ibid.: 248), but a fluid and hybrid space which constantly changes under the forces involved in intercultural encounters. From this perspective, the concept of third place reshapes

the very notion of culture: rather than being a "fixed category of place and identity" (Kramsch 2009b: 244), culture is a space "of contact or encounter between speakers from two [or more, I would add] different cultures" (ibid.). In this sense, therefore, culture is to be seen as a fluid and mutable "mode", and not as a place, of belonging (ibid.: 247).

Emerging "in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and the new cultures he or she is being introduced to" (Kramsch 1993: 236), a third place helps the learner develop a third perspective, thanks to which he/she is enabled to see both cultures from both an insider's and an outsider's perspective (ibid.: 210). This, again, explains the link between third place and the intercultural speaker, in other words someone who puts his/her own culture in relation with that of the other and recognizes the dialogic relationship between the two.

Kramsch's theory of thirdness has had great impact on theoretical and practical approaches to foreign language education, and several other scholars have given their interpretation of the notion of third place/space: Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco (1999), for instance, stressed the link between third space and intercultural competence by emphasising that learners should be able to occupy an "intermediary place" in their encounters with 'otherness' (ibid.: 15), so as reconcile unity and diversity through a dialogic process of exploration and mediation between different cultures. According to the authors, it is "the ability to find this third place" that is "at the core of intercultural competence" (ibid.).

Li and Girvan's approach to thirdness (2004) mirrors their view of language learning, in which reflection on both the target and the learner's native cultures is key to creating a third space within the classroom: "more than a mere sum of its parts" (2004: 4), a third space grows thanks to comparison and negotiation of meaning, and

can empower the learner develop not only linguistically, but also culturally and intellectually.

In the field of telecollaboration, Raffaghelli and Richieri (2010) advocated the role of the Internet "as a third space", a dimension that, in their words, "gives people the opportunity to practice dialogue and discover the relativity of one's own cultural positions" (2010: 228). To demonstrate this point, the authors reported on a one-year international project between teachers and students in Italy, Slovenia and Turkey, which aimed to enhance intercultural awareness and teaching practices thanks to joint collaborative activities. For the purposes of collaboration and sharing, a virtual working/learning space was set up and used by the three groups. As the authors indicated, both the teachers and students involved in the project reported on their impression that the online environment had fostered a sense of belonging to a community across frontiers (2010: 333). Raffaghelli and Richieri interpreted this result by suggesting that electronic communication can transform one's own and the other's cultures into a third, new place (2010: 334).

Helm, Guth and Farrah's (2012: 107) overview of the features of third space – originating in both off-line and on-line settings – included the following dimensions: the constant construction and re-construction of knowledge and identities; the acknowledgment, rather than the denial, of differences across cultures; and the promotion of understanding through a dialogic process of questioning and participative construction of meanings. Unlike Raffaghelli and Richieri, who enthusiastically advocated the potential of the Web to foster the creation of shared spaces, when it comes to online learning Helm and her colleagues seem to be more critical and cautious: in their view (2012: 107), the role of new communication technologies is not a prerequisite for the emergence of a third space in intercultural communication. Instead, a third space nourishes its own culture and processes, which

are neither created or located in the technology *per se* – although new modes for communication may influence the way third spaces are established and maintained. In their joint paper, they investigated the impact of linguistic, technical and educational hegemonies on the learning processes of EFL students in Palestine and Italy, who were involved in the Soliya Connect Program[17]. Through qualitative analysis of the learners' diaries, reflective papers, and questionnaires, the authors highlighted the emergence of a dialogic and hybrid third space within the community, a space which, from time to time, also appeared as a site for personal interior struggle or overt conflict with the other participants. As Helm and her colleagues suggested, various elements in the project appear to have fostered the construction of a shared space, including the very nature of the project, which aimed to foster dialogue in conflict; the use of a videoconferencing system, which helped create a feeling of familiarity and empathy among the participants; and the role of the facilitators who guided the online discussion sessions, and who were effective in addressing power imbalances.

Remaining within the field of CMC, Clarke's (2009) qualitative analysis of a one-year local project with EFL student teachers in the United Arab Emirates highlighted that online forums seem to foster the establishment and maintenance of a online community of practice, which the author identified as of a "sub-culture" or shared space (2009: 2335). His analysis focused on interactional patterns and strategies that included, among others, supporting expressions in the form of agreement and appreciation phrases (e.g. "You raised a good point"), and the use of inclusive pronouns such as *you* and *we*. In the author's words, the investigation showed that the students were willing to "establish and maintain a common understanding of their evolving community, embodied in a shared sense of purpose

[17] See Chapter 2 for a description of the Soliya Connect Program

and enterprise" and construed in the statements of agreement, support and membership. Through the use of these discursive strategies, the students aimed at "cementing the community's sense of self" (ibid.: 2342) by constructing its members as "a common corps" (ibid.: 2343). Furthermore, the use of the inclusive pronouns *we* and *you* also served the function of delineating the boundaries of the community and distinguishing it from those who did not belong to it and were therefore seen as antagonists. Although Clarke did not explicitly mention the notion of third place as described by Kramsch, his emphasis on the ways in which co-constructed interpersonal relations and identities concurred to the emergence of a shared space seems to suggest that a link exists between communities of practice and third space.

Dooly (2011), on the other hand, is more explicit in drawing a parallel between virtual communities of practice and third space: in her analysis of the social interactions occurred among teacher trainees participating in an international telecollaboration project (see Chapter 2 for a description), the author identified a sereies of discursive features that concurred to the creation of a shared identity within the community, and which helped the creation of a third space transcending geographic borders and real world identities (2011: 328). At the same time, the third space was also a site for struggle: when the online behaviour of some its members broke the rules of the community and therefore its unity, the participants had to cope with uncomfortable moments and misunderstandings, thus turning their shared space into a place for negotiation of cultural differences. In Dooly's words (ibid.: 334), the tie between virtual communities of practice and third space lies in the participative construction of a third culture "through the combination of multiple cultures (including e-cultures)", something which helps virtual communities grow upon a sense of common identity, shared repertoire and joint enterprise.

The investigation carried out by Bretag (2006) aimed to verify whether and how online asynchronous interactions could re-define student-teacher relationships as occupying a third space. The author used computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2004) to explore the email exchanges between 10 ESL students and their lecturer at an Australian university, and found that a movement towards third space was fostered, over a period of three months, by the use of positive politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987) such as claiming common ground, conveying cooperation and sharing intimate information. Drawing on English (2002), Bretag used the notion of third space to describe the constant process of negotiation of cultural identities and, in the specific case of her study, teacher-student relationships. Thanks to the interactive, reflective and potentially democratising nature of emails, the students and teacher involved in the case study were able to challenge the traditional binary power relations of the academia, and to negotiate a third space where everyone was granted the opportunity for self-expression and active participation in the construction of knowledge and identities.

As will be seen in Chapter 5 of this thesis, the work of Bretag inspired other researchers to investigate the nature of third space in online environments: among these, Pegrum (2009) used computer-mediated discourse analysis to investigate the potential of international online discussion forums for language teachers to foster successful intercultural learning through the construction of a third space. In doing so, Pegrum extended the notion of third space to focus on "educational third space", intended as a shared site which is fostered in educational contexts to stimulate the joint "deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge and understanding by all participants" and "whose success depends on the presence of intercultural learning" (2009: np). As the analysis of third space in Chapter 7 of this thesis will suggest, the emergence of a successful educational third space is not the natural and obvious

outcome of online contact: conscious of this, Pegrum emphasised the need to seek for evidence of social and cognitive indicators of intercultural learning and, therefore, of effective shared spaces.

The concept of third space has also been approached by scholars working in the field of research on English as a *lingua franca*: as has been outlined more extensively in the previous sections of this Chapter as well as in Chapter 1, the challenging question of the culture(s) activated in lingua franca communication has prompted some scholars (e.g. Baker, W. 2009 and 2010; Canagarajah 2007; Fiedler 2011; Jenkins 2006; Kecskes 2007) to suggest the fluid and hybrid nature that culture and identities take on in this kind of contexts. Adopting Will Baker's words, for instance, "the relationship between language and culture in ELF is emergent, liminal and fluid moving between the local, national and global" (2010: np): in this sense, in ELF communication there is no such a thing as one culture, but the result of a variety of cultures intertwining together in the instances of interaction. Similarly, Canagarajah (2007) suggested that language learning and use in ELF situations "takes place in fluid communicative contexts", in which speakers activate a number of performance and situational strategies to construct and negotiate their social and cultural identities under continuously changing conditions.

3.6 Summary

This Chapter first attempted to outline the complex yet fascinating relationship between culture and language, and the way in which this has been dealt with in foreign language education (§ 3.2). While early theories on the integration of culture into language teaching suggested that learners should strive to reach native-like linguistic and sociocultural proficiency, later approaches have postulated for a more

realistic view of learning, and have therefore proposed to replace the NS model with the figure of the intercultural speaker.

Challenging NS authority has also been one of the main goals of research into ELF: from this perspective, section § 3.2 of the present Chapter also offered a brief overview of how the traditional dichotomy native speaker/non-native speaker has been approached in the realm of *lingua franca* communication, with particular emphasis on its linguistic and cultural aspects.

The model of the intercultural speaker introduced in section § 3.2 was the *leitmotiv* of the description of Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997) (section § 3.3): by rejecting NS supremacy, the framework defines the skills, attitudes and knowledge dimensions that should be activated in intercultural encounters. Despite having become one of the pillars of recent research on intercultural language learning, Byram's model presents some limitations: in this light, section § 3.3 of this Chapter also attempted to describe why the framework fails to capture the transcultural nature of modern culture practices, does not explicitly clarify the role between language and culture and needs re-contextualization so as to embrace new online learning practices.

After describing how Byram's model of ICC was implemented and adapted to the specific context of this study (§ 3.4), the Chapter concluded with a brief section on third space (§ 3.5): a term which has appeared at several points in this thesis, 'third space' relates to the emerging and hybrid site that learners and/or ELF speakers should construct and negotiate when approaching other cultures. The concept is closely linked to that of intercultural communicative competence, in that a third space is the ideal site of the intercultural speaker, in other words a space in which meaningful learning takes place through interaction, co-construction and re-imagination of cultures, meanings and identities. As Pegrum suggests (2009), a

successful third space is the one in which intercultural learning occurs: drawing on this, I would add that the two dimensions – ICC and third space – are in a relationship of mutual dependence, as intercultural learning is only promoted if participants in a community are willing to establish, shape and re-shape their own third space.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXT OF STUDY:

THE 'PADOVA-INNSBRUCK 2011' PROJECT

4.1 Introduction

After looking at the theoretical frameworks that underpin this work, namely telecollaboration and intercultural communicative competence, Chapter 4 will get to the heart of the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' ELF project by describing how it was organized and integrated into the course syllabi of both institutions involved (§ 4.2). To complement this brief introduction, section § 4.3 will outline the rationale behind the choice of topics, task types and tools – something that has already been touched upon in the previous Chapter – and will provide an overview of the activities that were set up to stimulate collaboration and discussion among the participants. Although the main focus of the exchange was on interaction and negotiation of meanings, form-focused activities were developed for the Italian students so as to stimulate reflection and metalinguistic awareness on aspects related to the use of English in both EFL and ELF contexts, and will therefore be the focus of section § 4.4.

The sections that follow will look at the general outcomes of the project, first in purely quantitative terms through an overview of the number of texts produced by both groups of participants (§ 4.5), and then with a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, by presenting the students' own impressions on the exchange in relation to its perceived benefits on language skills and intercultural awareness (§ 4.6). The students' feedback on the activities and the tools used for

communication – as emerged from their responses to the final questionnaire -, as well as a description of the difficulties that I personally encountered throughout the project, will be the starting point for an analysis of the telecollaboration exchange that attempts to outline possible ways and instruments to improve further practice (§ 4.7). This responds to a need to inform the planning of future projects from the perspective of educational action research (O'Dowd 2003; Wallace 1998; also called "practitioner research" in Anderson, Herr and Nihlen 1994), so as to provide future students with enhanced opportunities for learning and skills development.

4.2 Setting up the project

In February 2011, I contacted the English Department at *Leopold Franzsen Universität Innsbruck*, in Austria - where I had spent one semester as an Erasmus student in the 2009-2010 academic year, and where I had personally met some of its professors – and sent them a proposal for a telecollaboration project that would involve Austrian and Italian students learning English as part of their academic studies. On the Austrian side, the exchange proposal was welcomed with great interest and curiosity by the team of instructors of the course 'Concepts, Contexts, Theories of Cultural Studies': since telecollaboration activities had never been implemented at the department before, I was invited to held a brief presentation to introduce the aims of project and illustrate the tools and activities that could be adopted to foster collaboration.

During the presentation, it was agreed that the telecollaboration project would involve students majoring in *Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale* at the University of Padova (Italy) and first- and second-year undergraduate students enrolled in courses that would prepare them to become school teachers, who were attending the course in Cultural Studies taught by one of the professors present at the

meeting. As the latter, however, did not feel confident enough with the online tools that the project would necessarily involve, a further instructor from the same department volunteered to offer logistic help, so as to guarantee constant support for the Austrian participants. In addition, the professor who was in charge of the Cultural Studies course also involved a management consultant with ICT expertise who could help him with the technologies and tools adopted in the project.

In order to better integrate the exchange into the Austrian context, it was decided to link the activities of the project to the main topics of the Cultural Studies course: as this also drew on Giles and Middleton's volume on culture (2008), some of its core themes were taken as inspiration to develop the activities of what was called the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project. Consequently, the main issues that were agreed upon as potentially offering a powerful stimulus for discussion were the following: culture, identity, representation, difference and discrimination. These were later developed and expanded into structured tasks so as to touch upon a variety of sub-topics and points of view.

In the first meeting, the tools to be used for the interaction were also discussed: as I had previous experience with telecollaborative activities by means of wikis and blogs[18], we opted for these tools instead of using private learning environments such as *Olat* – used at Innsbruck University – or *Moodle* – adopted in Padova. The preference given to the wikipage was driven by our awareness of the importance of providing both groups of students with the same chances to visualize, read and use the materials of the project at any time, even after the exchange activities were over. In this light, private virtual environments were not felt as an ideal solution, since they could not grant continuous access to the members of the

[18] I first approached telecollaboration when I was still a student, participating in an online exchange organized at the University of Padova by Sarah Guth and Nicoletta Marini-Maio from Dickinson College, USA (summer semester 2008/2009). Since then, I have taken part in several other projects, both as a participant, a tutor, a moderator and a facilitation trainee (among others, *Soliya Connect Program*; *Soliya Facilitation Training; Human Rights Issues in Guatemala and Italy*; *Terana*).

other institution beyond the quite limited time span of the project. On the basis of these considerations, we agreed on the creation of a private wikispace on the free platform Pbworks[19]: being completely independent from either institution, the wiki was intended as the ideal virtual place to store all the materials and instructions for the exchange activities, and to make them accessible by the students both during and after the project. In addition, the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' wikispace also contained links to the students' personal pages (blogs), where each participant could post their messages and comments to the given prompts and activities. In order to provide the two groups with the opportunity to interact in real time, and therefore overcome the limitations of the asynchronous communication mode offered by the wikispace, the free videoconferencing system Skype was adopted to engage the participants in weekly, synchronous discussion sessions involving small groups of 3-4 participants. Given the fact that the computer laboratories at the two universities did not allow for the installation of webcam facilities, it soon became clear that the Skype sessions could only take the form of audio-conferences, thus excluding images, pictures and other sources of non-verbal clues.

An innovative aspect of the 'Padova-Innsbruck' exchange was the integration of Facebook into the tools for communication: as has been discussed in Chapter 2, the great popularity of the social network would appear to suggest its potential to stimulate interaction and socialization beyond more formal classroom activities. To make participation in the Facebook Group page more meaningful in terms of intercultural learning, two forums were set up to foster further and continuous discussion on some of the core topics of the exchange, namely culture and stereotypes. Despite the rather structured format of the forums, informal and

[19] http://pbworks.com/

spontaneous interaction was highly welcomed and encouraged, as it was believed to lead to increased levels of familiarity among the participants.

After the first meeting at Innsbruck University, several online videoconferences via Skype and email took place with the other two instructors involved in the project, which contributed to the development of tasks and materials as well as to the sharing of logistic information: among other things, for instance, a total of seven Skype meetings was planned, each of which would take place on Friday afternoon from October to December of the same year and last approximately 1.5 hours. A further face-to-face meeting took place in August of the same year, in which I had the chance to show the wikispace and Facebook Group page that had been specifically created to respond to the purposes of the project, as well as the activities that I had developed up to that moment with the help of the two instructors' suggestions.

The few weeks that followed were characterized by a high number of email exchanges and Skype sessions among the three instructors, with the aim of finalizing all the activities prior to the beginning of the project. At the end of September, with the support of my supervisor, Fiona Dalziel, I held an introductory meeting for the Italian group of participants, in which I outlined the aims of the project, its activities and the tools that would be used. A similar presentation was given at Innsbruck University a few days afterwards.

An aspect that is worth highlighting is that fact that the project was integrated into the course syllabi of the two institutions to varying degrees and in different ways. As suggested above, for the Austrian group the exchange was an integral part of the course in Cultural Studies: consequently, the students enrolled on that course were required to participate and were formally assessed on the relevance of their written contributions to the discussions. For the students at Padova

University, on the other hand, the exchange was not a compulsory part of their language courses, nor did it imply any final evaluation. Instead, the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project formally belonged to the wide spectrum of optional courses that students enrolled in the bachelor's degree course in *Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale* - an undergraduate degree course which involves the study of at least two foreign languages and of a variety of economic, legal and sociological subjects - can attend over the course of their studies so as to enrich their competences in the foreign language. For any of these optional courses, which also include work placement activities, participants are awarded three ETCS credits: in this sense, optional activities represent for the students a valuable opportunity to develop skills and knowledge by taking part in activities that they themselves have chosen, as well as to gain useful credits that are necessary to complete their undergraduate studies. As will be suggested later on in this Chapter, the differences in the institutional and educational scenarios that have been briefly outlined in this section represent an interesting stimulus to reflect on the impact of differing institutional conditions on the learners' levels of participation and motivation.

4.2.1 Students involved

Prior to the beginning of the project, all the students were asked to complete a questionnaire, in which they had to respond to a set of questions on their national and ethnic background, their perceived level of proficiency in all the languages they could speak – including dialects -, the frequency of their contact with foreign people (through travel, stay abroad periods and in their daily studies or personal lives), their familiarity with and frequency of use of some online tools, and their expectations of the exchange. The main aim of this pre-survey was that of helping me – in my role of both instructor and researcher – to obtain a better idea of the participants in the

project, their cultural and linguistic background, as well as their expectations and their previous encounters with 'otherness'.

There were eighteen students from the University of Padova[20] who took part in the project: as briefly outlined above, they were all attending their final year of *Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale*, had chosen the telecollaboration project among the optional activities offered by their institution, and seemed enthusiastic to participate in it, as they had heard positive feedback about previous exchanges organized at the same university, or had personally taken part in them.

From the responses to the questionnaire, therefore, I was able to outline a brief description for each student, and then draw up a general profile of the whole Italian class: this revealed that the students from Padova were all 21-22 years old, and of Italian origin, except for one Rumanian-born girl who had been living in Italy since 2003. Although they all had been abroad at least once, the vast majority of them (14 out of 18) had spent only a few days in a foreign country, mostly on holidays with their families or friends, or on short study abroad exchanges organized at high school. Only three participants commented that their longest stay abroad had lasted between one or two months, while one female student answered that she had lived and worked in Spain for more than one year. The overall image of the Italian group that emerges from the pre-questionnaire, therefore, would appear to suggest that the participants in the project were not widely travelled: interestingly, none of them had ever taken part in the European exchange project Erasmus, which allows students to spend one or two semesters in a different country, studying and preparing for exams at a host university. Although the reasons for such low levels of engagement in mobility programmes were not further investigated, this result seems

[20] Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the participants from Padova University as 'the Italian students', and to the group from Innsbruck University as 'the Austrian students': far from being strictly linked to a sense of ethnic or national belonging, both terms will be only used for the sake of brevity, and therefore embrace the complexity of ethnical/national identities and cultural backgrounds of the participants.

to be in keeping with the findings of a recent survey on the integration of telecollaborative networks in Europe (Helm, Guth and O'Dowd 2012), which has revealed that only a very low percentage of students, namely 4.5%, choose to spend a time span of their studies abroad. As the survey report has also suggested, telecollaboration exchanges may represent a "viable alternative for those students and young people who CANNOT engage in traditional mobility programmes" (ibid.: 31, emphasis in the original), due to financial, personal or logistic reasons. For these students, therefore, telecollaboration can be seen as a "second-best alternative" (O'Dowd 2011: 373) to experience international and intercultural communication (Nunn 2011: 29) without necessarily leaving their homes. While physical mobility is still seen as "the ideal way to develop linguistic fluency" (O'Dowd 2011: 373) and foster intercultural learning, online exchanges are increasingly considered as effective tools for preparing intercultural speakers (European Commission 2009: 18). In line with this, the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange might have been seen by the Italian students as a way to access 'otherness' within the familiar context of their home institution, and to benefit from the intercultural encounters offered online – an impression that seems to be confirmed by the high number of students who initially applied to participate in the project.

Despite their lack of experience in stay abroad periods, some of the Italian participants had indeed contact with foreign people in their daily lives, both for personal reasons and for study. Four students, for instance, had participated in previous telecollaborative activities, while others mentioned foreign friends, in-laws and pen pals as 'sources' of intercultural encounters. In this scenario, five students out of 18 explicitly commented that they had extremely little contact with foreign people: one Italian girl, for instance, wrote in her responses to the questionnaire that "I've never had the opportunity to interact constantly with people from other

countries. I've always felt this as a limit and that's why I chose to start this experience" (Emma, PD[21])

A further interesting element that emerges from the survey relates to the languages spoken by the Padova group: while Italian was the mother tongue of almost all the students – the only exception being the Rumanian girl who, however, had native-like proficiency in Italian -, half of the students wrote that they also commonly used their local dialect to communicate in informal situations. Besides English, the most widely spoken foreign languages were Spanish (nine students), French (9) and German (8). In a much smaller number of cases, Russian (3) and Portuguese (2) were further languages studied by the Padova participants.

As for English, the language used in the exchange, seven students self-assessed their level of proficiency as B1-B2 of the *Common European Framework of Reference*, or CEFR (Council of Europe 2001). Level B2 was also selected by seven respondents, while only one student opted for level C1. The three remaining answers indicate a lower level of perceived proficiency, namely B1. It is worth pointing out that these answers were by no means aimed at evaluating the students' degree of mastery of the language in relation to a NS-oriented framework: instead, they were simply considered as a potential indicator of the participants' personal feelings and perceptions on their knowledge of the foreign language, as well as of their confidence in using it. Interestingly, this aspect re-emerges in the Padova students' diary entries after their very first Skype session with their Austrian partners: despite feeling they were "independent users" of the language (Council of Europe 2001: 23), at the end of their first online meeting several Italian participants expressed both their concern for what they perceived "the great English Austrian students speak"

[21] All names have been changed to preserve the students' privacy. The acronyms *PD* and *IBK* that will be used when quoting the students' statements indicate the Padova group and the Innsbruck group respectively.

(Elisabetta, PD, first week), and their willingness to try hard to communicate as successfully as possible with their peers.

The very last comment on the Italian students' responses to the questionnaire relates to their use of some of the online tools adopted in the project: as for Skype, half of the students wrote that they never or hardly ever used the videoconferencing system (9). Their unfamiliarity is mirrored, for instance, by the fact that some of them had to learn how to make a group phone call on Skype on their very first meeting. Among the respondents, four students answered that they used the videoconferencing system twice a week, while three participants adopted it up to thirty minutes every day. More extensive use of Skype - up to one or two hours per day - only emerges in the responses of two students. Not surprisingly, Facebook was very popular among the Italian participants: seven students indicated that they usually spent up to two hours on the social network every day, while two of them used it even longer. In addition, four students wrote that they connected to Facebook up to one hour a day, and the same number of respondents indicated that the average time they spent on the social network was up to thirty minutes. Only one participant did not have a Facebook account, but was willing to create one to participate in the project.

The group from Innsbruck University who took part in the project was originally composed of fourteen undergraduate students in the first and second year of a teacher's degree program. As described above, the exchange was a compulsory part of the course in Cultural Studies offered at the English Department: the participants, therefore, were expected to attend the regular classes on Friday morning and, in the afternoon, meet their Italian partners online for the exchange activities. After three weeks, two Austrian female students dropped out of the course due to the work overload. Both of them informed their instructor, and one in particular

apologized about having to miss the opportunity to take part in the telecollaboration project. From the fourth week, therefore, the Innsbruck group was reduced to twelve participants, and new discussion groups had to be arranged for the Skype sessions so as to guarantee that everyone had at least one partner from the other country to interact with. The comments that will be made on the Austrian group in this thesis, however, will also include the two girls who left the project beforehand, since their contribution – despite its brevity – was important to set the scenario of the interactions.

Compared with the Italian group, the participants from Innsbruck University came from a more varied cultural background: out of the 13 people who responded to the pre-questionnaire, one girl was of Kurdish origins, one was born to Bosnian parents, and three girls had been raised in the South Tyrol, an area in the North of Italy in which German has official status. In particular, among the three South-Tyrolians, one student came from an Italian background, and considered German as a foreign language, while another had been raised in a mixed family in which both German and Italian were used natively. Despite sharing some common linguistic and cultural ground with her partners from Padova, both students were enthusiastic about starting the new experience, which – in one of the girls' words – would help them discover the "different perspectives" that everyone has on their culture (Mara, IBK, pre-questionnaire).

The overall impression that emerges from the responses to the questionnaire is that the Austrian participants were more interculturally experienced than their Italian peers: besides coming from a more varied cultural and ethnic background, all the students but one had spent at least one or two months abroad; only one of them had never been abroad, as was therefore eager to "learn a lot about the italian culture as well as experience our own culture from a different point of view" (Stefan, IBK,

pre-questionnaire). Given the fact that they were all in either their first or third semester at university, none of the Austrian participants had been on an Erasmus mobility programme: to my knowledge, however, two of them had successfully applied for it and were planning to leave a few months later. The Innsbruck students also had contact with foreign people in their daily lives: friends, pen pals, exchange students and in-laws were indicated as offering the main opportunities for intercultural encounters. Interestingly, none of them had ever taken part in telecollaborative activities, although computer-mediated informal interaction – via online games for example - was mentioned as one of the modes of communication one of the students was familiar with.

The spectrum of languages spoken by the Innsbruck students was also quite wide, with Bosnian, Kurdish, Turkish and Italian being some of the mother tongues alongside with German and a variety of local dialects (7). Besides English, some students also studied French (3), Russian (1), Spanish (1) and Italian (7) as a foreign language. As for English, the average level of English proficiency lay between B2 and C1 of the CEFR: both B2 and C1 were selected by three respondents, and four students explicitly chose B2-C1 to indicate their perceived degree of confidence with the use of the language. Level C1-C2 emerged only in one of the students' responses. Although these data should be interpreted with great care, as they are based on personal perceptions, it is interesting to note that the Austrian students rated their English proficiency higher than their Italian peers. This is an important aspect to consider, especially in the light of the comments made by the Italian participants after the first Skype session (see above) and of the impressions shared by some of the Austrian students at the end of the project: in a few cases, the different level of confidence and mastery of the language for communicative purposes seems to have been felt as real, as the following response to a final questionnaire shows "…in

general the Austrian peers had quite a higher level of English" (Eike, IBK, post-questionnaire).

Asked whether they were familiar with Skype, only one student from Innsbruck answered that she used it for more than two hours every day. Two students revealed that they accessed the videoconferencing system on a weekly basis (twice a week), while the majority of the responses indicated that Skype was never used (5), or very rarely used (5) for distant communication. One of the students, in particular, asked me for support in setting up her Skype account, since she was not sure of how to use the tool. Among those who used Facebook on a daily basis, six students answered that they accessed the social network up to one hour a day; two respondents used it more than two hours, and one student up to thirty minutes. Three people, on the other hand, used the social network only rarely. Despite the fact that one student was not registered on Facebook, she was willing to open an account for the purposes of the project.

4.3 The three 'Ts': topics, tasks and tools

The aim of this section is to explore the topics, tools and tasks that were adopted to engage the exchange participants in intercultural interaction. In doing so, the rationale which informed the selection of task types will also be outlined, so as to give a better picture of the choices that underpinned the design of the activities in the project. Throughout this section, examples of the activities carried out by the students will be provided.

4.3.1 Topics

Although the topics of the exchange have been mentioned at various points in this work, I believe that a brief section should nevertheless be devoted to their

description. As suggested in Chapter 3, many of the topics proposed in the project were metacultural by nature: thus, for instance, the students were encouraged to share their views on the essence of culture, identity, difference and discrimination. By exploring and negotiating the meanings and assumptions that laid beyond these terms, the participants were stimulated to investigate the personal and collective linguacultures at play in the interaction. With their emphasis on metacultural discourse, the topics chosen for the project also took on a transnational and transcultural character, in that they prompted reflection and interaction on a variety of cultures (Cs3, as suggested in Chapter 3), which shifted the focus away from the cultures generally associated with English, and opened up new possibilities to explore other sets of values and behaviours. This transnational/transcultural approach was fostered by the constant encouragement to look beyond one's own personal standpoints, so as to explore a variety of local, national and global perspectives.

The topics of the project were chosen and integrated into the seven Skype sessions so as to follow a sort of ascending journey of exploration of several interrelated aspects linked to culture. Starting from the notion of culture, which the students were asked to discuss in their respective classes before the beginning of the actual exchange, the topics led to a negotiation of the values, behaviours and attitudes that concur to make intercultural communication successful and meaningful. After agreeing on shared rules for effective interaction, the two groups of students were invited to analyse three stories of intercultural misunderstanding (see below for a description), and to comment on the causes that had led to communication breakdowns. In doing so, they constantly made reference to their own experiences as well as to the 'rules' for communication that they themselves had agreed upon. The aim of this activity was to stimulate the students' awareness of the

role of culture in shaping people's values and worldviews, and of the limitations of a static view of cultures which sees them as necessarily colliding entities.

The role of culture was later explored in relation to the notion of identity or, rather, identities: with the help of some prompts, the students were provocatively asked to reflect on the concept of multiple and fragmented identities, as well as on the cultural, social and personal dimensions that concur to shape them. This topic led to further discussion on how certain aspects of our identities can become a marker of difference: in particular, on that occasion the students reflected on the phenomena of stereotyping and social exclusion which often originate from differences in national or ethnic origins. In addition, they also explored the role of the media, and of society in general, in shaping social labels.

The discussion on difference was almost naturally followed by a session on gender discrimination, in which various forms of sexual and gender exclusion were touched upon, both at a global and at a local level. Figure 5 illustrates some of the prompts that were used to help the students prepare individually for the session, while Figure 6 exemplifies some of the guidelines and materials adopted to prompt actual discussion in the Skype meeting. In both cases, the transnational character of the topic is embedded in the constant shift of focus from the personal to the local, national and global level. The themes that emerged in this Skype session helped the students approach the next task, namely the analysis of three films in which all the issues presented during the exchange converged (see further on in this section for a brief description of the film analysis task).

This week, we would like you to explore the way gender and sexual differences may affect everyday life. Post a comment to this page based on the materials and readings given below.

A.

Watch the following video:

1. what is your reaction to the message it conveys? Do you agree with it?
2. in your opinion, does "being a woman" play a crucial role in social exclusion and discrimination?
3. the video tries to represent the situation of women from a global perspective: do you think that in some countries or societies women are more likely to be "labelled" and discriminated because they are women? Justify your answers by bringing examples, facts and/or figures.

B.

Now let's move from a global to a more national and local perspective: think about your own country and the one where your exchange partners come from. How much do you know about the situation of women in these countries?

Read the articles given below:

1. what is your reaction?
2. do the articles about your own country reflect the real situation?
3. in your opinion, what is the role of women in your society?
4. what have you learnt about the other country that you didn't know before?
5. (if you are a woman) have you ever experienced being treated differently because you are a woman?
6. do you think that men and women should have different roles in society?

ITALY:

- http://genderdebate.com/2011/02/16/italian-women-put-up-the-fight/#comments
- http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/30/italian-firm-women-job-cuts

(if you wish, you may also have a look at the comments that the readers of the "Guardian" have posted in response to the article: what do they tell you? How do you react to them?)

AUSTRIA:

- http://www.german-way.com/women.html

Update

Interesting comments so far..Let me add one thing that might help you reflect on the situation of women in Italy and Austria: when I was looking for materials on this topic, I found it extremely hard to find articles about gender inequality in Austria, whereas the Web offered hundreds of articles and posts about the situation in Italy. I don't know whether this can add something to the discussion, but I found it quite interesting. Do you think that there might be a reason why the same topic has su much visibility in Italy and much less in Austria? What are your impressions?

Figure 5. Examples of prompts proposed to help students prepare on the topic

B.

As preparation for today's discussion, you were asked to reflect on the **role of women** both at a global and at a more local level. With your peers, discuss whether gender can affect the way people are labelled, classified and even discriminated. On the basis of the video and the readings provided on the Gender and Sexuality page, share your views and experiences:

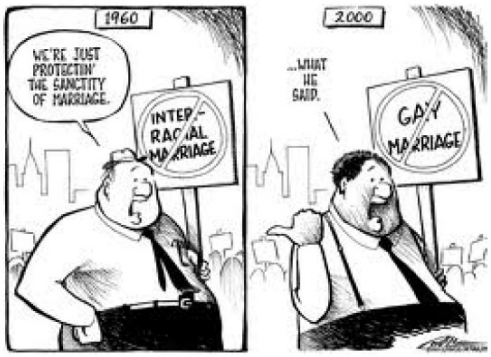
1. what is the role of women in your society? Which are the main problems that women are facing at the moment in the society you live in?
2. is there anything you would like to know about the situation of women in your peers' society? Is there anything unclear in the articles you have read?
3. in several countries, women are still payed less then men: what do you think about it?
4. What can be done to improve the condition of women at the global level? Think, for instance, at the video on social equality that you were asked to watch: is there a solution to the problems that women are facing worldwide?
5. And the local level, what can be done in YOUR country/society to challenge gender discrimination?
6. when people talk about gender discrimination, they often refer to the problems that women have to face in society. But is there such a thing as discrimination against **MEN**? Are men somehow discriminated or excluded in the society you live in? Can you think of any examples?

Source: http://tinyurl.com/4y9llbo

C.

Sexual orientation is a further aspect of personal identity that is still a marker of difference in several societies and contexts. Think, for instance, of **HOMOSEXUALITY**, and the way it is seen in the society and environment you live in:

1. is "being gay/lesbian" still seen as something to be hidden, rejected or even condemned? If so, why?
2. in your country/region/area, are homosexuals seen as "different"? Are they subject to open discrimination or violence? Bring examples to justify your answers.
3. what is homophobia?
4. what is your personal attitude to homosexuality?
5. if your sister/brother/child told you that she/he is homosexual, how would you react?
6. look at the comic strip below: which message does it convey? How do you react?



Source: http://tinyurl.com/d38dtm8

Figure 6. Examples of prompts used in the Skype session on gender discrimination

To conclude this brief overview of the themes approached in the Skype sessions, a few words must be said on the topic of the very last online meeting: as this took

place right before Christmas, together with the other instructors I thought it would be interesting to let the students explore the various meanings associated with the festivity, together with the traditions which accompany it. Instead of solely asking them to tell each other whether and how they celebrated Christmas, the students were first invited to look for information on how people from their partners' region and country were thought to celebrate it. Put another way, each student had to search the Web for any representation of what Christmas might mean in Italy, Austria, Veneto and Tyrol (the two regions in which the universities are located), and post it on a dedicated page on the wiki. During the last Skype session, the participants had to discuss whether the representations discovered by the partner group corresponded to the way the festivity was actually celebrated, both at a personal and a local/national level. In doing so, several stereotypical representations of 'Italian' or 'Austrian Christmas' were detected and promptly challenged, also thanks to the fact that not all the people involved in the project were Christians or celebrated the festivity. Although this activity may have had a less transnational nature, the students were still encouraged to address constantly the topic from both their own and a wider perspective, pointing out the various meanings and cultural connotations attached to the concepts of festivity and Christmas. In this sense, the discussion pointed out the limitations of considering culture as the sole expression of a dominant set of (national) values, beliefs and behaviours, and helped the students embrace a variety of different standpoints.

The main themes that underpinned the topics chosen for the discussion on Skype were also proposed in the two forums that were created on the Facebook Group page of the exchange. As will be seen in the description of the tools used in the project, one of the aims of the Facebook Group was to stimulate reflection and negotiation, in particular on the nature of culture and the impact of stereotypes.

Overall, the topics touched upon in the project can be summarized in the following graph, which also highlights the interrelatedness of the various themes. For an overview of the topics and their articulation across weeks, see Appendix A.

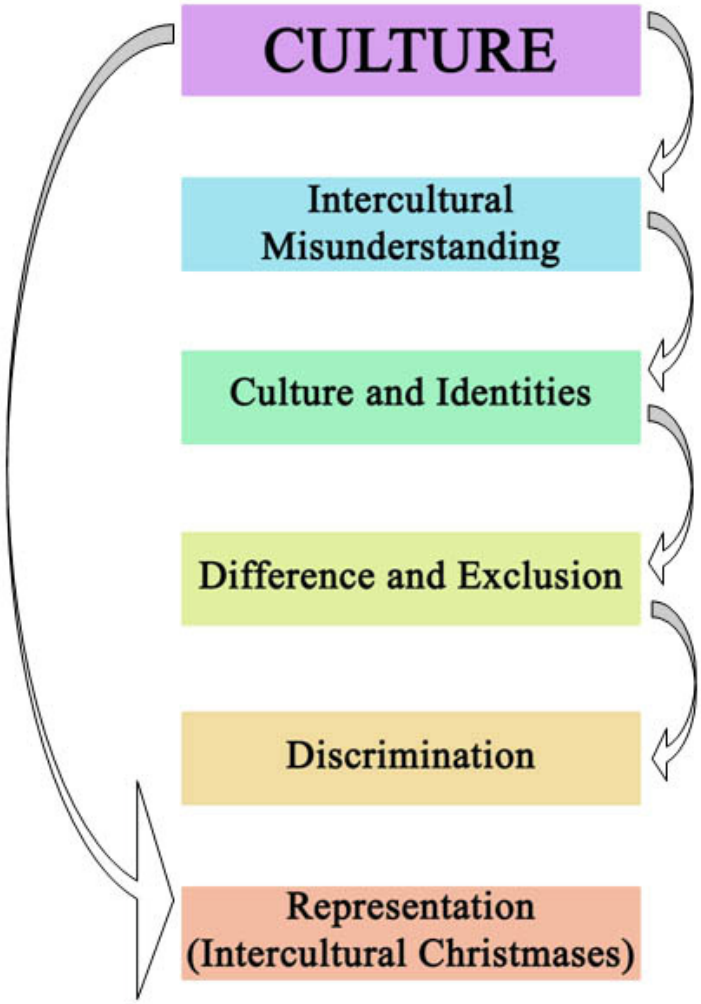


Figure 7. Sequence of topics in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange

4.3.2 Task types

Drawing on previous research on foreign language pedagogy, tasks can be defined as goal-oriented communicative activities which involve the achievement or creation of a final product (Willis 1996). O'Dowd and Ware describe them as a "meaning-centred activity that is based on learners' communicative needs and related to the real world" (2009: 174). In this light, tasks provide students with the opportunity to engage in the learning process in a way that fosters both "situational and interactional

authenticity" (Carson 2012: 49). In modern foreign language education, where the negotiation of linguistic and cultural meanings occupies a central role in the learning process, telecollaboration seems to offer enhanced opportunities to respond to the learner's needs: as suggested at various points in this thesis, telecollaborative activities consist of tasks which engage groups of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in authentic interaction, discussion and exploration. As O'Dowd and Ware emphasize (2009: 175), this feature makes network-based collaboration an ideal site for task-based learning.

Yet, as already suggested in Chapter 2, researchers also agree that online intercultural encounters do not necessarily lead to increased awareness by sole virtue of involving participants from different cultural backgrounds (Belz 2002 and 2003; Dooly 2011; Kramsch and Thorne 2002; O'Dowd 2003; Ware 2005). Instead, some authors suggest the importance of carefully designing collaborative tasks in network-based environments, so as to help learners initiate and sustain their intercultural learning processes (Müller-Hartmann 2000: 145), while at the same time limiting the tendency to approach the online activities with superficiality (Ware 2005: 76).

In this respect, O'Dowd and Ware (2009: 175) distinguish informal tasks – in which learners are free to "engage in general conversation with their partners about hobbies and interests" - from more structured assignments, in which participants are required to work together to produce a specific document, or engage in form-focused reflections on the foreign language. On the basis of the communicative activities that are promoted, therefore, the authors postulate a categorization of telecollaborative tasks which is articulated into three main categories: of these, *information exchange tasks* require learners to share information about themselves, their hobbies and home cultures. This can be fostered through monologic personal presentations, or through more articulated "ethnographic

interviews" (ibid.), in which learners are expected to activate not only attitudes of curiosity and openness but also their skills of discovery and interaction.

Comparison and analysis tasks, on the other hand, further require participants to interpret and compare documents or products from the other culture, and to relate them to their own. This can be obtained, for instance, by asking both groups to complete and analyse word-associations and other kinds of questionnaires, or by encouraging them to explore and discuss literary works, films and newspaper articles. As O'Dowd and Ware remark (ibid.: 175-178), these activities can have a linguistic focus – when participants provide each other with explanations on the language used in the products and documents under discussion – or a cultural focus – when partners clarify to each other the cultural assumptions that lie beyond language use, or when the differences and similarities between the two cultures are explicitly addressed.

The final type of online learning activities includes *collaborative tasks*, in which students in both classes work together to produce a collective document (essay), product (PowerPoint presentation) or linguistic/cultural translation. As suggested by the O'Dowd and Ware (ibid.: 178), this type of activity involves not only "coordination and planning", but also a great deal of "negotiation of meaning both on linguistic and cultural levels", since learners have to continuously ensure mutual support to reach their final goal.

In order to promote students' engagement with otherness in a way which is respectful of the degree of familiarity and interactivity of the participants, some practitioners suggest that task types be organized so as to follow gradual stages (O'Dowd and Ware 2009: 179): in an introductory phase, information exchange activities may offer the chance for students to get to know each other, manifest curiosity and activate skills of discovery. A comparative stage may then follow, in

which learners are encouraged to analyse and compare cultural products and draw parallels between the cultures involved in the interaction. Collaborative tasks may represent the final phase, as they are characterized by an "intense level of negotiation" and coordination (ibid.).

The tripartite categorization of task types advocated by O'Dowd and Ware constitutes the rationale that informed the design and implementation of the activities in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project, and in particular of its Skype meetings, which *de facto* constituted the core of the whole exchange. Each Skype session was articulated into two broad parts, namely an introductory 'ice-breaking' activity, and an intercultural discussion on the assigned topic, for which the students had to prepare prior to the meeting.

Besides the very first Skype session, in which the warm-up activity consisted in introducing oneself to the other members of the group with the help of a short visual presentation that the students had recorded individually using an online application called Fotobabble[22] (see below for details), all the subsequent online meetings included a game as ice-breaking task. The weekly games were principally aimed at helping the students create a familiar and friendly atmosphere, in other words a feeling of "unity with their online partners before they actually embarked on the real collaboration" (Dooly 2011: 322). Examples of this include the ice-breaking task proposed in week 2, in which each student had to list three aspects of his/her personality, hobbies or life, one of which was a lie. In turn, his/her peers had to guess what was true by writing in the Skype chat box which of the three things they thought was the lie. In a further discussion session, the students were asked to choose three significant places in their university city – related to both their studies and personal lives – and to describe them to their partners, possibly searching and sharing

[22] http://www.fotobabble.com/

their pictures on the Web. This activity was particularly appreciated by the participants, in that it allowed them to have fun together, familiarize and learn more about each other.

Yet, not all the weekly games were designed to simply foster gradual personal disclosure, as some of them were more specifically aimed at stimulating comparison, critical thinking and negotiation of meanings: in order to introduce the Skype session on 'Identity', for instance, the students were first asked to list six elements (nationality, family, religion, friends, studies/job, language) according to the place they occupied in their rank of values as well as to their influence on shaping their personal identities. After comparing their responses by highlighting differences and similarities, the students were also asked to discuss why some of the elements were more influential than others. Through this kind of task, the students also had the opportunity to explore the cultural connotations that they attributed to certain words and concepts, thus potentially unveiling the meanings and assumptions that each individual attached to a specific concept or expression – in other words, their personal linguaculture.

With their focus on both the socialization and sharing dimensions, the introductory activities can be considered as belonging to the *information exchange* type, in which the establishment of personal relationships and an increased awareness of the cultures and personalities involved in the interaction occupy a central role. Yet, the emphasis on comparison that characterized some of the ice-breaking activities seemed to move them away from the sole exchange of information towards what O'Dowd and Ware (2009) call the *comparison and analysis* task type, in a way that seems to signal the interrelatedness of task categories.

As suggested above, the second most important activity of the Skype sessions centred around the discussion on a given topic: this kind of task required the students to exchange information on their views and personal experiences, and to relate them to those of their peers. In this sense, the activities belonged to the *information exchange* type: yet, far from being monologic and static exchanges of factual knowledge, the discussions took the form of dialogic ethnographic interviews, in which "a great deal of cultural sensitivity and the intercultural skills of discovery interaction" are required (O'Dowd and Ware 2009: 175). An example of this is the session 'Exploring difference', in which the students were encouraged to discuss how labelling people on the basis of some of their personal, social or cultural identities, can lead to discrimination. As preparation for the sessions, the participants had been asked to watch a video on 'cultural and social labels', to think about what labelling and difference meant to them, as well as to reflect on episodes in which they had felt different or had been treated as such. During the Skype meeting, they had the opportunity to ask each other questions on their experiences – taking turns and acting as "both ethnographers and informants" (O'Dowd 2006: 91) - as well as to reflect on the power issues at play in contexts in which perceived difference can turn into real discrimination.

As suggested in Chapter 3, the fact that the students were encouraged to start their reflection from their own standpoints and perceptions, before moving on to explore those of the others, allowed them to potentially touch on a variety of personal and collective linguacultures. This process is also highlighted by the constant reference to the personal, local, and global dimensions of the issues under discussion: in the session 'Exploring difference', for instance, the students were first asked to think of what they themselves considered as 'cool' or 'uncool', before exploring the values and trends that prevailed in their own societies and at a more global level, and

drawing parallels between them. This 'movement' from the personal to the global also aimed to help the students avoid generalizations based on the experiences and information provided by one or two informants, and to look at the processes under discussion from a wider, transnational perspective.

Although this type of task requires a great deal of exchange of information, the emphasis on the analysis and comparison of a variety of standpoints, perceptions, experiences and values, makes these activities a potential site for the development of intercultural awareness and for the refinement of interpreting skills. Thus, in this case, too, the tasks described seem to fall into two of the categories outlined by O'Dowd and Ware (2009), namely *information exchange* and *comparison and analysis* - something which appears to suggest the difficulty to draw neat boundaries between task types.

An activity which, by nature, involves comparison and analysis is the word-association game (O'Dowd and Ware 2009: 176). Drawing on the *Cultura* project (Furstenberg *et al.* 2001 – see Chapter 1), which has made this kind of questionnaire one of its distinguishing marks, a word association task was proposed as part of the initial exchange activities. The game required the students to write instinctively two or three words that came into their minds when reading given prompts such as 'freedom', 'Austria', 'Italy' and 'job'. The responses given by each class were collected and analysed within the Skype discussion groups, so as to highlight cultural differences and similarities related to the concepts contained in the questionnaire. The main aim of the task was to stimulate reflection on the variety of cultural meanings that were associated to the given prompts, thus highlighting the various collective linguacultures at play in interaction. Figure 8 illustrates the responses given by both groups of students to the prompt 'immigrants':

IMMIGRANTS	Uni Innsbruck	Uni Padova
	Africa, Turkish Interesting people who have maybe an other point of view Different cultures, sometimes other religion Turkey Integration, social backgrounds, destinies New chances Africa, war, poverty Tensions, troubles, need support Turks, unsolved problems Language-barrier, little wages	Misunderstood, resigned Attriti (=conflicts, tensions) Racism, boat Criminality, misery Work Foreign people, foreign language Black people, integration, respect Culture, folklore, different habits Work, differences, richness Welcome A good way to know ourselves Far away countries, multiculturalism Poverty Poor, Padua Work need Many, difficulties, help Fear, new, difference Work freedom

Figure 8. Example of responses to the word-association questionnaire

Throughout the exchange, *collaborative tasks* were also encouraged, both as complementary activities to the discussion sessions and as independent assignments: the first case is exemplified by the second Skype meeting, in which the students had to discuss three stories on intercultural misunderstanding, share their personal interpretations of them and tell each other about similar experiences. Towards the end of the session, each discussion group was asked to produce a joint commentary on the three stories, and to post it to a collective page that had been created for each group on the wikispace of the project. Right from the start of their meetings, therefore, the students were encouraged to negotiate ideas and coordinate their efforts to collaborate together. This was thought to be at the same time challenging, as the students were not very familiar with each other yet, and stimulating, since they had to create a respectful and open environment for collaboration right from the start.

A more complex collaborative task was proposed towards the end of the exchange, and required the students to form three groups of up to 10 members: each

group was asked to watch one of the films suggested by their instructors and to write a critical film analysis to explain the most salient aspects to the rest of the class. The three films chosen for this task (*Brick Lane*; *Ae Fond Kiss*; *East is East*) focused on the issues dealt with during the exchange, namely identities, cultures, difference and intercultural collision/dialogue. For the analysis, the participants were given a list of guidelines aimed at helping them watch the film under a critical light and relate its message to the topics discussed throughout the project. In particular, the guidelines encouraged them to reflect carefully on the following aspects: the nature of conflict in the film; examples of confrontations of cultures and of intercultural collision; whether and how the conflicts were solved; and a link to the students' own personal experiences. After watching the assigned film, each group was expected to collaborate to produce a PowerPoint presentation that focused on the aspects illustrated in the guidelines, and to then present their product in a joint 'whole group Skype session' a few weeks later.

This task required high levels of reciprocity, mutual help and negotiation within each team, as the three groups had to decide how to divide labour across their members, and discuss the films from a cultural and linguistic point of view. Interestingly, none of the three films explicitly related to the students' cultures, but dealt with a variety of other cultures – British, Pakistani, Bengali, Muslim, Catholic etc. - and the effects of their coexistence in one country. The films were chosen so as to provide the participants with further elements to engage in metacultural discussion on topics that they had already explored in their Skype sessions: this time, however, the students were given potential access to a variety of new perspectives, namely those of the characters of the films. In this sense, the students were encouraged to pinpoint transnational and transcultural connections and act as mediators not only

between their own cultures, but also between a variety of other values, standpoints and experiences that stretched far beyond their countries' national borders.

4.3.3 Tools and task-cycle

As already suggested, Skype, a wikispace and Facebook were the principal tools that were adopted for the exchange: in order to benefit as much as possible from their features and potential, the three tools were used in quite different ways and for different purposes. Certainly, Skype had a prominent role in the project, in that it allowed the students to 'meet' and discuss online in small groups. Although the contribution of visual images is often considered to mirror "the immediacy of 'live' face-to-face interaction" and, thus, enhance the sense of closeness between the interactants (O'Dowd 2006: 92-93), in neither locations did the system support the integration of individual cameras. Consequently, during the Skype sessions the students were only able to hear and talk to each other, and to write comments on the shared whiteboard that appeared on their screens.

Like the audio-conferencing system, the private wikispace that had been created on the Pbworks platform also played an important role in the exchange, in that it stored all the materials and instructions that had been developed to guide the students' discussions and reflections. More specifically, the prompts and guidelines hosted on the wikispace aimed to help the participants prepare for, engage in and reflect on their online meetings. In this sense, the wiki was specifically designed to be used not only *during* the audio-conferencing sessions, but also *before* and *after* them, thus supporting the students in their preparation for the weekly discussions and encouraging them to post their reflections at the end of each online meeting. This seems to be in line with O'Dowd's remark (2006: 93-94) that telecollaborative tasks that take place by means of video- and audio-conferencing need to be embedded in a

carefully designed pedagogic structure so as to prevent participants from interacting only superficially, and should therefore be accompanied by pre-conference preparation as well as post-session analysis.

The 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' wikispace, whose logo is reproduced in Figure 9 below, was divided into several different 'areas':

- an introductory homepage with information on the exchange, its aims and structure, the instructors' contact details and a *Skype Names Table*, which contained all the names of the participants divided into nine discussion groups (two students from Padova and one/two students from Innsbruck). The introductory page also contained basic instructions on how to use the wiki, navigate through its pages, as well as add and edit content;
- a calendar and assignment page, in which – week by week – the new tasks were introduced with an overview of their instructions. Each new task was linked to two separate pages, named after the topic to be discussed: while one contained all the materials and instructions to help students prepare for the discussion on Skype, the other provided them with other prompts and guidelines to be used during their online meeting.
- 32 personal pages (blogs), one for each participant, which were used to post the students' personal introductions at the very beginning of the project, and reflective diary entries at the end of each Skype session.
- nine group pages, in which each discussion group could post their collaborative work, as exemplified in the previous section.

Figure 9. Logo of the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' wikispace

As described above, the wikispace hosted all the materials for both the pre- and post-Skype phases. The pre-session stage consisted in providing the students with videos, articles, statistical data or short stories to introduce them to the topic of the Skype session. All these prompts were posted on a dedicated page within the wikispace of the project, and were accompanied by questions aimed at stimulating critical thinking. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the students were asked to post a brief reflection on the issue using the 'comment' option on the same page of the wiki, and possibly relating their message to those written and published by their peers. In this way, individual reflection and argumentation was already combined with dialectical exploration of the other's opinions and experiences, although in-depth discussion was not promoted at that stage in the asynchronous mode.

After each Skype session, in which the students were encouraged to explore a variety of experiences, standpoints, cultural values and linguacultures through structured tasks (a game and a discussion/collaborative activity), each participant was expected to write a diary entry on their personal page so as to keep track of their intercultural encounters, their expectations and feelings, as well as what they had learnt or reflected on thanks to the exchange tasks. The only exception was the seventh (last) Skype meeting, at the end of which the students were asked to re-read

all their previous diary entries and self-assess their perceived intercultural learning on the basis of what they had written over the course of the project, with the help of Byram's descriptors for ICC. The choice of keeping a diary was triggered by the potential that journal writing has in helping learners to develop metacognitive skills and critical thinking (Helm 2009: 3), as well as to profit from the asynchronous mode to articulate their ideas in a more insightful and aware manner.

The post-Skype phase also included all the activities promoted on the private Facebook Group page. Although the wikispace remained the central repository of all the tasks and materials, this was not felt as an ideal place for the students to 'meet' and socialise beyond the Skype sessions, since none of them was familiar with the tool prior to the exchange. In addition, on the basis of my previous experience with collaborative wikispaces, I feared that the participants might find the wiki too formal and distant from the more popular online tools that they used for socialization and sharing. The Facebook Group was therefore set up with the primary aim of providing the students with a virtual space where they could establish and maintain relationships, share ideas on given prompts and, if they wished, become 'friends' with each other. In this way, it was hoped that an increased level of familiarity would help the participants feel more comfortable when working together.

However, the socialization dimension was not the only aim of the Facebook Group: as already mentioned above, the potential of Facebook in fostering intercultural learning was exploited through the creation of two forums aimed at promoting further metacultural discussion on issues related to the topics of the project, namely the nature of culture and the role and effects of stereotypes. Thus, the students had the opportunity to continue exploring some of the aspects discussed during the Skype sessions in a very informal, yet stimulating environment, and to enrich their online interactions thanks to pictures, hyperlinks and videos taken from

the Web. The first forum was on stereotypes, and was meant to break the ice among the students through the use of amusing pictures, but also to prompt critical reflection on the effects of having a stereotypical view of other people, countries and cultures. The students were therefore asked to reflect on how stereotypes are created and expressed, to comment on some pictures which were found on the Web and represented the way Europeans are believed to see each other, as well as to reflect on a video by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, in which she reports on the dangers of having a stereotypical view of the 'other'. Figure 10 illustrates the prompts used for the forum, while Figure 11 exemplifies one of the pictures caricaturing European stereotypes.

FORUM 1: stereotypes

By in Padova-Innsbruck2011 · Edit doc · Delete

In this first forum, we invite you to reflect on stereotypes and on their role in constructing our view of the world. **Read the following prompts and leave your comment to this page!** Please remember to follow our guidelines in order to participate successfully in the forums (see doc 'Forums: instructions for use" on the right side of the Group page)

- Consider what professor Lehtonen from the Finnish University of Jyväskylä states about cultural stereotypes: "In an intercultural setting, one of the goals of the participant is getting to know the attitudes and personality of the communication partner. In this process, we apply both **evidence** and our **existing beliefs** about the members of that cultural group. These are cultural stereotypes. **Stereotypes can concern one's own group or that of the other**. These are called respectively auto- and hetero-stereotypes ". *Are stereotypes always negative, or can they somehow help us deal with intercultural situations? Do you have stereotypes about your own country/culture? And what about stereotypes about your partners' country (Italy or Austria)?*

- From the Facebook Group Wall, click on "3 photos" at the top of the page: there, you will find a **photo album called "Sterotypes"**. Have a look at the pictures in the photo album, which represent in an ironic way what Europeans think of each other. *How do you react? Do you feel you might agree with any of them (be honest!)? Do many stereotypes emerge? How can you explain them?* If you are interested in this issue, have a look at this blog post: http://dailycandor.com/what-europeans-think-of-each-other/. Here, the blogger (an American) reports what, in his opinion, Europeans think of each other (Italians and Austrians included).

- Stereotypes can be dangerous and lead to misunderstandig, intolerance and racism insofar as they become *'single stories'* about that particular persons, countries and cultures. Watch Chimamanda Adichie's video "The danger of a single story" that you can find below. Chimamanda is a young and famous writer from Nigeria, author of several prize-winning novels. In your comment to this forum, **think of a single story that you have on any 'other' country** (Austria/Italy, Britain, the US, or Morocco, Albania, Sweden..any country!). Can you also tell us about any episode in which **you were the subject of prejudice or racism because of someone else's 'single story' about your country and culture**?

  LINK to the video:
  http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html

Figure 10. Prompts for Forum 1

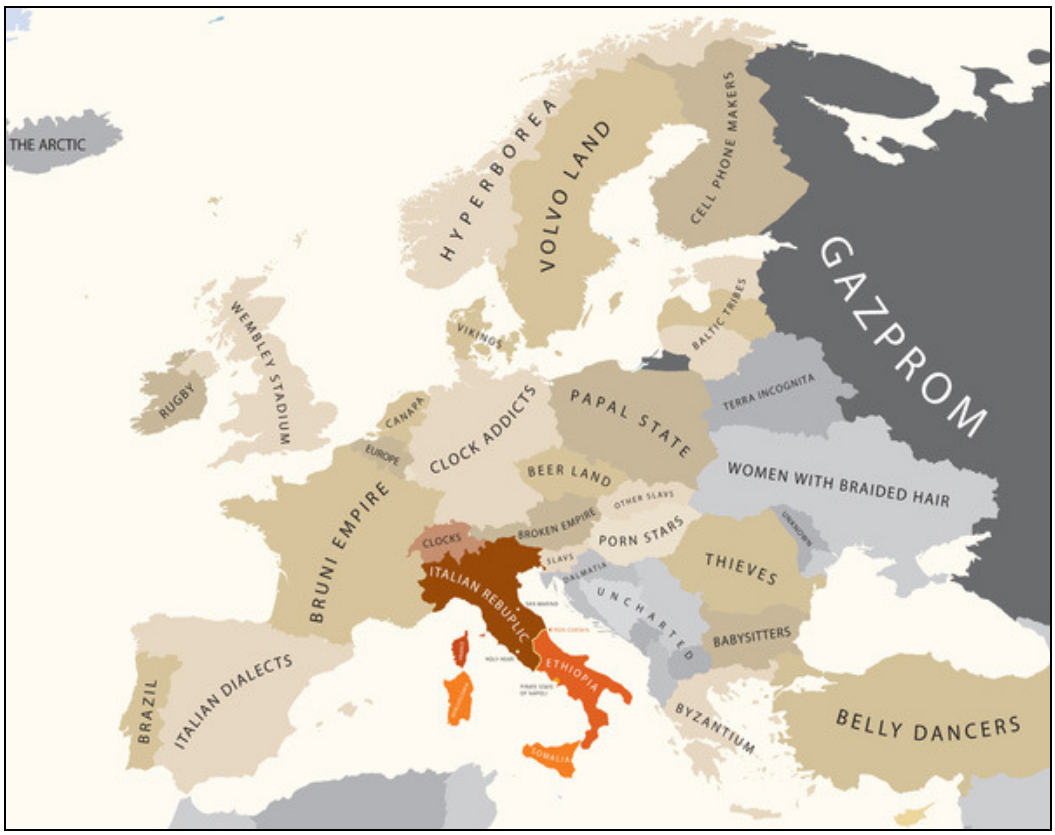


Figure 11. Caricature of European stereotypes: "Europe according to Italians" (©2009 by AlphaDesigner[23])

The second forum hosted on the Facebook Group page dealt with the notion of culture and what it meant to the students. Thus, all the prompts proposed in the forum aimed to stimulate metacultural reflection among the participants, who were asked to provide their own definition for culture as well as a metaphor to exemplify it. As a stimulus to their reflection, they were provided with three of the most well-known metaphors used in Cultural Studies (culture as "Iceberg, "Onion" and "Ocean") and were encouraged to create their own and choose/upload a picture to illustrate it. The prompts for this forum are illustrated in the Figure below:

[23] http://alphadesigner.com/

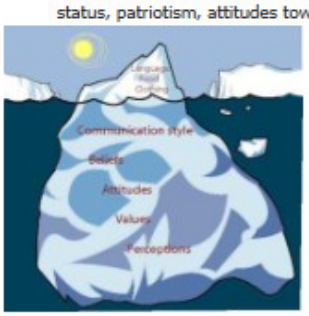
FORUM 2: Ocean, Onion or Iceberg?

By in Padova-Innsbruck2011 (Files) · Edit doc · Delete

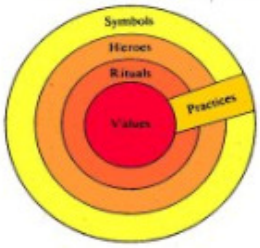
The topic for this forum is CULTURE and the way it constructs and represents our identities. During this exchange you have been discussing several aspects related to culture (identity, difference, discrimination), so now it's time to try to sum up your ideas about what culture is. Read the two prompts below and formulate your answer based on your personal feelings, ideas and experiences!

1. First of all, **what is culture**? Culture can mean different things to different people: for instance, it can be seen from a broad and national perspective (national culture), or as linked to specific groups of people (hip hop culture, Islamic/Christian culture, middle class culture etc..). What is YOUR definition of culture? Write a post which sums up your ideas.
2. The best way to understand culture is to look at it through **metaphors**: through the years, social scientists have defined culture through a variety of different images. Explore some of the metaphors given below and then think about how **you would illustrate your view of culture.** Which image would you use? Try to be creative!! Once you have thought of your personal metaphor for culture, either draw it manually (on a piece of paper) or using any computer graphic tools. Then take a picture of your work/save it as a jpg file and upload it to the Padova-Innsbruck Group page (simply click on „Add photo" on the Group wall). You can carry out this task in pairs if you want.

- The most commonly used metaphor for culture is certainly the **ICEBERG** (some of you have mentioned it in their diaries): its tip corresponds to what is actually visible in a given culture, even at the first contact. This includes language, food habits, clothes, art, architecture, press and media, non-speaking habits and social rituals (i.e. kissing on cheeks, bowing to a superior etc..). The invisible part, on the other hand, represents the values, attitudes and traditions that are not immediately recognizable unless we are familiar with a given culture: this includes communication styles, politeness strategies, directness of speech, attitudes to friendship, gender roles, social status, patriotism, attitudes towards corruption/honesty etc..



- Another image for culture is that suggested by Geert Hofstede in 1991: according to him, culture is like an **ONION**, in other words a system that can be peeled, layer by layer, in order to reveal the content. Imagine the whole onion as 'culture' and as you peel on, you see different levels which work on and influence culture (in any particular society). The most external levels are the visible aspects of culture (as in the iceberg tip), and include symbols (words, artifacts etc..), rituals and icons (people admired by the society). The external levels are the manifestation of the innermost values and beliefs of a culture, which Hofstede defines as the core of the onion.



- In 2005, a new metaphor has been suggested by Professor Tony Fang as opposed to Hofstede's representation of culture. According to Fang, Hofstede's vision of culture is a static one, in which the values and beliefs of a culture are remarkably stable over time - and therefore make up the core of the onion. Fang's claim is that culture changes over time and through the effects of globalization forces. He therefore crafted an **OCEAN** metaphor in contrast to Hofstede's onion analogy: as Fang suggests, in a particular context and at a particular time some cultural values may be promoted and may therefore be brought at the surface of the ocean, while others may be temporarily suppressed or lie dormant to be awakened by conditioning forces at some time in the future.

Figure 12. Prompts for Forum 2

The pre- and post-Skype phases exemplified above can be summarized in the graph below (Figure 13): here, the logical sequence of interdependent stages that guided the development of the various activities in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project is visually highlighted by the image of the task-cycle (Leaver and Willis 2004). Within each stage, a variety of tasks types – described in the previous section – was adopted to stimulate critical thinking, discussion, reflection and socialization.

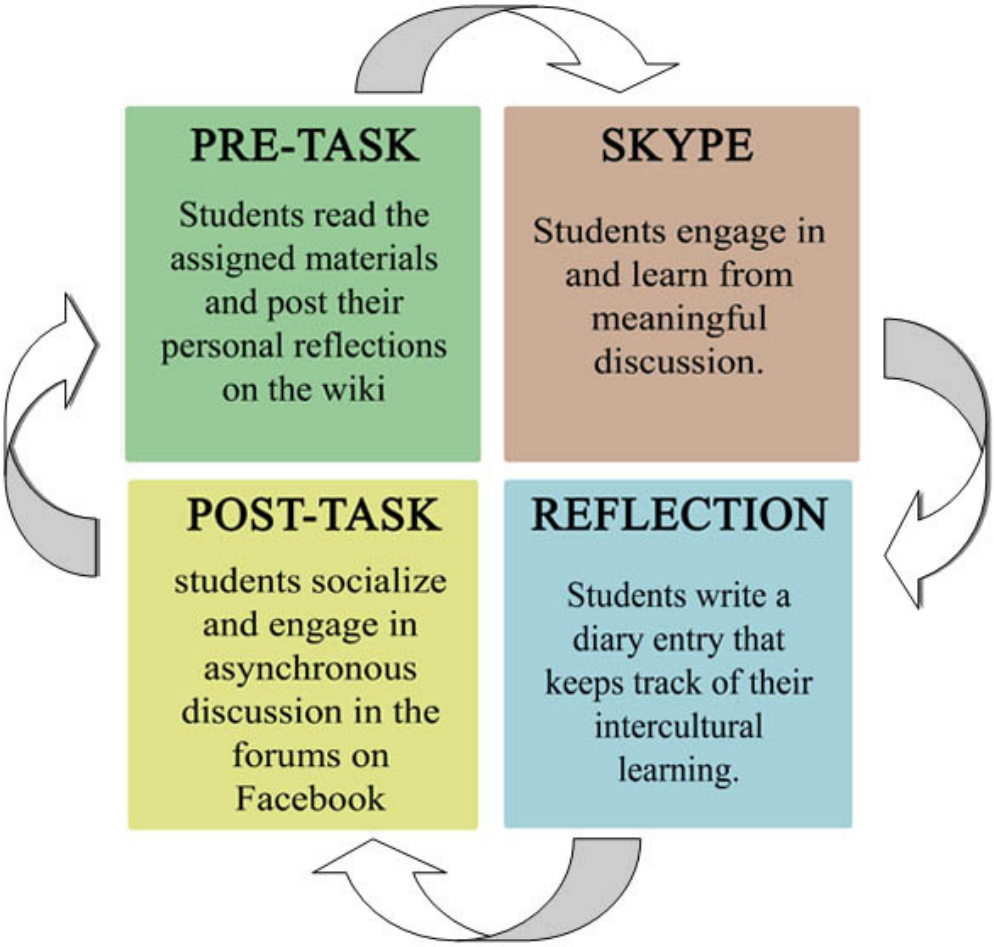


Figure 13. Task-cycle of the activities in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange

Other online tools concurred to stimulate interaction, participation and discussion throughout the exchange: these included, for instance, the highly popular video-sharing website YouTube[24], the file-hosting service Slideshare[25] and the Web-based

[24] www.youtube.com
[25] http://www.slideshare.net/

survey site SurveyMonkey[26]. Besides these well-known tools, other minor facilities were promoted in the project: as mentioned above, the free software Fotobabble was adopted at the very beginning of the exchange to give the students the opportunity to create an unconventional personal introduction. Instead of solely writing a few lines about themselves, the participants were also asked to choose a picture that best represented their personal 'world' or culture, upload it on their Fotobabble profile, and accompany it with a recorded comment. Each student was then encouraged to listen to the photo-message of their peers, take notes and prepare some questions for the first Skype meeting. The activity of recording the self-presentation on Fotobabble was carried out by the students in their respective laboratories, so that full technical support could be guaranteed.

A further free online tool adopted in the project was a wallwisher[27]. This tool, which takes the form of a blank page – a 'wall' -, can be used to post messages, notes, and comments, as well as to edit, re-use and move them from one side of the page to the other. A wallwisher is an ideal online space for brainstorming ideas, giving feedback on others' comments and for sharing them in real-time without the need to meet face-to-face. The wallwisher entitled 'Intercultural speakers' was created and adopted in the very first class meeting with the students: to introduce the participants to telecollaboration activities in a gradual and non-intimidating way, we invited both groups to meet separately – yet at the same time – in their respective computer laboratories. There, they were not yet asked to interact directly with their partners abroad through Skype: instead, they were encouraged to collaborate with their class peers to brainstorm some ideas and agree on what, in their opinion, would make intercultural communication successful and meaningful. For this activity, they had been previously asked to read and reflect on some materials, including an extract

[26] http://it.surveymonkey.com/
[27] http://wallwisher.com/

from O'Dowd (2007d) in which the author argues for the importance of honest and open dialogue between communication partners. Once they had come up with some ideas, the students were all invited to publish them on the wallwisher, where they were also able to read what the participants from the other country were posting in real-time (see Figure 14 for a few examples).

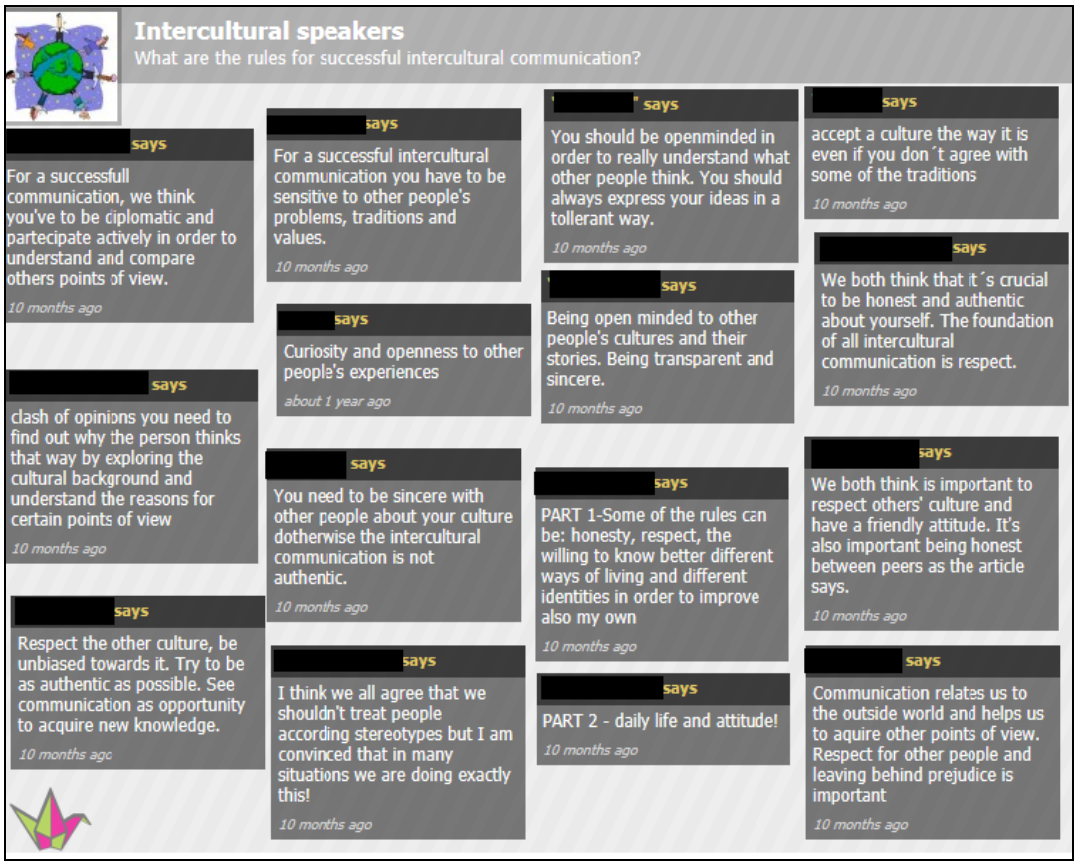


Figure 14. Examples of comments shared on the wallwisher

The wallwisher activity served two main purposes: firstly, it aimed to help the students negotiate and make explicit some principles of effective intercultural communication (among others: curiosity, respect, openness to diversity, honesty, critical attitudes, sincerity), without any external help or interference from their instructors. These principles were later discussed in greater depth in the first Skype meeting - where the two groups finally met online - and became the 'rules' of reference for both classes throughout the project. In this sense, the joint collaborative activity not only helped the participants share their own particular socio-cultural

assumptions about interaction – something which, according to Nunn, is otherwise unlikely to happen in intercultural communication (2011: 33) – but also had the potential to foster the collaborative negotiation of a common repertoire of values, meanings and rules of behaviour within a community of practice, thus preluding to the emergence of a third space. Secondly, working on the wallwisher in separate groups aimed to enable the students to approach online collaboration at a gradual pace, moving from within their familiar class environment to the wider community of practice promoted by the exchange and acquiring knowledge of potentially differing online "cultures-of-use" (Thorne 2003). From this perspective, the wallwisher activity also helped them to become more familiar with online tools without necessarily having to cope with the emotions that often accompany new intercultural encounters.

4.4 Focus on form

At various points of this thesis, the role of the participants in the project has been suggested as occupying both an ELF and an EFL dimension, something that would appear to highlight the complementarity of the two – often considered dichotomous – poles. In the interactions with their peers from abroad, the ELF dimension certainly prevailed for two main reasons: firstly, the students were by no means evaluated on the appropriateness of their language output, nor did the instructors interfere with the interactions that occurred between the two groups. Secondly, and more importantly, the specific topics and tasks of the project allowed the participants to approach a variety of cultural meanings that transcended those national borders that are often advocated – in the context of EFL teaching – as the ideal territory for cultural learning.

In this scenario, dominated by an ELF communicative dimension, the participants still also occupied the role of learners of English as a foreign language, since they had all chosen English as the language of their studies. In the case of the Italian students, in particular, it was possible to arrange two separate in-class meetings in the foreign language laboratory – one in November and the other in December 2011 – not only to encourage them to share what they had learnt about their peers' and their own cultures up to that moment, but also to help them reflect on language features that might improve their effectiveness in both ELF and EFL communicative contexts. In this sense, the emphasis on fluency and negotiation of contents that characterized the online interactions with the Austrian students was enriched with a more specific focus on form that was relevant to the Italian learners' specific needs.

As has been outlined in Chapter 2, focus on form is claimed to play an important role in online collaborative activities, in that it can help students "notice" target language forms (Schmidt 1993a; 1993b) and consciously recognize the mechanisms that underlie their use, thus finding a balance between meaning and form within highly communicative contexts. In the specific context of the study described in this paper, focus on form was embedded in data-driven learning activities. In both face-to-face class meetings, the materials used for focus on form stemmed directly from the written texts that the students had produced during the project, which included their weekly diaries, posts to the weekly activities on the wiki, and comments to the Facebook forums. The following paragraphs are an attempt to illustrate some of the activities that were proposed to focus the Italian students' attention on linguistic forms.

During the first class meeting in November, the students were first asked to read through a list of sentences taken from their written output, and to identify any

misused forms - either in terms of grammatical or syntactic structures, or in terms of vocabulary – so as to negotiate possible alternatives with their peers. An example of the sentences used for this activity is the following: "More we grow and more we become curious so happens that we begin to create the story of our country". Although the incompleteness of the correlative comparison pattern may not prevent the message from being successfully conveyed, increasing awareness of the use of this pattern could still help clarify the close relationship of the processes described by the speaker.

The second activity of the class meeting aimed to help the students expand their university-related vocabulary, which was found to be quite limited and repetitive. Figure 15 illustrates the tasks that were developed for the purpose. As can be noticed, the last task of this activity required the students to engage in corpus analysis, in other words the exploration of a machine-readable collection of naturally-occurring texts which aims to obtain empirical and consistent data on language use (Baker 2006): although most of the students were already familiar with corpus investigation, brief introductory training was provided for the whole class on how to use the free concordance program *AntConc*[28] and interpret its results.

For the specific task described above, a small corpus of texts written by US university students was used for reference: the corpus had been compiled using the American students' contributions to several forums in a previous bilingual telecollaboration exchange organized by the university of Padova. Investigating a corpus of authentic texts has been acknowledged as an effective method to gather information about real language use (Baker, Hardie and McEnery 2006; Prat Zagrebelsky 2004): through the calculation of concordances and collocates, for instance, students can have access to the most common patterns surrounding a lexical

[28] http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html

item, thus uncovering underlying discourses as well as the formal techniques used to present them (Baker 2006: 114). For the purposes of our class meeting, corpus analysis aimed to provide the students with an opportunity to enhance their awareness of recurrent patterns related to university lexicon, and to appreciate the variety of language uses so as to possibly enrich their vocabulary.

ACTIVITY 2: UNIVERSITY VOCABULARY

A. In small groups of 4 or 5, brainstorm some vocabulary related to university. What can you think of? Write down all the words that you would use to describe your studies.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.

B. With the person sitting next to you, write one sentence about your studies WITHOUT using the verbs "study" or "attend"

.....
.....

C. In pairs, open the corpus analysis software *AntConc*, and investigate the following keywords in a corpus of English native speakers' texts:

student; year; degree; graduate/graduation.

You can sort each keyword both on the left and/or on the right. For each word, try to identify recurrent patterns (words that regularly appear with that keyword). Are there any patterns that you have never thought of using yourself? Note them below:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

***Figure 15**. Form-focused activity to increase awareness of the variety of vocabulary*

The second class meeting with the Italian students took place in December, before the end of the telecollaboration project: as by that time the number of texts produced by the students had further increased, it was possible to develop more form-focused activities on the basis of their communicative needs. In the first activity - called 'spot the difference' (Figure 16) - the students were provided with a list of sentences taken from their written materials: each sentence contained a noun or verb that had been used in such a way that might have distorted the intended meaning and that, therefore, might have represented an "obstacle to communicative success" (Seildhofer 2004: 220). For this activity, the students were guided in the exploration of the British National Corpus[29], an online 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a vast variety of texts and genres.

Corpus investigation also formed the basis for further form-focused activities proposed in the second class meeting, which required the students to explore and discuss the concordances of a series of given words and expressions taken from their own texts, so as to pinpoint recurring collocates: in one of these activities, for instance, the grammatical patterns following the expression "I agree with" were investigated and compared with those used in the above-mentioned corpus of texts composed by US students, with the aim of improving the Italian participants' awareness of the authentic uses of agreement expressions and enrich the variety of patterns available to them for communication (Figure 17).

[29] http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/

Padova-Innsbruck exchange
Focus on Form, 7 December 2011

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

What follows is a list of sentences taken from your written materials. Each sentence contains a noun or verb that you have used in a way that might alter the message/meaning you intended to convey. For each word, check its authentic use by investigating the free online corpus BNC.
To do so, follow these steps:

1. go to the BNC (British National Corpus) website BNC: http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/;
2. as 'search string', type the word you are looking for;
3. select the KWIC option, and sort the word to the left and/or right: this will order all your results alphabetically according to the first word on the right and/or the left of your search word;
4. click 'search' and then explore the extracts provided on the right side of the screen: **in which contexts and with which meanings** do your words appear?

Here are the words you should search in the corpus:

- CONFRONT: "We confront each other about many different topics..."

In which contexts and with which collocates is the verb used in the BNC?
……
……
Which verb/s or expressions could be used instead?
……
……

- ARGUMENT: "We discussed about *various arguments*"

In which contexts and with which collocates is the noun used in the BNC?
……
……
Which noun would be more appropriate in this contex?
……

- COMMIT: "I tried to understand what she thinks and what is difference from my culture in order to not committ a misunderstanding."

Authentic collocates for "commit" (which connotation does this verb have?):
……
……
Which verb/s or expressions would be more appropriate to convey the meaning of the sentence reported above?
……

- ACKNOWLEDGES: „there were problems in intercultural acknowledges"

Authentic collocates for „acknowledges" (how and with which function is this word used in the BNC?)
……
……
Which noun should be used instead?
……

Figure 16. Form-focused activity "spot the difference"

EXPRESSING AGREEMENT

Please consider the following examples, taken from some of the texts that you have written on the wikipages: then observe the examples taken from a corpus of authentic texts written by a group of American students participating in the online forums of a previous telecollaboration exchange:

1. Which grammatical structures follow the pattern "I agree with"?
2. Which differences can you notice between the expressions used by the American students and the ones that you have used?
3. Do any grammatical forms only appear in your concordances?
4. Which other ways do you know to express agreement with somebody else's ideas?

Padova students

I agree	with you all
I agree	with this claim
I agree	with K. when she says we are not aware of these identities
I agree	with the opinions of everyone
I agree	in what A. said
I agree	with A. when she said that humor
I basically agree	with L. and M.

American students

I agree	with K. that the American Dream is something that many
I partly agree	with what you wrote
I agree	with A. in that people should feel good about their looks
I agree	with you all that America's patriotism can be seen as both a sign
I agree	with K. in that the TV shows today represent what people
I agree	with K.

Figure 17. Form-focused activity on the expression 'I agree with'

As this section has tried to exemplify, focus on form was integrated into the telecollaboration project so as to offer the Italian students the chance to notice how certain words and expressions are used in authentic contexts, to explore the meanings and connotations of given patterns, as well as to expand their vocabulary so as to

appreciate the variety of linguistic and communicative choices provided by the English language, and which can be activated in both ELF and EFL contexts.

4.5 Written output

As suggested in the introduction, the following sections will look at the general outcomes of the project: in particular, the paragraphs below will outline the number of texts and words which were produced by both groups of participants - the vast majority of which constitute the basis for the analysis that will be presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

In order to obtain a clearer picture of the two groups' contributions to the exchange activities, all the texts written by each participant were collected and quantified separately. The texts include the students' personal introductions (written at the beginning of the exchange to present themselves to the rest of the group), their diary entries, their posts to the weekly tasks/topics on the wikipages, their contributions to the Facebook forums, and any other comment or message that the participants had posted on the Facebook Group page (e.g. to ask for information or help, to communicate with their peers or instructors, or to share further pictures, links and materials on the topics of the exchange).

After quantifying the number of texts composed by each individual, the total number was calculated for each group: although two students from Innsbruck had dropped out during the course of the project, their written output was included in the analysis, since their posts had triggered further reactions and comments on the part of the other students involved in the project. All the students from both groups had composed at least a minimum of two texts, the only exception being one Austrian participant who never contributed to either the wikispace or the Facebook Group page. Tables 2 and 3 sum up the number of texts composed by each group:

Padova students (tot. 18)	Number of texts (tot. 301)
Personal introductions	18
Weekly diaries	84
Posts to wikipages	65
Posts to Facebook forums (Forum 1 + Forum 2)	45 + 20 = 65
Other posts to Facebook (FB)	69

Table 2. Number of texts written by the Italian group

Innsbruck students (tot. 14)	Number of texts (tot. 122)
Personal introductions	13
Weekly diaries	47
Posts to wikipages	24
Posts to Facebook forums (Forum 1 + Forum 2)	14 + 5 = 19
Other posts to Facebook (FB)	19

Table 3. Number of texts written by the Austrian group

As can be inferred from the data presented above, and as illustrated in Figure 18 below, some differences emerge in relation to the number of texts composed by the two groups: on average, the Innsbruck students posted fewer messages than the group from Padova (8.71 vs 16.72 texts per student). This is not only linked to the fact that there were fewer Innsbruck participants in the project, but also to the fact that, in the Austrian group, there was a greater variation in the number of contributions from student to student: while the difference in the number of texts

across the various participants from the Padova group is relatively low - displaying a coefficient of internal variability (CV) of 37.69% -, the inter-group variation increases among the Innsbruck students, reaching 53.33%. This means that a greater discrepancy exists within the Austrian group between the number of texts composed by the more 'active' students and the number of posts made by those who only rarely contributed to the wikispace and/or the Facebook Group page. If the two groups of texts are considered altogether, in other words as forming a unitary group, the internal variability is even greater, reaching 79.55%: this implies that a significant level of internal variation exists among the texts which compose the macro-group.

The difference between the two groups seems to be also confirmed by the so-called *Student's t-test*, a statistical test which is used to compare the actual difference between two means in relation to the variation in the data as expressed by the standard deviation. In brief, after calculating the standard deviation of the difference between the means of the two groups (sd= 2,34), the t-test shows a result at the 99% probability level, which indicates that the two collections of texts are significantly different from each other.

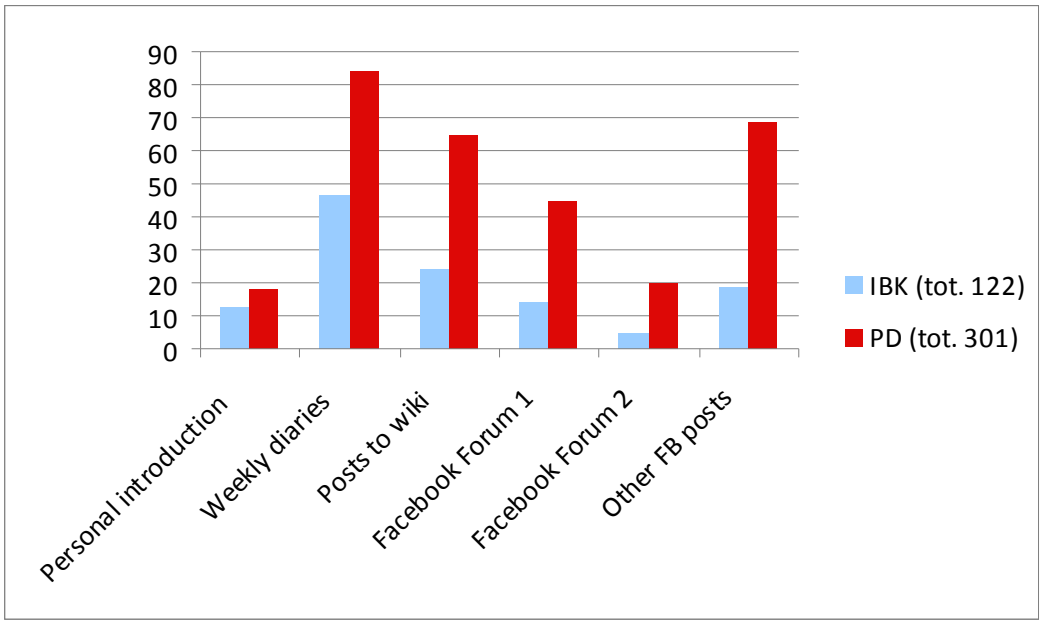


Figure 18. Number of texts composed by both groups

A look at the number of words written by the two groups of students seems to support the differences illustrated above. In this case, the number of words that constitute the participants' personal introductions, weekly diaries, posts to the tasks on the wikispace and comments in the Facebook Group page was calculated. Overall, the Italian students produced a total number of 44,862 words, the majority of which in their weekly diaries. The Austrian students' written output consists of 26,303 words, with the diaries constituting the richest source of data. Tables 4 and 5 below show the number of words for each group, while Figure 19 compares the results obtained:

Padova students (18)	Number of words (tot. 44,862)
Personal introductions	4,285
Weekly diaries	21,444
Posts to wikipages	11,694
Posts to Facebook forums (Forum 1 + Forum 2)	3,756 + 2,144 = 5,900
Other posts to Facebook	1,539

Table 4. Number of words in the Italian students' written production

Innsbruck students	Number of words (tot. 26,303)
Personal introductions	3,109
Weekly diaries	14,651
Posts to wikipages	5,732
Posts to Facebook forums (Forum 1 + Forum 2)	1,259 + 992 = 2,251

Other posts to Facebook	560

Table 5. Number of words in the Austrian students' written production

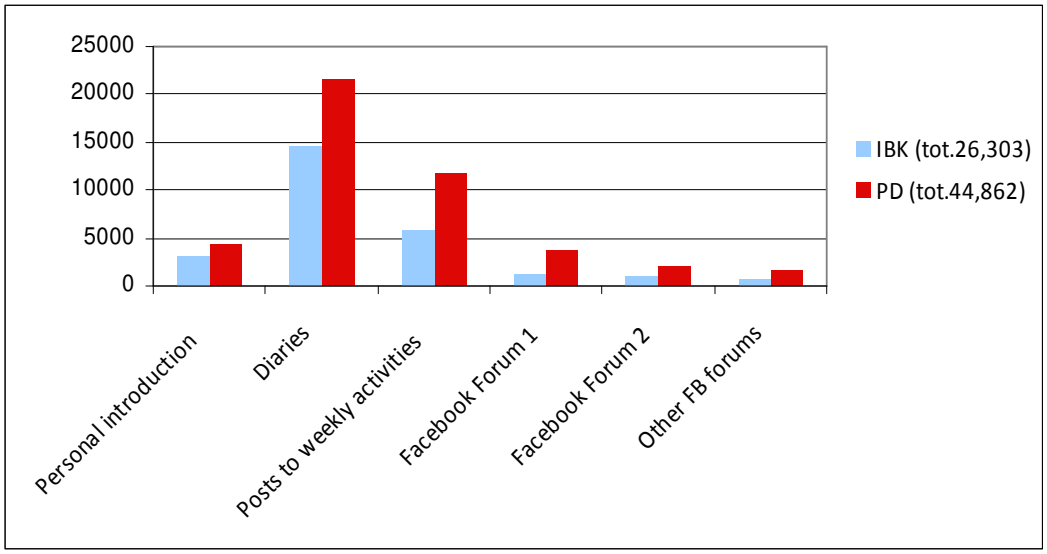


Figure 19. Number of words composed by both groups

What the differences illustrated above appear to suggest is that the two groups of students contributed to the written assignments in different ways and to differing extents. While, on average, the Italian students posted more texts and were more similar to one another in terms of the quantity of their written output, the Austrian students were appear to have been less active on both the wiki and the Facebook group, with only few students posting a high number of contributions. Some of the possible reasons for this difference will be discussed in the investigation of the difficulties encountered in the course of the exchange (section § 4.7).

Despite these remarks, an aspect that is worth highlighting is the presence, among the texts that the students were explicitly required to write as part of the project tasks, of completely spontaneous posts on the Facebook Group wall: besides responding to the stimuli provided by the two discussion forums, some participants also used the Group page to communicate with me - mostly to ask for support about specific tasks and to inform me of their absence from class -, as well as to share

further links and resources taken from the Web which related to the various topics discussed in the project. In the first case, the use of Facebook seems to suggest that the students preferred the social network over more traditional communication tools (e.g. the email) when they wanted to communicate with their instructor. This would appear to be confirmed by the fact that, once the Group was set up, none of the students used emails to communicate with me, but preferred the social network for 'organizational' communication, although emails were much used at the very beginning of the exchange. This seems to support the claim that Facebook can potentially facilitate teacher-student communication by means of what students perceive as a more direct tool (Munoz and Towner 2009; Mazer, Murphy and Simonds 2007).

As often happens on Facebook, the Group page was also used by the participants to share further materials and stimulate the other students' comments on the topics of the exchange (see Figures 20 and 21 for some examples). This was probably the most interesting aspect of the use of Facebook in the project, since it was not planned nor explicitly required: it was a spontaneous outcome of the use of the social network as a place for collaborative learning. This seems to show that social networks and other open resources such as images, comic strips and videos are greatly appreciated by students who use them to highlight or confirm aspects of their learning process.

Figure 20. Example of spontaneous post on the Facebook Group wall (Elisabetta, PD)

Figure 21. Example of a spontaneous post on the Facebook Group wall (Eike, IBK)

4.6 Students' impressions and feedback

Overall, the students were enthusiastic about the project. At several points during the exchange, the participants expressed their excitement and eagerness to meet and communicate with their peers. In addition, they seemed to enjoy the choice of the topics related to culture and identity, which they found "interesting and very inspiring" (Bruno, PD, Facebook post). One month after the project had started, a student from Padova commented on the ongoing experience by posting a comment in the Facebook Group page: "I'm finding this experience extremly interesting; everything is working well (except for computers and skype ahaha). Every week we discuss about different aspects related to intercultural communication and we do it in many ways..you chosen well the various topics and I think it will continue in this 'good wave'. The skype sessions with our austrian peers are really enjoyable" (Vania, PD).

This post was followed by similarly enthusiastic comments, which also highlighted the potential of the exchange in stimulating the participants' language skills: a student from Innsbruck, for instance, commented that "[t]his experience is very interesting, useful and fun. It is really helping me to broaden my horizons and to improve my speaking skills!" (Mara, IBK). A student from Padova replied to this post in the following way: "I agree with all my peers!! I think that this is one of the most useful and interesting activity I've done since I started the University. I've understood what intercultural communication means and I could improved my spoken interaction ability" (Chiara, PD). Eike, a participant from Innsbruck, confirmed her peers' comments by remarking that "[i]t's really interesting to talk with persons from a different cultural background and to share opinions. I think during this month we had the opportunity to get to know the members of our group and I enjoyed it really much. The topics (e. g. identity) we discussed are interesting

and helpful to understand some basic concepts of culture" (Eike, IBK, Facebook post).

Posted halfway during the project, the comments reported above shed some light on the feelings, attitudes and impressions that the participants – or a least a number of them - felt to be true in relation to their ongoing experience. These impressions are also mirrored in the responses given by the students at the end of the exchange, when they were asked to complete a final questionnaire composed of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The aims of this survey were twofold: providing the students with an opportunity to give their feedback on the project and suggest possible areas of improvement, and helping them reflect on the extent to which the experience had stimulated their language development and intercultural learning. All the participants - except for two Austrian students, and the two girls from Innsbruck that had left the project halfway - completed the questionnaire: the responses given by the 28 respondents, therefore, can be seen as quite indicative of the two groups' overall opinions.

Asked about what they had liked the most in the project, all the students responded that the most engaging part was getting to know and communicating with people from other cultures, thus accessing and learning from a variety of different mindsets, experiences and opinions – something which, in some of the students' words, is not often possible in class (Riccardo, PD; Bernhard, IBK). In addition, all the students expressed their appreciation of the topics chosen for the exchange, as well as for the materials and activities adopted to stimulate reflection and discussion. According to one of the participants, the Skype sessions were the most engaging part of the project, "because we dealt every week with very interesting topics. I also found very funny and nice all the activities, videos, texts and so on that we had to prepare at home before the skype section. Very useful!" (Chiara, PD). This comment

is echoed in the response given by a student from Innsbruck, who had particularly appreciated “the fact that every media (videos, texts, comic strips) were used to introduce us into the various topics” (Mara, IBK). Another participant remarked that she had liked “the fact that it [the project] opened my mind, discussing about different cultures and points of view really helps to remove judgments and stereotypes. I found very interesting to talk about different values and lifestyles and discover so many things about other cultures!” (Sofia, PD). According to Elisabetta, a student from the Padova group, the exchange had provided an opportunity to question and challenge her own assumptions and beliefs, as well as to delve into topics that she “had never had the chance to face before”. For Bernhard, a participant from Innsbruck, the project had fostered the exchange of ideas and new perspectives, which in turn had contributed to an increase in his intercultural awareness.

The positive benefits of the exchange on the students’ perceived intercultural learning also emerge from their answers to other, more specific questions: using a 5-point Likert scale, for instance, the participants were asked to rate from 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much) the extent to which the interaction with their peers and the topics chosen for the project had helped them reflect on their own cultures and they way these might be seen by others. As can be inferred from the graphs in Figures 22 and 23 below, both groups of students gave very positive responses - from medium (3 points on the Likert scale) to very high (5 points) -, thus suggesting that the exchange had encouraged them to ‘decentre’ and look critically at their own cultural values and assumptions.

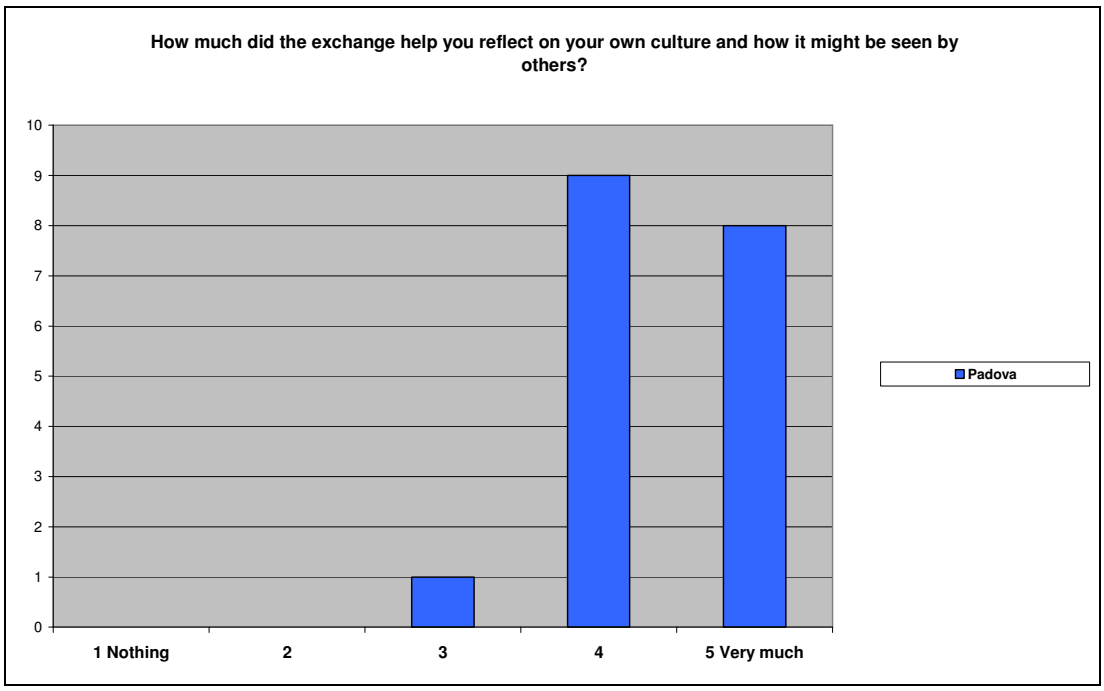


Figure 22. Perceived benefits of the exchange in relation to one's own culture (Padova students)

Figure 23. Perceived benefits of the exchange in relation to one's own culture (Innsbruck students)

In a further question, the students were asked to consider the impact of the project on their ability to reflect on the other culture and on the differences and similarities with their own. In this case, too, positive responses were given, with both

groups of students mostly defining the benefits of the project as high and significant (4 points on the Likert scale).

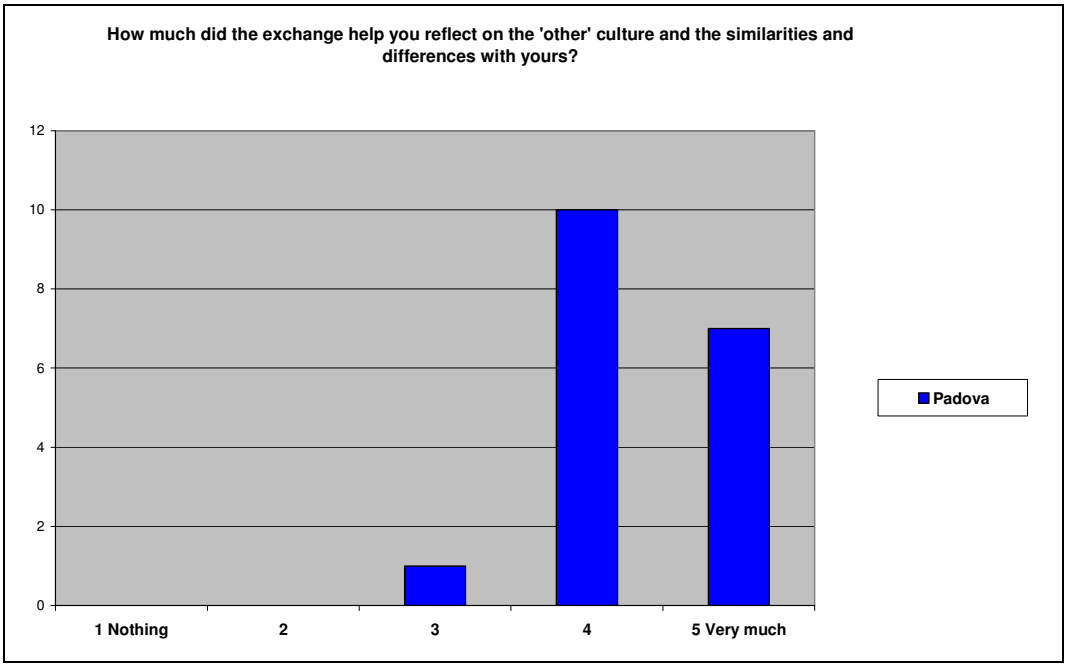


Figure 24. Perceived benefits of the exchange in relation to the other culture (Padova students)

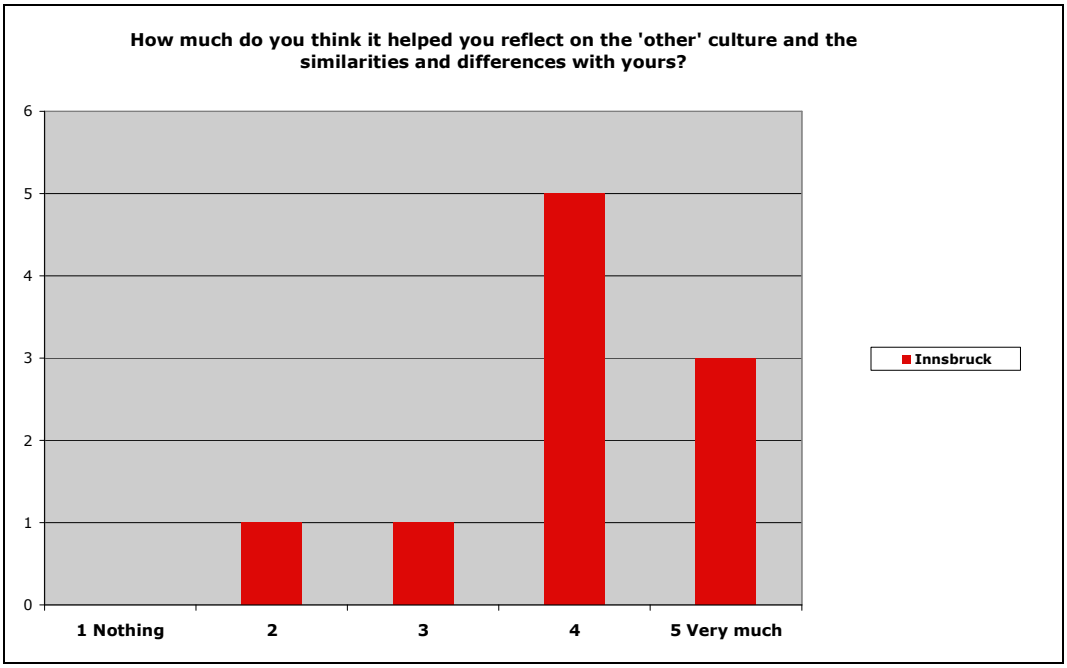


Figure 25. Perceived benefits of the exchange in relation to the other culture (Innsbruck students)

The fact that, overall, the responses given by the Italian participants to both the questions reported above are slightly more positive than those of their Austrian peers,

cannot be explained easily. Yet, considering that most of the Padova students had apparently had fewer intercultural experiences than their exchange partners (see § 4.2.1), it might be suggested that – in their view - the project had triggered a greater change in their understanding of cultures, both their own and those of others.

In other responses given by the students to the questionnaire, further positive aspects of the exchange emerge: for some participants, for instance, "the tasks were very well organized and it was clear which was the thread to follow during these months" (Daniela, PD). According to another student, the project had "a good structure and so there was always something to talk about and it didn't get boring. I found the atmosphere quite good…like sitting in a café and having a talk". (Eike, IBK). For others, the most rewarding aspect was the evident interest and commitment that all the students had shown during the project (Daniela, PD), the patience and kindness of their instructor in helping them carry out the various tasks (Roberta, PD), and the fact that they were able to speak for more than one hour every week without any external help (Denis, PD).

Overall, the use of English as *lingua franca* of the exchange was also perceived as positive and beneficial: for all the Italian students, communicating in English with other non-native speakers was "engaging", "exciting" and "interesting", not only because it offered the chance to hear and appreciate different accents (Vanessa, PD), but also because it helped the participants feel less embarrassed and nervous than if they had had to interact with native speakers (Riccardo, PD). Since the Italian participants perceived their level of proficiency as being lower than that of their Austrian peers, the fact that communication took place in a language that was not the mother tongue of the other group was highly appreciated, as it made them feel supported and understood by their partners, with whom they could negotiate language forms and meanings (Elisabetta, PD). This would appear to indicate that the

use of a contact language favoured the construction of a Community of Practice, whose members were able to negotiate a shared linguistic repertoire and collaborated to communicate as effectively and clearly as possible, thus aiming at the achievement of a joint communicative enterprise.

The impressions shared by the Italian students are partly mirrored in the Austrian students' answers to the questionnaire: out of 10 respondents, six of them confirmed that the use of a *lingua franca* had helped create a stress-free environment (Catherine, IBK), in which all the interactants shared "the same troubles and problems" with the language (Stefan, IBK). The sense of equality and mutual support also emerges in the following comment, which stresses the importance of cooperation and collective engagement within the discussion groups: "we all needed to be very clear when we wanted to say something (…). We always tried to explain what we meant if someone did not understand what we had said" (Mara, IBK). In addition to this dimension, two students explicitly welcomed the use of ELF as a way to use the language "in an international context" (Bernhard, IBK), a situation which, in their view, is much more common outside the classroom than communication with solely native speakers (Eike, IBK). Furthermore, one student stressed how the ELF exchange had helped her not only improve her language skills, but also develop her "social skills (e.g. politeness, respect for others) that people need to operate successfully in any culture" (Zara, IBK).

Besides these positive comments, however, four students also suggested that communicating in English with their Italian peers had sometimes been challenging, as they had some difficulties understanding their partners' strong accent or had to avoid difficult phrases in order to be understood (Catherine, IBK). Despite this, it is interesting to note that none of these students explicitly complained about the differing level of perceived proficiency, nor did they advocate more equal

language levels in their suggestions to improve future exchanges: this would appear to confirm that the main focus of their activities was on communication and negotiation of contents and not on form.

Nevertheless, the different levels of proficiency might have influenced the students' differing perceptions of the benefits of their online interactions on the development of their language skills. In this case, too, a five-point Likert scale – in which 1 corresponded to 'zero improvement' and 5 to 'very high improvement' – was used to ask the students to give their own impressions on the extent to which the project had fostered their speaking, listening, reading and writing abilities, as well as their fluency and confidence in using English in authentic contexts. Overall, the Italian students' responses were very positive: as can be seen from the graph in Figure 26 below, in relation to speaking and listening skills, as well as to fluency and confidence, their responses ranged from medium (3 points on the Likert scale) to very high levels of perceived improvement (5 points). This is clearly explained by the fact that the exchange involved synchronous interaction between peers, in situations in which confidence, fluency and the effective activation of speaking and listening skills played a fundamental role for successful communication. The results for the development of writing skills also rank quite high: although the responses to the questionnaire seem to be more varied in nature, for a high number of students the written activities on the wikispace and the weekly diaries seem to have been a useful opportunity to stimulate their writing skills. The ability to read in the foreign language is apparently the one which was felt as having improved the least, although quite high scores still appear in the students' responses: this might be due to either the predominant emphasis that the exchange activities – and in particular the Skype sessions - placed on listening and speaking abilities, or to the students' perception

that their most urgent need was to improve their oral skills and fluency through interaction.

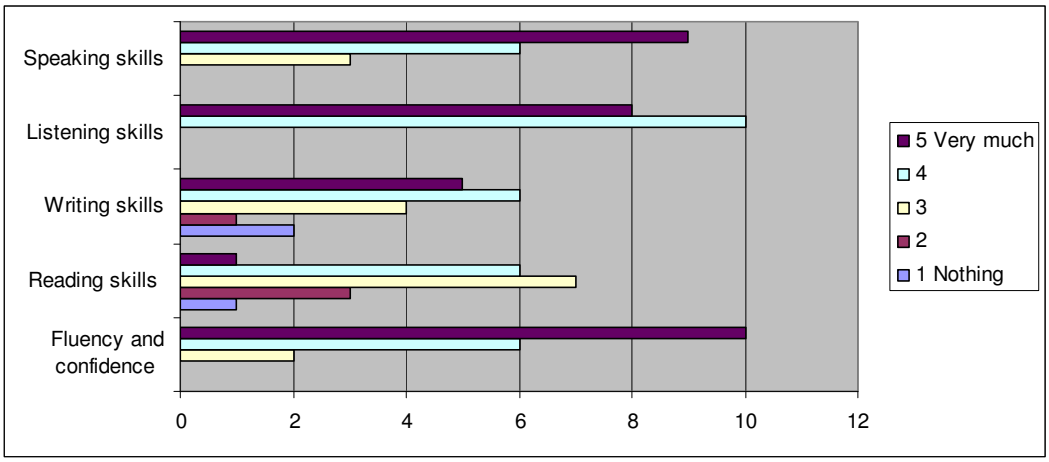


Figure 26. Perceived improvement of language skills (Padova students)

For the Austrian students, the responses seem to be more heterogeneous (Figure 27): although the perceived improvement of speaking and listening skills, as well as fluency and confidence, is still considered as high (4 points in the Likert scale) and medium (3 points) - thus confirming the overall impressions suggested above -, very low scores are also present in the students' answers to the questionnaire. This is especially the case of writing and reading skills which, for the majority of the respondents, did not improve at all during the exchange (1 point on the Likert scale), or developed only to a minor extent (2 points).

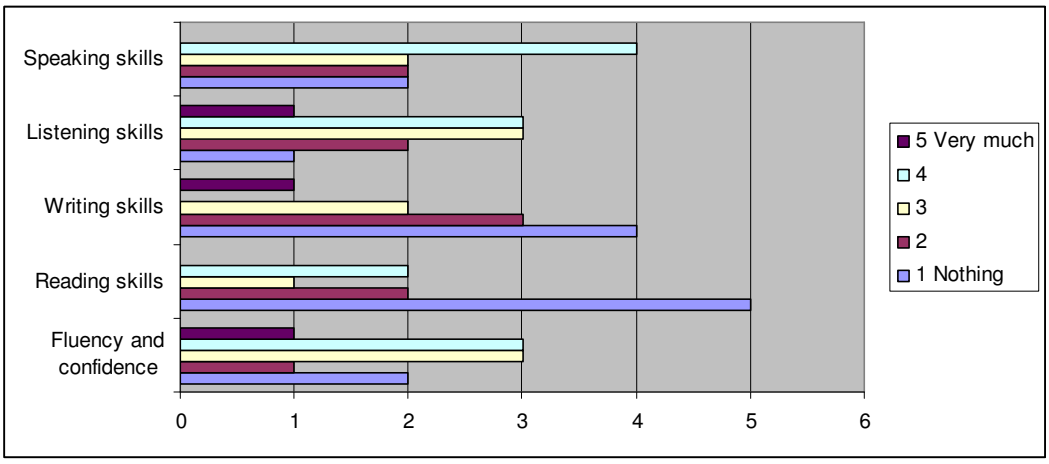


Figure 27. Perceived improvement of language skills (Innsbruck students)

Although these observations are solely based on the students' personal impressions, and are therefore not supported by any objective investigation nor external evaluation, the responses to the questionnaire offer some insights into the perceived benefits of this exchange. In sum, it would appear that the online interaction with other peers had fostered the development of speaking and listening skills, as well as of fluency and confidence, to a significant extent. Writing and reading skills, on the other hand, seem to have played a secondary role in the exchange, possibly because of the predominance of real-time interaction in the Skype sessions, which clearly made up the core of the project activities.

If interpreted in the light of the students' perceived levels of language proficiency prior to the beginning of the exchange, the overall differing levels of linguistic development that emerge from the answers of the two groups to the final survey would appear to indicate that the Austrian students might have felt the need to interact with people with a higher English proficiency, so as to further stimulate their language improvement. As one of the Innsbruck participants wrote in the final questionnaire, "improving oneself only works when you work with a higher standard, somebody with a higher language proficiency than your own" ((Bernhard, IBK). The Italian students, on the other hand, might have benefited more from the exchange, not only thanks to the interaction with their partners – who, in their view, were more expert users of the language - but also thanks to the form-focused activities that had been developed for them. By drawing their attention to formal aspects of the language, the tasks proposed in the two class meetings might have helped the Italian participants increase their awareness of the language they were using in the project, thus potentially amplifying its impact on their learning process.

Before concluding this section, a few words must be devoted to the students' impressions of the main tools adopted for communication: as the answers

to the post-questionnaire reveal, Skype was by far the most appreciated tool, in that it was "convenient" (Bernhard, IBK) and allowed for real-time interaction. The participants' comments on the use of Skype can be summarized by the following response, according to which the audio-conferences had enabled the students to "feel closer" to their peers, and helped to narrow the distance between the two groups (Sofia, PD).

Despite the fact that none of the students was familiar with wikis before starting the project, the vast majority of the students expressed their appreciation for the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' wikispace, as well as their "great surprise" for how quickly they learnt how to use and edit it (Mara, IBK). Some of them defined the wikispace as "clear, appealing and with nice colours" (Emma, PD), "easy to use and well organized" (Chiara, PD), and an useful tool "to understand the organization of the project, the assignments, things we had to do and when, and also to know everybody's opinions and thoughts through diaries and pages" (Elisabetta, PD). Only two students from Padova explicitly commented that they had liked the wiki less than the other tools used in the exchange: in their view, the wiki was principally a space that hosted the weekly assignments and the personal diaries, while most of the actual interactions took place via Skype or Facebook. In addition to these observations, one student from Innsbruck lamented the high number of notifications that she had received on her personal email address anytime the wikispace was edited by a participant in the exchange.

Among the tools adopted for the project, Facebook was probably the most controversial, as great differences can be noticed in the way the two groups of students welcomed its introduction into the exchange. Asked to comment on the use of the social network, the vast majority of the Italian participants answered that they had appreciated the Facebook Group and had enjoyed participating in it. For them,

the Facebook Group was useful to "keep in touch every we wanted, discussing, commenting, posting things etc.." (Elisabetta, PD) and to communicate and exchange opinions in a very immediate way (Daniela, PD). Out of the 18 students from Padova, only four revealed they were not particularly keen on using Facebook: of these, two students responded that they did not use Facebook regularly, and that they therefore found it hard to follow what was going on the Group Wall. One respondent felt that the social network was not appropriate for academic work, while another commented that although she did not like the social network *per se*, she appreciated "the topics we were asked to discuss" on it (Emma, PD).

Compared to these responses, the answers given by the Austrian students show the other side of the coin: of the ten students who completed the questionnaire, only five wrote they had enjoyed the tool because "Facebook enables us to stay in touch…we shared our opinions, ideas and personal thoughts" (Zara, IBK). The rest of them, on the other hand, maintained that Facebook was the tool they had liked the least, as they felt it should be only used for socializing and not for academic purposes. All of them, however, revealed they had remained in contact with their peers through the social network. It is not easy to find an explanation for such a striking difference in the way Facebook was perceived by the two groups: on the one hand, one might suggest that the Austrian students were not very frequent users of the social network even prior to the exchange. This seems to be confirmed by their responses to the initial questionnaire, which – as has been outlined in section § 4.2.1 - show that the Italian participants generally spent more time on the social network than their Austrian peers. In this light, therefore, Facebook might not have been the most suitable tool for all the students: some of them might have enjoyed the whole exchange, yet they might have decided not to participate in the Facebook activities as

they considered the social network as an inappropriate tool in the specific context of the project (Thorne 2003: 57).

4.7. Difficulties, drawbacks and future directions

As discussed above, the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange received enthusiastic feedback: overall, the students appreciated the activities and the social encounters that it promoted, thanks to which they were stimulated in their intercultural and language learning processes. Despite the overall enthusiasm, however, not all aspects of the project were felt to be entirely successful. Although the previous section has already identified some of the elements that were apparently less effective in the eyes of some students - the choice to use Facebook, for instance, and the differing levels of proficiency – the following sections will explore into greater depth the major difficulties that were encountered over the course of the project. In order to do so, the participants' responses to the final questionnaire, as well as my own impressions on the experience will be taken into account to shed some light on those elements that may need improvement and more accurate development to set up future telecollaboration projects. This appears to be in line with the purposes of educational action research, intended as "a form of self-reflective enquiry" (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162) carried out by collecting and analysing data on one's own current practice with the aim of informing and guiding future practice (Wallace 1998).

In the students' eyes, one of the most important drawbacks of the exchange was linked to the computing facilities used for communication: almost all the participants who responded to the final questionnaire lamented that their computers and the Internet connection were often too slow and inefficient, so that they sometimes had to cope with problems using Skype to interact with their peers. Although access to the computer and the Internet was the cause of frustration and

disappointment, the difficulties that the students encountered in this respect did not seem to discourage them from successfully interacting and establishing meaningful relationships, nor to cause any problematic episodes of "failed communication" (O'Dowd and Ritter 2006). Instead, as the weekly diaries reveal and as I could personally witness during the Skype sessions in the computer laboratory, the participants were able to cope with technical problems by activating effective strategies such as irony and humor, as well as by granting each other mutual support and help.

In addition to technical problems, two students also complained that they frequently had to change groups for the Skype sessions, as their peers were sometimes absent or had dropped out of the project: in their view, this had prevented them from actually creating "a real relationship" with the partners from the other group, although – at the same time – they had appreciated the opportunity to access a wider variety of opinions and experiences (Elisabetta, PD; Oliver, IBK). Unfortunately, students' occasional absences or drop-outs are often beyond the control of the teacher. In the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange, for instance, a maximum of two absences per participant was allowed: yet, the sole fact that a single student missed one session implied a change in the balance relationships among the various discussion groups, which had to be re-arranged to make sure that everyone had at least one partner from the other country to work with. As the students had already made me aware of their difficulties during the exchange, I was perfectly aware of the challenges that they were encountering, and I tried to support them every time they had to change group by asking them for continuous feedback and carefully listening to their feelings and impressions. When dealing with small discussion groups, as was the case in the exchange described in this study, giving support and encouraging the students to profit from new encounters may be the only

effective solution to keep their interest and motivation high, even when they have to enter a different discussion group.

In the final questionnaire, a few students also pointed out that the project was very time-consuming, and that in some cases they had struggled to read all the given materials and write the weekly diaries. This drawback was felt to be particularly true by the students from the Innsbruck group, for whom the project activities constituted only one part of the course in Cultural Studies that they were attending: as the following comment reveals, the exchange "was a lot of work for us Austrian students, because besides the assignments of the wikipage we have a lot of homework for our course in addition" (Catherine, IBK). As this perceived difficulty seems to have had an impact on the overall levels of participation in the written assignments of the project, a more detailed discussion of its possible causes and potential solutions will be presented below.

On the basis of the difficulties that they described, the students suggested some improvements so as to facilitate the planning of further telecollaboration projects: asked about what they would change in future exchanges, most of the participants highlighted the need for better technologies. Clearly, fast access to the Internet and efficient computer technologies are among the institutional factors that can facilitate online contact among students from different cultures and/or countries. Yet, unfortunately, teachers are aware that they often have to rely on the facilities provided by their institutions, and therefore accept the potential drawbacks that these offer, which may even include obsolete computers and a slow Internet connection. Even in those cases, it is up to the teacher to help the students activate positive strategies to cope with potential technical problems through mutual support and, as was the case in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange, with a good amount of patience, irony and humour.

In their suggestions for the planning of future telecollaboration projects, a high number of students also suggested the introduction of webcams so as to make videoconferences possible ("it would be great to SEE the persons you're talking to via skype on a webcam!" - Petra, IBK). Although not having access to visual images during the Skype sessions was not perceived as an obstacle to successful communication, the students' responses would appear to indicate that, in online synchronous interaction, visual images and other non-verbal clues might favour the establishment of an even more familiar atmosphere within the group of participants, thus enhancing the opportunities for socialization and interaction. In addition, as non-verbal behaviour is an integral part of culture (Byram 1997), the availability of real-time visual images may help interactants explore their cultural behaviours to an even greater extent, and therefore benefit more fully from their intercultural encounters. Certainly, future exchanges will have to take this dimension into account, and try to provide participants with the best solutions to fully enjoy and profit from the interaction with their peers. Yet, in this case, too, the availability of tools that support visual images will be often dependent on the facilities provided at the institutional level.

In my twofold role of instructor and researcher, over the course of the project I kept a personal diary in which I noted my thoughts and reflections on the exchange, the social and learning processes that were, or were not, occurring, and the problems or drawbacks that I was personally encountering. For the purposes of action research, these reflections are as important as students' feedback in defining the aspects of the exchange that were successful and identifying those which would need further improvement. As action research is believed to be most effective if it is done collaboratively with other instructors and researchers (Wallace 1998; Burns 2003), at several points during the exchange I was able to share my impressions

and/or doubts with my supervisor, who constantly monitored the exchange's progress, and with the two instructors at the University of Innsbruck.

As suggested in section § 4.2, two professors from the Austrian university contributed to setting up the exchange: the instructor who was in charge of the course in Cultural Studies at the University of Innsbruck, and who had agreed to include the project into his course, and a teacher (henceforth, the co-instructor) who had spontaneously offered to help with the logistics and the technologies required by the project activities. While the collaboration with the co-instructor remained constant and very productive over time, it was the relationship with the main instructor which, after some time after the beginning of the project, proved to be challenging.

In the first few months since our first meeting in Innsbruck, a high number of Skype meetings and email correspondences had taken place between me and the two instructors from the Austrian institution. These were characterized by intense collaboration and mutual help: together, we planned the activities of the course, shared ideas and suggestions for improvement, and enjoyed the relationship of trust and reciprocity that we had started to build up. During the first weeks of exchange activities, our collaboration was reinforced by the various issues, needs and ideas that emerged as the project unfolded. At the end of October, I had a further face-to-face meeting in Padova with the main instructor of the course: during the meeting, we discussed some of the challenges that we had encountered in the project, for example the fact that two students from Innsbruck had dropped out of the exchange. After that meeting, and in the following months, communication with the main instructor became increasingly difficult. Probably due to academic commitments and work overload on his part, email correspondence became rare, and several organizational aspects of the Skype sessions were delegated to the co-instructor who had offered her support throughout the exchange, but who was not officially in charge of the course.

At the end of the project, my attempts to receive some feedback from the main instructor did not produce any response. The co-instructor, who had participated with constant enthusiasm in the organization of the project, expressed true appreciation of the activities of the exchange and for the enthusiasm of the students who had taken part in it, while also acknowledging the recent difficulties that had characterized teacher collaboration.

Although the reasons for the main instructor's gradual disengagement are extremely difficult and delicate to investigate, tentative explanations might be found in a possible intensification of his academic and teaching duties, a sudden change in the aims that he had set for the exchange, and/or in his low level of familiarity with Web-based tools, which may have hindered his full participation in the online activities and, therefore, his deep engagement in the social and learning processes of the project.

Whatever the causes, the challenging situation that emerged towards the end of the exchange did not only affect the quality of the relationship among the three instructors, but also appears to have been felt by some of the participants from the Austrian group. Significantly, one of the students wrote in the final questionnaire that she had had "the feeling that the communication between the professors was not really going well" (Hilde, IBK), especially when the students were asked to produce a collaborative film analysis using Powerpoint. On that occasion, the difficulties that characterized teacher-teacher coordination apparently affected the quality of the students' initial collaboration, so that further, more accurate instructions and clarifications had to be provided to make sure that the task was clear to both groups. This episode, as well as the personal impressions that were shared above, seem to confirm the findings of previous research into telecollaborative projects (e.g. Cloke 2010; O'Dowd and Eberbach 2004; O'Dowd and Ritter 2006), namely that teacher

collaboration plays an important role in helping students create a constructive and supportive environment for communication, and therefore has a "significant influence on the outcome of telecollaboration" (O'Dowd and Ritter 2006: 627).

In the 'Padova-Innbruck 2011' exchange, the role of the instructors might also have had an impact on the students' overall levels of engagement in some of the activities required by the project. As suggested above, the difference in the number of texts composed by the two groups of students would appear to suggest that the Italian and Austrian students contributed to the written assignments with differing levels of participation, while – on the contrary - the Skype sessions were regularly and equally attended by both groups. Although it is very difficult to draw any conclusions on this issue, the gap between the students' levels of commitment with the written tasks might have been influenced by two main factors: on the one hand, the feeling of being loaded down with work, which was explicitly expressed by some of the Austrian participants in the final questionnaire; on the other hand, the instructors' different attitudes and behaviours in the online environments which hosted the written activities. In the first case, better teacher collaboration may have helped coordinate the quantity of work that was required from the Innsbruck students more effectively, thus preventing some of them from feeling overwhelmed by the assignments that they had to complete for both the Cultural Studies course and the telecollaboration project. As for the second factor, a more balanced and similar attitude of all the instructors towards the written activities that were taking place on the wikispace and within the Facebook Group might have motivated both groups of students to participate in a more similar and homogenous way. In my view, the instructor's discreet, yet constant presence in the online platforms used for telecollaborative activities constitutes an important motivational factor, which may encourage the participants feel that their contributions are read and valued not only

by their peers – whose role is fundamental for intercultural learning – but also by their teachers – in the role of careful and interested listeners.

It was in the light of this belief, for instance, that I regularly took the initiative to post brief encouraging comments on the students' texts: far from evaluating their content or intervening in the interactions among peers, my short comments aimed to simply stimulate the students to maintain and share their interest and in the topics, tasks and social encounters. To a minor extent, very similar behaviour was adopted by the co-instructor from the partner university. The main instructor, on the contrary, showed a different attitude towards the tools that hosted the written assignments: as he did not have a Facebook account, for instance, he apparently never accessed the Group page to read his students' comments and posts. His access to the wikispace, of which he was one of the administrators, was also very infrequent, as the timeline of recorded visits demonstrates. Although this is something that would require more accurate analysis, the main instructor's behaviour might have played a role in reducing some of the Austrian participants' engagement with the written activities: aware that their teacher would probably never read their posts and comments in the online environments, and concerned about the work load for their in-class course, some students may have felt less stimulated to engage in the written tasks of the project. If interpreted in this light, the difference in the number of texts composed by the two groups would appear to highlight that active teacher participation in the online environments used for telecollaborative activities is important to enhance student motivation and push students further on the way to becoming intercultural speakers.

On the basis of these observations, it appears clear that better teacher collaboration should be continuously stimulated in any future telecollaboration project: besides having a direct positive impact on the instructors' relationships,

better teacher collaboration may help coordinate the work load for both groups of students more effectively, also on the basis of the institutional constraints of the parties involved. Furthermore, the instructors' individual attitudes towards both the tools and the tasks that are adopted for the exchange should be constantly shared and discussed within the team of teachers, also with the aim of helping students develop and maintain their commitment to the tasks (the written ones in particular), and of making them feel the interest with which their texts are read by their instructors.

4.8 Summary

The aim of Chapter 4 was to describe the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' ELF exchange so as to give a clearer idea of the contexts in which communication and learning among the participants took place. In order to do so, the Chapter first attempted to outline how the project was developed in all its parts by the instructors of both universities, as well as to describe the two groups of students that were involved in the exchange (§ 4.2). In addition, the delineation of the rationale that informed the choice of topics, task types and tools adopted for the project, aimed to provide an overview of the activities that were designed to prompt discussion and collaboration among the participants: throughout the section (§ 4.3), several examples were proposed so as to give the flavour of the activities that saw the participants engage in the discussion, analysis and negotiation of a variety of themes, standpoints and meanings. As the following section tried to illustrate (§ 4.4), the Italian students were also encouraged to reflect on the language that they were using in the project and, thanks to *ad-hoc* activities that had been designed for the purpose, were guided into the exploration of formal aspects of language that might be useful in both ELF and ELF communicative contexts.

Besides describing the project, this Chapter also attempted to provide an overview of its general outcomes: thus, for instance, section § 4.5 outlined the number of texts produced by the two groups of participants, while section § 4.6 looked more specifically at the students' impressions on the exchange, including the relevance of its topics and tasks for intercultural learning, the efficacy of its tools, and the perceived benefits in terms of intercultural and language development. In the section that followed (§ 4.7), the students' feedback on the drawbacks of the exchange and their suggestions for further improvement were combined with a report on the difficulties that I personally encountered throughout the project: with the awareness that every telecollaboration exchange is unique and different from the others, the difficulties illustrated in this section may indeed serve as a useful lesson on some of the changes that could be made to meet both the students' and the instructors' real needs and, thus, improve the design of future projects.

To conclude, it is worth highlighting that, despite the difficulties encountered in the project by both the students and their instructors, the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange was felt by the participants as a useful opportunity to communicate and learn about other personal and collective cultures, collaborate in the negotiation of a variety of cultural and linguistic meanings, as well as use English in an authentic international context. Whether these perceived positive dimensions really stimulated the students' intercultural communicative competence and the construction of a third space will be the focus of Chapters 6 and 7 respectively.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this Chapter is to outline the methodology that was adopted to search for evidence of intercultural communicative competence in the students' written output, and to investigate the emergence of a third space and of various subject positions on the part of the exchange participants. As will become clear along the way in this Chapter, the methodology embraced to respond to these two research questions is deeply rooted in mixed methods research (henceforth MMR), intended as "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study" (Tashakkori and Creswell 2007: 4).

After providing a brief description of two of the main approaches to conducting research, namely quantitative and qualitative (section § 5.2), section § 5.3 of this Chapter will present mixed-methods research as an ideal bridge across apparently dichotomous paradigms, and as an approach which allows for a better understanding of research problems (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007). Drawing on existing literature on mixed methods research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007 and 2011; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010a; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006 and 2009), section § 5.3 will also outline some of the most widely recognized typologies of mixed methods design. In the sections that follow, the discussion will focus on the reasons why and ways in which mixed methods research was adapted and implemented in this study to investigate intercultural communicative competence

(section § 5.4) as well as third space and subject positions (section § 5.5). Finally, section § 5.6 will briefly touch upon the ethical issues that accompanied the work outlined in this thesis, as well as the main limitations that it presents.

Before embarking on such a description, however, it is important to clarify some of the terms that will be used throughout this Chapter, namely *paradigm*, *methodology*, *method* and *design*. In Guba and Lincoln's words (1994: 105), a paradigm is "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator" in his choice of method, as well as in the way he/she defines reality and the acquisition of knowledge. In this light, paradigms are human constructions that seek to respond to methodological, ontological and epistemological questions by mirroring a particular set of beliefs (ibid.). Positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism are, in the authors' view, the four major paradigms that can underpin a researcher's choices and practices. This classification is relevant to the purposes of the present Chapter in that – as will become clear below - it helps to gain better understanding of the paradigms that inform quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research approaches. Lying at one side of the spectrum, positivism views reality as ruled by "immutable natural laws and mechanisms" (ibid.: 109) and therefore as an apprehendable entity that can be studied in an objective and definitive way. Developing from the seeds of positivism, postpositivism considers reality as only imperfectly apprehendable: although objectivity remains the ideal to strive for, the postpositivist paradigm places emphasis on critical examination – supported by both tradition and the community - as a way to understand reality. Within this scenario, emic viewpoints are welcomed, especially in the social sciences, in that they can help to determine the meanings associated by people to their actions (ibid.: 110).

Rooted in historical realism, critical theory and other related ideological positions (e.g. feminism and materialism) see reality as "shaped by social, political,

cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values" (ibid.: 109) that have crystallized over time. Researchers who embrace this paradigm are aware that their own subjective values will inevitably impact the results of their investigation, and opt for a dialectical method of inquiry so as to engage in dialogue with the subjects of the inquiry. Finally, at the other side of the spectrum, constructivism proposes a view of reality as multiple, intangible, specific and locally constructed. Proponents of this paradigm see knowledge as created in interaction among the researcher and the objects of inquiry, and advocate for research methods in which the findings are "literally created as the investigation proceeds" (ibid.: 111) through an hermeneutic process of consensus construction. As Creswell notes (2007: 20), the final goal of research rooted in the constructivist paradigm is to "rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation".

Further terms that need to be clarified at this stage are *methodology*, *design* and *method*: in their joint book, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007: 4) define methodology as "the framework that relates to the entire process of research". This entails the fundamental and philosophical assumptions that guide a researcher's inquiry, and that determine the plan of action – in other words, the design - to conduct a particular investigation. As can be inferred from this description, the notion of research *design* serves as a link between the philosophical assumptions held by a researcher and the specific method that he/she uses to achieve the goals of the research. In this light, *methods* can be defined as the processes and techniques that are adopted to collect and analyze data (ibid.): thus, for instance, the methods used by an ethnographer can range from collecting artefacts and writing field notes to conducting interviews. The data that derive from the application of such methods are then analysed according to tenets of ethnographic methodology.

5.2 Quantitative and qualitative research: an irreconcilable dichotomy?

As Teddlie and Tashakkori suggest (2003: 4), researchers currently working in the social and behavioural sciences can be categorized into three main groups, according to whether they adopt quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches to their research. In the authors' view, quantitatively oriented researchers primarily aim at conducting numerical analyses within a postpositivist tradition. Investigators working from a constructivist perspective, on the contrary, are primarily interested in narrative data, and belong therefore to the category of qualitative researchers. Occupying an in-between position, mixed-methodologists are those whose purpose is to gain insights from both quantitative and qualitative data. As will be seen later on in this Chapter, researchers adopting this third approach are driven by a variety of different philosophical assumptions, which range from pragmatism to the transformative-emancipatory paradigm (Mertens 2003). In order to gain better insights into mixed-methods research, it is essential to first outline some of the features that characterize quantitative and qualitative approaches, their potential and their limitations.

Driven by a positivist paradigm, quantitative methods were the dominant methodological orientation in the first part of the 20th century (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003: 4). From the perspective of quantitative research, numerical data are gathered and analysed to test hypotheses and theories about reality, isolate causes and effects and measure phenomena, with the ultimate goal of generalizing findings and formulating general laws (Flick 2009: 13). In order to do so, quantitative methods for data collection include questionnaires and testing. Data are then analyzed through the use of "mathematical models, statistical tables, and graphs"

(Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 17) which are designed in such a way so as to exclude the researcher's influence on the data. In Flick's words (2009: 13), the generation and inspection of quantitative data should "guarantee the objectivity of the study, whereby the subjective views of the researcher as well as of the individuals under study are largely eliminated".

In the 1950-1970 period, emerging postpositivist arguments begun to challenge the "naïve realism" (Guba and Lincoln 1994) that was typical of positivism, and tried to respond to some of the difficulties associated with it, such as the lack of contextual information and of emic insights, the exclusion of the discovery dimension in empirical investigation, as well as the inapplicability of general data to individual cases (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 106). Proponents of the postpositivist paradigm advocated for the collection of information in more natural settings, the reintroduction of discovery as an essential element of inquiry, and the inclusion of an insider's viewpoint. Although still essentially anchored in the quantitative methods that had been typical of the positivist approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003: 5), practitioners embracing the postpositivist paradigm paved the way to the inclusion of qualitative methods of research.

A much stronger response to the limitations imposed by the positivist orientation that underpinned quantitative research was offered, during the 1970-1985 period, by what has been called "the qualitative research movement" (ibid.). Associated to constructivism, the "quiet methodological revolution" (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: ix) enacted by qualitative oriented researchers promoted a "more subjective, culture-bound, and emancipatory approach to studying individual behaviours and social phenomena, and it introduced new research methods for answering questions" (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003b: ix). These methods took on a dialectical and hermeneutical nature, which was rooted in the epistemological notion

that reality, being locally situated, had to be known through the interaction between the researcher and the phenomenon of interest. This different ontological epistemological, and methodological view necessarily had an impact on the way research was and is still conduced from a qualitative stance. While quantitative research relies on deductive processes focusing on the collection of objective and measurable data so as to test pre-established hypotheses on facts or truths (Burns 2003: 23), qualitative methods are essentially inductive (Creswell 2007), in that concepts and hypotheses are formulated only after the inquirer has collected useful data from the field. Qualitative methods of data collection include interviews, observations and focus groups. As Merriam suggests (2009: 15-16), qualitative researchers "build toward theory from observations and intuitive understanding gleaned from being in the field (…). Typically, findings inductively derived from the data in a qualitative study are in the form of themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypotheses, and even theory about a particular aspect of practice".

Creswell (2007) distinguishes five types of qualitative strategy of inquiry, namely ethnography, case study, phenomenology, grounded theory and narrative research. Although a detailed description of these approaches goes beyond the scopes of this Chapter, it is worth noting that what characterizes them is the attempt to look deep into the quality of social life. Unlike quantitative research, which investigates large numbers of randomly selected cases in order to develop generalizations from mathematical propositions and statistics, qualitative investigators are primarily interested in gaining emic insights into "the specifics of particular cases" (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 16), so as to "make sense of the human behaviour within the research context" (Burns 2003: 22). From this perspective, qualitative research implies "an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or

less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (Van Maanen 1983: 9). As Holliday points out (2010: 4, italics added), this process displays a clear focus on the interpretation of social perceptions and internal emotive processes, and therefore "invokes the need to discover as much about how research subjects *feel* about the information they provide as about the information itself".

Given its essentially interpretive nature, qualitative research assigns a central role to the researcher's ability to analyse and make sense of the data from an emic perspective, that is to say in terms of the meanings that people attribute to them: the researcher, therefore, is the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam 2009: 15), and his/her descriptions and insights become central to the interpretation of research findings. In this process, great importance is attributed to rich descriptions and detailed explanations of the contexts and participants involved, as well as of the findings of the research: often referred to as "thick description" (Geertz 1973), these holistic accounts (Creswell 2007) not only help clarify the complex array of facets of the particular phenomenon being studied, thus increasing the quality of the research itself (Holliday 2010), but also enhance "the possibility of the results of a qualitative study 'transferring' to another setting" (Merriam 2009: 227).

The ontological, epistemological and methodological differences that distinguish quantitative from qualitative approaches have induced proponents of the two orientations to criticize each other's way of conducting research. On the one hand, quantitative researchers have often questioned the validity and reliability of qualitative approaches which, being essentially interpretive, are viewed as biased and subjective, if not unscientific. As Denzin and Lincoln remark (2003: 12), positivists blame qualitative inquirers for writing "fiction, not science" and for having "no way of verifying their truth statements". Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, claim

that quantitative approaches presume a fixed, immutable reality that can be comprehended through mathematical and objective models: as such, quantitative researchers are criticized for failing to include people's subjective worldviews into their analyses, and for ignoring the multifaceted and contextually situated nature of reality. As can be inferred from this brief description, the alleged dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research orientations has focused on the methods adopted for inquiry, the rigor of their procedures, and the validity of their findings. First and foremost, however, the debate has centred around the paradigms and worldviews that underpin the two approaches (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003b: ix), something that led theorists writing in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s to label those years as 'the paradigm wars' (Guba 1989). As noted by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003: 7), the paradigm wars broke out over the notion that the two research orientations were essentially antagonistic and mutually exclusive. Known as the 'incompatibility theory', this concept also implied that "it was inappropriate to mix quantitative and qualitative methods" (ibid.: 5), in that their underlying paradigms excluded each other "just as surely as the belief in a round world precludes belief in a flat one" (Guba 1987: 31).

Within this scenario, however, the paradigm wars were – almost paradoxically - one of the main triggers for the development of mixed methods as a distinct methodological movement (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003b). Mixed method research was already conducted throughout the 20th century in the field of social and behavioural sciences, and included studies by Campbell and Fiske (1959), Sieber (1973) and Denzin (1978). Yet, it was during the 1980s that researchers begun to legitimize and define their practices as a viable alternative to the conflicts between qualitative and quantitative inquiry (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003b: x). In their view, mixed methods research had the potential to reconcile the two opposing paradigms,

in that it represented a response to the incompatibility theory. Since then, mixed methods research has become increasingly common (Bryman 2006; Creswell and Plano Clark 2007), a trend which has been favoured by the growing the number of conferences focusing on this approach, as well as by the rich body of publications explicitly devoted to it, which include volumes, handbooks and journals such as the *Journal of Mixed Method Research* published by Sage.

5.3 Mixed methods research: bridging paradigms

Defined by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003a) as "the third methodological movement" in that it builds on both quantitative and qualitative approaches, mixed methods research has been described in different ways, depending on whether the focus has been placed on the methods of data collection and analysis, or on its underlying philosophical assumptions. Two examples are useful to illustrate this point: in 1989, Greene, Caracelli and Graham advocated a view of mixed methods research as a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods, neither of which "is inherently linked to any particular inquiry paradigm" (1989: 256). Almost a decade later, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) introduced the concept of methodological orientation (paradigm) as an integral part of mixed methods research: in their view, mixed methods approaches implied the combination of the philosophical positions referable to both qualitative and quantitative inquiry across all stages of the research process. In their joint 2007 volume, Creswell and Plano Clark offered a broad yet comprehensive description which reconciled the standpoints underpinning previous definitions. In their words, mixed methods research can be seen as both a methodology and a method:

> [m]ixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical

> assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases in the research process. As a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (2007: 5).

As this definition suggests, researchers adopting a mixed methods approach are driven by the willingness to gain better understanding of the issues under investigations. But what is the added value of combing qualitative and quantitative methods? In his extensive review of 323 social science articles mixing the two approaches, Bryman (2006) produced a detailed scheme of 18 reasons that commonly inform the choice of mixed methods research, and that can thus be helpful to understand its potential to provide a better picture of research problems. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

a. triangulation – generally speaking, the term triangulation refers to the strategy of shoring up the internal validity of a study (Merriam 2009). According to Bryman (2006), in mixed methods research triangulation can be obtained by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches so that their findings may be mutually corroborated.

b. offset – combing qualitative and quantitative research allows the inquirer to offset the weaknesses inherent in either approach by drawing on the strengths of both;

c. completeness – the researcher can bring together a more comprehensive account of his/her research by mixing both qualitative and quantitative approaches;

d. process and structures – the combination of the two approaches can offer insights into both the structures of social life (through qualitative research) and the process (through quantitative research);

e. explanation – through qualitative research, the inquirer can explain the findings generated through quantitative methods, and viceversa;

f. illustration – the use of qualitative data can be useful to illustrate quantitative findings;

g. confirm and discovery – qualitative data can be used to generate hypotheses, while quantitative data can be adopted to test them within a single project;

h. diversity of views – mixed methods research can both uncover relationships between variables (through quantitative research) and provide insights into the meanings and worldviews of research participants (through qualitative research);

i. enhancement – gathering data using a qualitative approach can augment quantitative findings, and viceversa.

On the basis of this scheme, as well as of other recent publications (e.g. Creswell and Plano Clark 2011; Migiro and Magangi 2011; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003a), it can be argued that mixed methods research helps inquirers answer their research questions from a broader variety of perspectives, drawing on the strengths of both approaches, converging and corroborating findings, and adding insights that might be missed when adopting only one method.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007: 10) argue that a further advantage of mixed methods research is that it empowers researchers to use "multiple worldviews" instead of remaining anchored in the paradigms that are typically associated with qualitative and quantitative approaches. In effect, researchers

embracing a mixed methods approach have long discussed the suitable philosophical framework for their practices (Niglas 2010). In this respect, several stances have been taken: researchers who have embraced the *dialectical* stance (e.g. Greene 2007), for instance, assume that all paradigms have the potential to contribute to greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, and can be therefore "respectfully and intentionally used together" (Greene 2007: 69). From this perspective, the tensions generated by the juxtaposition of different paradigms can enable the researcher to dialectically gain enhanced, reframed and new understanding.

The *design* stance adopted by researchers such as Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) also posits that multiple paradigms can be used in a study: yet, instead of blending them together, they assume that different paradigms may serve as the foundation for different phases of the research. In this light, for instance, the postpositivist paradigm may underpin the quantitative aspects of inquiry, while constructivist assumptions might guide the collection and analysis of qualitative data.

The *single* (or *alternative*) *paradigm* stance includes pragmatism (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003a) and the transformative-emancipatory paradigm (Mertens 2003). Based on early work by American thinkers such as Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1914), George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and John Dewey (1859-1952), pragmatism is now "the most often mentioned in the mixed methods literature" (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010b: 679), something that suggests its vast popularity among mixed methods researchers. Primarily focused on problem solving, pragmatism allows for the use of a variety of methods based on their "appropriateness to the situation at hand" (Greene and Hall 2010: 132). For pragmatists, the research question is more important than the method they use or the paradigm that underpins it. In this light, no paradigm is inferior to the others

(Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010b), since any which best meets the research purpose will work.

As suggested above, a further example of the single paradigm stance is the transformative-emancipatory paradigm. According to this, knowledge mirrors the power and social relationships at stake in society: consequently, knowledge construction should aim at helping people improve their condition in society (Mertens 2003). As such, the transformative-emancipatory paradigm places central importance "on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups such as women, ethinc/racial minorities, members of gay and lesbian communities, people with disabilities, and those who are poor" (Mertens 2010: 139-140). From a methodological point of view, transformative inquirers combine qualitative and quantitative methods by placing particular attention, in all phases of research, on "issues of power that can influence the achievement of social justice and avoidance of social oppression" (ibid.: 142).

Finally, a further stance that has been taken by mixed methods practitioners is the so-called *a-paradigmatic* perspective (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2010: 14) according to which philosophical assumptions are not relevant to research practice, since the latter is more directly informed by theory and context (Greene and Hall 2010).

Overall, therefore, mixed methods researchers have adopted different stances as to how to introduce and implement worldviews in their practices: as Creswell and Plano Clark summarize (2011: 51), "some believe that there is a single worldview that informs mixed methods" such as pragmatism or transformative-emancipatory approaches. Others, on the contrary, propose including multiple worldviews in a mixed methods study, as these can enable the inquirer to gain better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, other researchers give

more importance to the contexts and theories of the research project, and claim that no philosophical assumptions play an incisive role in it. Whatever the worldview, mixed methods research appears to represent an ideal bridge across apparently dichotomous philosophical assumptions, in that it enables one to move on from the 'either/or' approach that characterized the paradigms wars mentioned above.

5.3.1 Types of mixed methods designs

In the field of mixed methods research, design typologies "provide classification schemes for depicting the framework related to the mixing of research approaches (qualitative, quantitative) and methods" (Nastasi, Hitchkock and Brown 2010: 311). As such, typologies provide researchers with a variety of "paths" (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006: 12) that can guide researchers in the development of their studies, and that help establish a "common language" (ibid.) for the field. The literature devoted to mixed methods research has revealed a wide plethora of mixed methods design typologies (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010a): although an exhaustive description of all the types of mixed methods designs is beyond the scopes of this Chapter, a brief overview on the typologies that have been developed by some of the most influential mixed methods researchers can help clarify the design applied and implemented in the present study.

In their joint volumes (2007 and 2011), Creswell and Plano Clark outlined six major design types – each of which contains subtypes – whose differences are related to the timing, weighting, interaction and mixing of qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the authors' view, interaction relates to the extent to which the qualitative and quantitative strands[30] are kept independent from each other.

[30] Drawing on Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), Creswell and Plano Clark (2011: 63) define a strand as "a component of a study that encompasses the basic process of conducting quantitative or qualitative research: posing a question, collecting data, analysing data, and interpreting results based on that data".

In this light, the authors distinguish between designs with "an interactive level of interaction" (2011: 65), in which direct interaction exists between the two strands of the study, and designs with "an independent level of interaction" (ibid.), in which the researcher keeps the two strands (each of which includes question formulation, data collection and data analysis) separate. In the first case, the qualitative and quantitative methods are mixed before the final interpretation, while in the second the two methods are combined only when drawing conclusions on the overall study. As for the weighting of the two approaches, Creswell and Plano Clark (ibid.) identify three possible options for choosing the appropriate mixed methods design according to whether the two methods have equal priority, or whether the study gives greater emphasis to quantitative methods (quantitative priority) or to qualitative methods (qualitative priority).

In terms of timing, the typologies proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) distinguish between sequential, concurrent and multiphase combination timing types. The former occurs when the inquirer adopts "both the qualitative and quantitative strands during a single phase of the research study" (2011: 66). Sequential timing, on the contrary, characterizes designs in which the strands are implemented in two distinct phases, in other words "with the collection and analysis of one type of data occurring after the collection and analysis of the other type" (ibid.). Finally, multiphase combination timing occurs when multiple phases are introduced, which include concurrent and/or sequential timing in a program of study.

The last criterion, namely the mixing of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, explicitly relates to the inquirer's choice about where and how to mix the two strands, and represents therefore "the process by which the researcher implements the independent or interactive relationship of a mixed methods study" (ibid.). In the authors' view, mixing can potentially occur at four points of a research

process, namely in the broader phase of design, in the phase of data collection, during data analysis, or during the interpretation of findings.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) remark that the criteria illustrated above should serve as a guide to choose a design for conducting mixed methods research. On the basis of the criteria of interaction, weighting, timing and mixing, the authors propose six main designs which researchers can implement in their own studies so as to match their research questions and underlying assumptions. These include the convergent parallel design, the exploratory sequential design, the explanatory sequential design, the embedded design, the transformative design and the multiphase design. The paradigms that underlie each of these designs are varied, ranging from constructivism for the qualitative to postpositivist for the quantitative component: according to the 'design stance' adopted by Creswell and Plano Clark (see above), the choice of the philosophical foundations for a research study will depend on the method(s) that has priority in it.

In brief, the convergent design involves the separate, yet concurrent analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, and the merging of the two sets of results to compare and relate them. The explanatory sequential design is characterized by a quantitative phase of data collection and analysis, which is given priority in addressing the research question and is then followed by a second phase of qualitative data collection and analysis. As the authors suggest (2011: 71), the second, qualitative phase is implemented "so that it follows from the results of the first, quantitative phase". Unlike this design, the exploratory sequential design gives priority to the collection and analysis of qualitative data in the first phase. This is then followed by a second quantitative stage of data collection and analysis, whose aim is to test or measure qualitative exploratory findings. In the embedded design, the researcher may add a qualitative strand within a primarily quantitative design, or

viceversa, so as to enhance the resulting, overall design. The transformative design is implemented within a transformative theoretical framework, which guides all the decisions in terms of priority, mixing and timing. Finally, the multiphase design is seen as combining "both sequential and concurrent strands over a period of time that the researcher implements within a program of study addressing an overall program objective" (ibid.: 72). In this light, for instance, a qualitative study may form the basis for a subsequent quantitative study, which in turn informs the outcomes of the whole program.

The broad design types classification proposed by Tashakkori and Teddlie has undergone numerous conceptualizations since the publication of their book in 1998: its latest version, developed through a series of joint works (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010a; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006 and 2009) focuses on the methodological components of research designs, and relies on three main criteria: the number of methodological approaches used in a study; the number of strands or phases; and the type of implementation processes. As for the former, the two authors distinguish between monomethods studies – which involve only one method (qualitative and quantitative) as in the most traditional research approaches - and mixed methods studies – which build on both qualitative and quantitative methods and form therefore the basis for MMR. As for the second criterion, Tashakkori and Teddlie identify monostrand studies – characterized by only one strand, in other words a cycle composed of three stages, namely conceptualization, experiential and inferential process[31] – and multistrand studies – which include more phases. The third criterion refers to the type of implementation in mixed methods multistrand designs, and looks at whether qualitative and quantitative data are collected

[31] For Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006; 2009), the conceptualization stage involves the formulation of research questions, the experiential stage encompasses concrete observations and operations, and the inferential stage is devoted to abstract explanations. In particular, the experiential stage can be broken into two parts: methodological and analytical. This aspect will be better illustrated later on in this Chapter.

sequentially or concurrently, and whether one type of data will be converted into the other. An additional, though less relevant criterion relates to the extent to which qualitative and quantitative approaches are integrated at the experiential stage. If qualitative and quantitative approaches are only mixed at this stage, but not also at the inferential stage, the authors speak of quasi-mixed (monostrand or multistrand) designs (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006 and 2009), which however do not belong to the class of mixed methods designs.

Table 6 below provides an overview of Teddlie and Tashakkori's broad classification of research designs. As can be noticed, the Table distinguishes between monostrand and multistrand designs, as well as between monomethod and multimethod designs. Although conceptually encompassing all possible designs in that it also includes monomethod and monostrand types, the scheme features in particular the mixed methods ones, which are highlighted in bold. The abbreviations QUAN and QUAL, standing for quantitative and qualitative respectively, are derived from Morse's basic notational system (1991):

Design Type	**Monostrand designs**	**Multistrand designs**
Monomethod designs	Monomethod monostrand designs: 1. Traditional QUAN design 2. Traditional QUAL design	Monomethod multistrand designs: 1. Concurrent Monomethod a. QUAN + QUAN b. QUAL + QUAL 2. Sequential Monomethod a. QUAN → QUAN b. QUAL → QUAL
Multimethod designs	Quasi-Mixed Monostrand designs: 1. Monostrand Conversion Design	**A. Mixed Methods Multistrand designs:** **1. Concurrent Mixed Designs**

		2. Sequential Mixed Designs **3. Conversion Mixed Designs** **4. Fully integrated Designs** B. Quasi-Mixed Multistrand designs: mixed at the experiential stage only, including the Concurrent Quasi-Mixed design

Table 6. Teddlie and Tashakkori's typology of research designs, also featuring mixed methods (adapted from Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006: 15)

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006 and 2009) consider the typology of mixed methods multistrand designs as the most complex, in that it is composed of more than one phase/cycle and combines qualitative and quantitative methods at all the three stages (conceptual, experiential and inferential) that compose each strand. In this light, this typology is the one which guides researchers in the implementation of mixed methods in their studies. According to the authors, there are four types of mixed methods multistrand designs: concurrent, sequential, conversion and fully integrated. These are also called families of designs, in that they each have "the capability of taking different shapes as a project develops" (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010b: 815). The paradigm that underpins the implementation of the four families in a research study is, in the authors' view, pragmatism, which allows for the choice of a variety of methods on the basis of the specific needs and purposes at play in the study.

Among the four families described by the two authors[32], concurrent mixed methods designs include at least two relatively independent strands, one with qualitative questions and qualitative data collection and analysis, and the other with

[32] For more detailed information on each family of designs, please refer to Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006 and 2009.

quantitative questions and quantitative data collection and analysis. Inferences obtained on the basis of the results from each strand are then integrated so as to generate meta-inferences which seal the end of the study.

Unlike the previous family, sequential mixed methods designs involve at least two strands that take place chronologically (QUAN→QUAL or QUAL→QUAN). The inferences made in the first strand become the starting point for the formulation of questions and the collection and analysis of data for the following phase. The final inferences originate from the results of all the strands of the study. As Teddlie and Tashakkori remark (2006: 22), "the second strand of the study is conducted either to confirm/disconfirm the inferences of the first strand or to provide further explanation for findings from the first strand".

The third family includes conversion mixed methods designs: these are multistrand concurrent designs in which "one type of data (e.g. QUAL) is gathered and analyzed accordingly (QUAL) and then transformed and analyzed using the other methodological approach (e.g. quantitized)" (ibid.: 23). This implies that *one type* of data undergoes *both* qualitative and quantitative analysis and meta-inferences.

Finally, the fully integrated mixed methods design is a multistrand concurrent one, which allows for the mixing of qualitative and quantitative approaches at all stages of the study. This means that, at each stage (e.g. conceptualization), one approach impacts the formulation of the other in an reciprocal and iterative way.

Overall, what essentially characterizes the four families described above is that they involve multiple strands and enable researchers to integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches in more than one stage of the study. As suggested above, the inferences made from both methods are then integrated into final meta-inferences. These, as noted by Nastasi, Hitchkock and Brown (2010: 321), "reflect a mixed-

paradigm perspective resulting from the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative research perspectives applied to the findings".

In the present study, a mixed methods approach was adopted so as to answer the two research questions (*RQ1* and *RQ2*) through a greater variety of insights: drawing on the strengths of each method, my aim was to provide stronger and more comprehensive inferences on the emergence of intercultural communicative competence, on the one side, and of shared spaces and related subject positions on the other. Throughout the study, a pragmatic approach to research underpinned the implementation of MM design, in an effort to utilize the best methods at hand for the collection and analysis of the data. Before going into a detailed description of the designs adapted in this study and methods used for data collection and analysis, it is important to note that the two research questions guiding this work were answered separately. In responding to the first research question (*RQ1*), in fact, the implementation of mixed method research was specifically informed by Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2006; 2009 and 2010) description of the four MM design families. When dealing with the second research question (*RQ2*), on the other hand, corpus linguistics provided the basis for the application of mixed methods and the development of a rather new MM design. The choice of addressing the two questions separately is not only due to the different research methodologies that were implemented, but also to the two aims that prompted this work: on the one hand, getting insights into ICC and the way it was manifested in the students' written output; on the other hand, exploring whether the texts written by the exchange participants reveal the emergence of a third space and related subject positions. Although there exists a strong link between intercultural communicative competence and third space (Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco 1999; Pegrum 2009; see § 3.6), the two dimensions that underpin this study will be kept separate both at a

methodological and analytical level, and will only be merged in Chapter 8, when the final conclusions on the whole study will be drawn. In line with this, section § 5.4 below will outline the design and procedures that guided the investigation of ICC in the students' written output, thus responding to the first research question. The section that follows (§ 5.5), in turn, will describe the methods that were used to explore the construction and negotiation of shared spaces and subject positions, in an attempt to answer the second research question.

5.4 Applying MMR in order to investigate intercultural communicative competence

The first aim of this study was to look for evidence of intercultural communicative competence in the texts that the Italian students produced while participating in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange. As suggested in Chapter 1, the analysis of the Italian participants' voices that informed this study did not aim to assess the students' ICC and its possible increase over time - something that, as other scholars have argued (Byram 2000; Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 2002; Dervin 2010; Liddicoat and Scarino 2010; Vogt 2006), represents a delicate and problematic challenge. Assessing the knowledge component of ICC may be a relatively straightforward task in that it focuses on the students' understanding of factual information about their own and the other culture (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 2002); instead, it is extremely hard for an external researcher, to measure whether a specific course, telecollaboration project or study-abroad experience has really helped students change their attitudes and become more aware of and critical towards their own sets of values as well as those of the others (Byram 2000). In Byram's words (ibid.: np), "this is affective and moral development", and quantifying it would mean entering an extremely personal sphere, one in which the means of external measurement of

interculturality are bound to fail to capture the affective and intimate dimensions of what it means to be intercultural (Liddicoat and Scarino 2010: 52). Put another way, and paraphrasing an effective expression by Paran and Sercu (2010), such a quantification would imply the attempt to test what is actually "untestable".

As most of the dimensions of ICC touch deeply on personal processes, their assessment on the part of a teacher or researcher would impose important limitations to the understanding of the complex dynamics that accompany an individual's encounters with otherness within an institutional context such as, for instance, an online exchange. Any external quantification, in fact, would imply the almost impossible task of distinguishing the impact of such intercultural encounters from the attitudes and skills that students have already developed, over the years, thanks to previous experiences with otherness in the environment/s in which they grew up and lived, and thanks to key factors such as their families, languages, cultural memberships, intra- and intercultural encounters as well as episodes of conflict, difference and exclusion. In my view, this constitutes an even more delicate challenge when, as in the case of the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project, the encounters promoted at an institutional level take place over a relatively short period of time, and therefore make the boundaries between already acquired competences and newly developed abilities even more indistinct.

Far from aiming at the assessment of the participants' intercultural communicative competence and its increase over time, this study attempted to pinpoint whether the Italian students activated and manifested any dimensions of ICC over the course of the project and, if so, how these were conveyed in their diaries and posts. The focus, therefore, was on the *manifestation* of ICC and not on its development: although some participants may have developed some dimensions of ICC over the course of the project, the purpose of this research was to look for

evidence of intercultural communicative competence in the texts that the Italian students composed while participating in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange. As suggested in the first Chapter (page 19), the question that informed the experiential stage of data collection and analysis is as follows:

RQ1 *What evidence do reflective diaries and other forms of written output (forum posts) give of the Italian students' intercultural communicative competence and of its activation through the intercultural encounters and activities promoted by the exchange?*

As can be noticed, the way the first research question is formulated suggests the combination – at the very early stage of conceptualization – of both a qualitative and quantitative stance. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006), mixed methods research questions should necessitate that both quantitative and qualitative data be gathered and analyzed to address the question. The research question reported above responds to this requisite, in that looking for *evidence* for something (in this case, intercultural communicative competence) entails providing both qualitative and numerical insights into the phenomenon of interest, so as to determine with which quality and frequency it occurs.

The design that was implemented in this study to respond to the first research questions was an adapted version of what Teddlie and Tashakkori call the *multistrand conversion mixed methods design* (2006; 2009): as outlined above, this implies that complex, mixed methods research questions guide the implementation of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, with one set of data being first collected and analyzed as such (e.g. qualitatively), and then transformed into another data type (e.g. quantitative) and analyzed accordingly. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006; 2009; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998; 2003a), the process of data conversion

can take two forms. On the one hand, quantitative data types may be transformed into narratives that are then analyzed from a qualitative standpoint: in this light, data are said to be *qualitized*. On the other hand, data conversion may involve the transformation of qualitative data into numerical data which can be statistically analyzed: in this case, researchers speak of *quantitized* data.

As will be better illustrated later on in this Chapter, the primary sets of data used to answer the first research question of this study were of the qualitative type, in that they were derived from the collection of the Italian students' diaries and Facebook posts. The first strand had consequently a qualitative nature (QUAL): drawing on Byram's ICC framework, and expanding on it so as to adapt it to the specific telecollaborative context under investigation, the purpose of this strand was to pinpoint categories and themes that could provide insights into the Italian participants' ability to engage with otherness in their intercultural encounters. After their qualitative analysis, all sets of qualitative data were subjected to a process of conversion into quantitized data. In this light, the second strand (QUAN) was directly related to the first, in that it built on the qualitative analysis of data to provide deeper and more comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation. While the first strand helped identify categories and themes, the second strand was useful to quantify the occurrences for each theme across the weekly diaries, thus pinpointing recurring patterns at the level of the Italian class that could be indicative of the manifestation of ICC across weeks. The inferences obtained from the two strands were then combined in the last phase of inquiry, so as to provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence of ICC as manifested in the Italian students' personal journals and posts to the Facebook forums. In this light, the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches occurred at the three stages of the design. The

observation of both sets of findings also led made it possible to formulate inferences on the reasons for the trends that were identified across the various weeks.

Figure 28 below visualizes the two strands of the design implemented in the attempt to respond to *RQ1*. Drawing on Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006; 2009), the geometric shapes in the form of rectangles represent the qualitative strand (QUAL), while the ovals indicate the quantitative strand (QUAN). It is worth noting that each strand has three stages, namely conceptualization, experiential, and inferential. As suggested above, the experiential phase is composed of two parts, the methodological and the analytical. The Figure clearly indicates that data conversion occurred at the experiential stage, more precisely after the data set had been qualitatively analyzed: this is shown by the zigzag line going from the qualitative strand to the quantitative strand. As suggested above, the qualitative and quantitative approaches are interrelated across each stage, and finally converge in the formulation of meta-inferences. The dotted line going from the meta-inferences box to the methodological stage indicates that the conclusions emerging from the observations of both qualitative and quantitative findings led to the gathering and analysis of further data within the same study, thus initiating a further, yet related process of investigation. More specifically, this occurred when the analysis of the primary source of data – the diaries – was followed and complemented by the collection and investigation of qualitative and quantitized data from the students' posts to the Facebook forums. As will be exemplified in Chapter 6, the aim of this secondary process was to corroborate and integrate the meta-inferences drawn at the end of the first exploration process, thus providing deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation, and potentially enhancing the validity of the research.

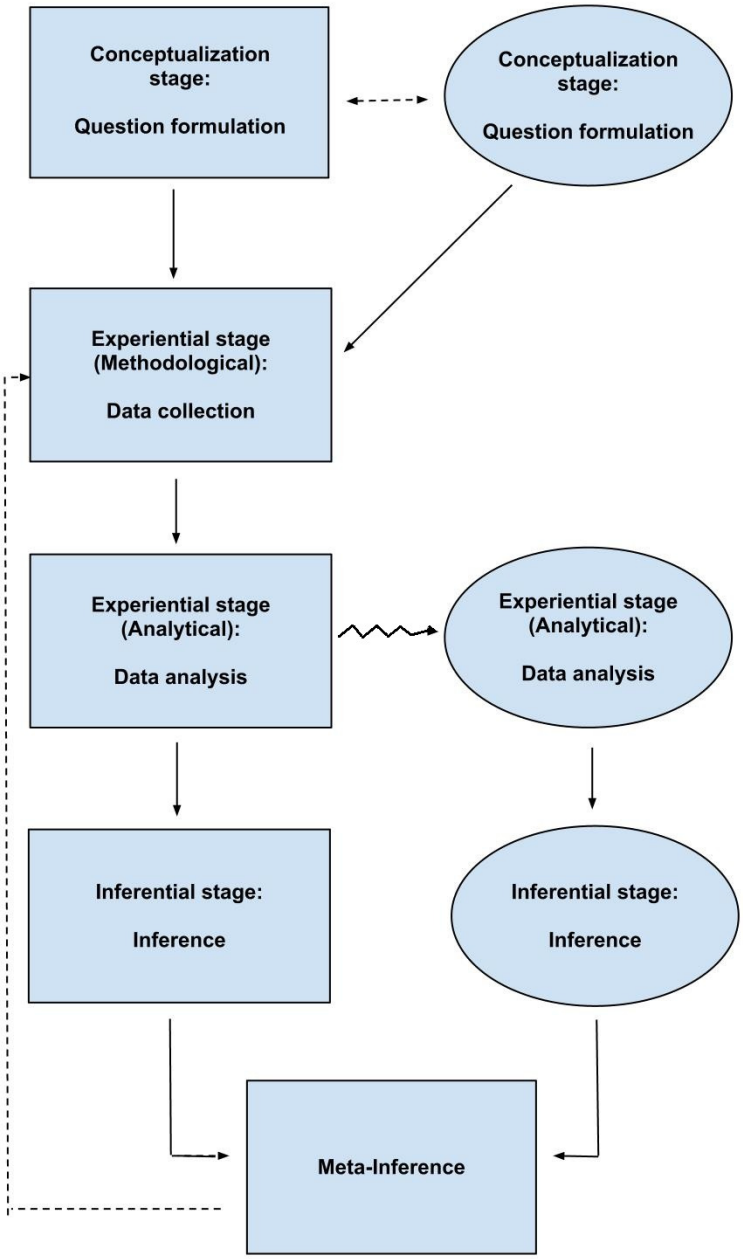
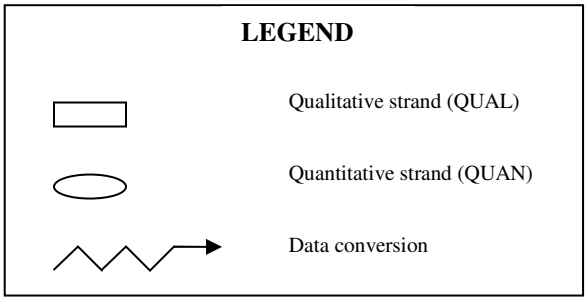


Figure 28. The multistrand conversion mixed methods design adopted to respond to RQ1(adapted from Teddlie and Tashakkori 2006 and 2009)



After briefly outlining the mixed methods design adopted to answer *RQ1*, the following subsections provide more detailed information about the qualitative and quantitative strands that informed the two processes of investigation of the Italian students' diaries and Facebook forums. It is worth noting that, in the descriptions that follow, the term 'diaries' will be used to include the students' posts to the Facebook forums. As the two processes were performed adopting the same strategies, the inclusive use of the noun 'diaries' is aimed at facilitating the reading process.

5.5.1 First strand (QUAL)

Drawing on qualitative research, the first strand adopted for the investigation of ICC in the Italian students' written output followed an inductive process, through which data were gathered in order to gain understanding of the phenomenon of interest and pieces of information were ordered and combined into larger themes to answer an initial research question. At this point in the study, my key concern was comprehending the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, despite the fact that all the data had to be filtered by my interpretive lens. The use of the students' personal narratives as the primary source of data allowed me to explore their experience from an emic stance, in that - as already discussed in Chapter 1 - diaries can "offer insights into people's private worlds" (Pavlenko 2007: 164), and therefore constitute a valuable source of information about the way social and learning processes are experienced and internalized from an insider's standpoint.

Among the various types of qualitative research identified by Merriam (2002 and 2009), namely ethnography, basic interpretive, case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative analysis, critical and postmodern-poststructural, this strand of the study can be considered an example of basic

interpretive (or, put another way, basic) research. In social sciences, basic studies are the most common form of qualitative research (Merriam 2009), and have as their primary goal the unveiling and interpretation of meanings (ibid.). As the other types of qualitative research, basic studies are characterized by a series of features which range from a primary focus on gaining emic perspectives on a specific phenomenon, the role of the researcher as an instrument, and the inductive and interpretive nature of the research strategy (see section § 5.2). As Merriam suggests (2002: 6), "in conducting a basic qualitative study, you seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives of the people involved, or a combination of these". Collected through interviews, observations and documents, the data that may be useful to uncover the meanings associated with the phenomenon of interest are then "inductively analyzed to identify the recurrent patterns or common themes that cut across the data" (ibid.: 6-7). This was the strategy used in the first strand of the present study.

For the purposes of this research, I first collected and saved all the Italian students' diary entries in Word format, dividing them according to each single author, and ordering them in chronological order - from the least to the most recent – on the basis of the Skype sessions to which they were related. In this way, 18 individual Word files were created, each of which contained the personal narratives of a participant, as well as some essential information about him/her. Overall, the 18 files contained a total of 84 diary entries, although some differences existed between them: within the group, in fact, seven participants had completed all the six diary entries required in the project; four had written five personal journals; one participant had composed four entries; and six students had completed three weekly diaries.

After collecting and saving all the personal journal entries, the stage of data analysis began by carefully re-reading all the texts and jotting down notes and

observations on aspects in the data that I thought might be relevant to answer the research question. This stage may be referred to as "open coding" (Merriam 2009) in that the researcher simply makes notations to highlight any segment in the data that might be useful. The phase of open coding was followed by a second step of codification, which consisted in defining an initial set of categories that, starting from the dimensions of ICC as described by Byram (1997), would help me "look for recurring regularities in the data" (Merriam 2009: 177) that I had been reading and observing. In qualitative research, categories – or themes – are descriptive "conceptual elements" (ibid.: 181) that, capturing some recurring patterns throughout the data, help researchers identify and codify pieces of information that may be useful to answer their research question. As Merriam notes (2009: 183), the construction of categories is an inductive process, although a "deductive stance" needs to be activated as well: this means that tentative themes are derived inductively as the researcher reads through the data and makes notations; these are then deductively tested to check whether they can form recurrent clusters of information throughout the data at hand, and are therefore meaningful to the purposes of the research. As the inquiry unfolds, new categories are likely to emerge, while others may become subcategories: this process continues until saturation, in other words when one reaches the point at which no new information emerges (ibid.).

Besides identifying useful categories from within the data at hand, in some cases classification themes can be borrowed from previous studies, on condition that their theoretical framework and aims are compatible with those of the study of interest (ibid.: 185), and provided that the presence of already existing categories does not hinder the generation of new themes. In the research described in this thesis, the identification of the initial set of categories was facilitated by the classification

scheme that I, together with Sarah Guth and Francesca Helm[33], had adopted in a previous study on the personal narratives of a group of Italian students participating in the Soliya Connect Program (Guarda, Guth and Helm 2011). The aim of the study was to explore the students' personal journals on the telecollaboration experience so as to identify any change in perspective and attitudes which resulted from the interaction with people from a variety of different cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds.

On that occasion, the researchers identified a series of categories that strictly mirrored Byram's *savoirs*: these categories were therefore labelled as *attitudes*, *knowledge*, *skills of discovery and interaction*, *skills of interpreting and relating*, and *critical cultural awareness*. Further categories were also inductively created on the basis of the specific context under investigation: thus, for instance, the category *language* was derived from the data to mark any piece of information in which the students had commented on the use of language in the project, while that of *empowerment* was used to identify any stretch of text in which the students had expressed their willingness to propose solutions to the conflicts and/or problematic issues that were discussed in the Connect Program (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). The classification scheme used in Guarda, Guth and Helm's joint study (2011) can be summarized as in Figure 29 below: to facilitate understanding, each theme is accompanied by a brief description. As can be noticed, some of the categories are further divided into subthemes: these were inductively obtained in the coding phase in order to better identify and isolate the specific meanings attributed to the various stretches of text. Thus, for instance, the category *skills of interpreting and relating* was broken down in such a way as to differentiate the instances when the

[33] Sarah Guth and Francesca Helm are members of staff at the University of Padova. They have done extensive research on telecollaboration, and are members of several scientific committees in their field of research (including Eurocall and Eurocall CMC SIG). They are also involved in the EU Lifelong Learning funded project INTENT mentioned earlier on in this thesis.

students had shown an ability to relate cultural differences from those when this ability was activated to interpret similarities across the cultures involved in the project.

Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.

Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.

Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own. This includes:

- **Interpreting similarities**
- **Interpreting differences**

Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction. It embeds:

- **Discovery of others' opinions**

Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. It's the ability to critically evaluate both the target culture and the own culture, which might lead to a change in opinions. It includes:

- **Complexity** - awareness of complexity
- **Empathy** – the ability to put one self in another's shoes – though not agree
- **Inverted commas** – use of loaded words and words with special meaning
- **Personal opinion** – evidence for critical personal opinions
- **Causes** – ability to identify causes of conflict

Conflict – reporting of disagreements or conflict within group

Language - reporting anything related to language

Technology - reporting anything related to tech

Empowerment – willingness to take action and propose solutions to problems and/or conflicts

Task – reference to activities in the Connect Program

Evaluation - evaluation of the experience. This includes:

- **Positive Evaluation**
- **Negative Evaluation**

Name– reference to peers or to the group facilitators

Group – reference to groups. In includes:

- **Italian group** – reference to peers in Padova
- **Soliya Group** – reference to Soliya partners

Figure 29. Categories developed by Guarda, Guth and Helm (2011)

Although the aim of the research conducted on the Soliya Connect Program was slightly different from that informing the present study, the use of Byram's ICC framework and the adoption of the participants' diaries as a source of data made Guarda, Guth and Helm's classification scheme a good stating point for the development of a more specific and context-bound set of categories. It was in this light, therefore, that part of the classification scheme shown in Figure 29 was maintained: consequently, the categorization frame adopted for this analysis comprehended all the pre-existing categories that, through the careful and repeated reading of the Italian students' diaries, were found to be applicable to the new context of investigation. These included not only those that explicitly related to Byram's *savoirs* - namely *attitudes*, *knowledge*, *skills of discovery and interaction*, *skills of interpreting and relating*, and *critical cultural awareness* -, but also *language*, *technology*, *task*, *evaluation, group* and *name*. As I moved further along in the observation of the diaries, other themes from the borrowed scheme were eliminated, since none of the stretches of information that were identified in the texts could be related to them. The themes that were eliminated comprehended *conflict* and *empowerment*, as well as a series of subthemes such as *empathy* and *causes* (subthemes of critical cultural awareness), and the subcategories of *group*. In order to capture all the possible insights offered by the data, new categories were generated following the inductive process illustrated above: thus, for instance, the category *collaboration* was created to highlight all the instances in which the students had commented on the way their group had collaborated in the project. The category *feeling*, in turn, identified the stretches of text that contained evidence for the students' feelings before, during or after the Skype session. In line with a deductive approach (Merriam 2009: 183), the new, tentative themes were checked by searching through the data for more pieces of information that could give them substance.

While constructing the classification scheme, each category was attributed a code, or tag, which was used to classify and combine the various pieces of information revealed as the analysis unfolded: thus, for instance, the category of attitudes was labelled as <ATT>, that of knowledge as <KNW> and that of language as <LAN>.

Figure 30 below exemplifies all the categories that make up the scheme used for the codification and investigation of the Italian students' written output: as can be noticed, each theme is preceded by the tag that is used in the codification of the texts. As in the classification scheme used in Guarda, Guth and Helm's study (2011), some themes were broken down into subcategories: within the category of critical cultural awareness (<CCA>), for instance, explicit focus was given to the instances in which the students showed an awareness of the complexity of culture and of metacultural discourse (<CCA-COM>), to their use of what they perceived as culturally-loaded words (<CCA-IC>), as well as to the segments in the diaries in which critical cultural awareness emerges as embedded in the writer's personal opinions (<CCA-PO>). Clearly, not all the categories listed in the classification scheme refer to ICC: while the first themes explicitly draw on the five dimensions described in Byram's framework (1997), the categories that follow aim to capture and make sense of all the stretches of information that are conveyed in the diaries, and are therefore related, for instance, to the technologies used in the project (<TECH>) and to the students' feelings before, after and during each Skype meeting (<FEEL>).

CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

<ATT> Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.

<KWN> Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.

<INT> Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own. This includes the ability to build parallels between the two cultures.

<INT-SIM> Ability to identify similarities between the cultures involved in the interaction

<INT-DIFF> Ability to see and interpret differences between the cultures involved in the interaction

<DIS> Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction. This includes the ability to ask good exploratory or even 'difficult' questions, as well as to deal with potential misunderstandings.

<DIS-OO> Ability to discover others' opinions

<CCA> Critical cultural awareness: ability to evaluate critically perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. In this sense, it is the ability to take a critical stance towards both the target culture and the own culture. It includes the ability to critically reflect on *metaculture*.

<CCA-COM> Awareness of complexity of culture

<CCA-IC> Inverted commas: use of culturally-loaded words or words that, in the writer's view, have a special meaning

<CCA-PO> Expressing critical personal opinions

<LAN> Language: reporting anything related to language and the way it was used in the project

<TECH> Technology: reporting anything related to technology and the way it was used in the project

<TASK> Task: reporting anything related to the practical tasks of the telecollaboration project

<EVAL> Evaluation: of the intercultural experience promoted by the telecollaboration project

<EVAL-POS> Positive evaluation

<EVAL-NEG> Negative evaluation

<NAME> Name: explicit reference to other group members through the use of their first name

<COLLAB> Collaboration: reporting anything related to the way the group collaborated.

<GRP> Group: use of direct formulae that explicit address the group of participants (e.g. "Hi guys")

<FEEL> Feeling: anything related to the students' feelings before, during or after the Skype meetings. It is different from <ATT> in that it is just about feelings and not specifically about attitudes and curiosity. It is also different from <EVAL> in that it does not necessarily imply an evaluation.

Figure 30. Classification scheme used for the codification of the Italian students' texts

The themes that were identified in the analysis are better illustrated in the following Table, which represents a codebook with authentic examples from the students'

diaries. As I moved along in the exploration of each diary entry, the codebook served as a useful 'reference point', in that it provided me with a constant set of examples which facilitated the construction of categories and the identification of similar themes in the texts. In this sense, the codebook functioned as a "frame or boundary" that helped me "systematically map the informational terrain of the text" (MacQueen *et al*. 1998). In the codebook reported below, extracts from the Italian students' diaries are also provided for each of the subcategories. It is worth noting that here, as in all other extracts, the students' names have been substituted by pseudonyms.

Category	Tag	Examples from diaries
Attitudes	**ATT**	"In the next session I'd like to talk about different views that them and we have about different arguments, such as religion, gay marriage, politics in both countries, violence against women, etc." (Maria, PD_week 1)
Knowledge	**KNW**	"As a matter of facts, Petra has to study two subjects, which are completely different, in order to become a teacher" (Ester, PD_week 1)
Skills of interpreting and relating	**INT**	"For me it's very difficult to understand perfectly these situation, because I'm not living it. But if I've to compare my life with theirs, I could say that in every family there are generation troubles, especially between parents and sons" (Riccardo, PD_week 4)
	INT-DIFF	"From them I learnt a lot of things and one thing that stroke me was that, in Austria, universities are free, they have no tuition fees!! That's impressive! And in this field I'm very critical about Italy because we are the 10th country in the world that has the most expensive tuition fees and hearing that in Austria they don't pay, let me think!" (Antonella, PD_week 1)
	INT-SIM	"First of all, we started with the game of our rank of values in life. We all agreed with the fact that family and friends are the most important and influential components since they guide us from the very beginning of our life" (Emma, PD_week 3)

Skills of discovery and interaction	**DIS**	"I asked Sanja about the situation of women in Austria and she anwered that they are more evolved in this sense,they consider the women more" (Roberta, PD_week 4)
	DIS-OO	"For Eike friends is the most important, she lives alone and she hears her parents not so often like me for example and she thinks that friends are life so, they are very important in her life" (Vanessa, PD_week 3)
Critical Cultural Awareness	**CCA**	"Speaking of multiple identities we draw a conclusion: a person doesn't have more identities but on the contrary every person tries to conform to the situation in which is found, to the person that has in front. At times a person can be more expansive others no. Certainly we won't behave in the same way with the teachers that we behave with our friends" (Renata, PD_week 1).
	CCA-COM	"mmm, actually this has been more difficult than the previous ones. A talk about identity is quite philosophic… and I've never understood philosophy :P the main problem was that everyone had a different idea of what is identity so we couldn't find an agreement. Or better, we agree on the general points but going inside the problem we found out different opinions… but on the other hand, this was an interesting talk because the matter was (and is) very huge and there were a lot of things to say" (Melidan, PD_week 3)
	CCA-IC	"Women have problems mainly in the working environment since they could get pregnant. For this reason, employers prefer hiring someone'safer'" (Emma, PD_week 5)
	CCA-PO	"I think that to minimize labeling, we should be more open-minded towards the others and do not stop us at the first impression; only in this way we can understand if the opinion we have about a person is right or not" (Anna, PD_week 4)
Language	**LAN**	**"**Throughout this session I've learned some new expressions and words together with cultural customs" (Sofia, PD_week 2)
Technology	**TECH**	"At the beginning we had some technical problems because I couldn't understand very well what my peers were saying because there was too noise..but after some minutes

		everything went better and we started talking" (Chiara, PD_week 1)
Task	**TASK**	"We did the game that we were asked to do and <EVAL-POS> we had lot of fun when we talked about our universities and our culture" (Bruno, PD_week 4)
Evaluation	EVAL-POS	"This week was really well, <LAN> first of all because we spoke for more that one hour in english and obviously becouse I found good pears to speak with". (Denis, PD_week 1)
	EVAL-NEG	"Unfortunately, I had some technical problems. My microphone worked whenever it wanted and the audio was bad". (Emma, PD_week 3)
Name	**NAME**	"I discovered that Sanja is Muslin so we interacted and talked about the problem of being a woman in a Muslin tradition" (Vanessa, PD_week 1)
Collaboration	**COLLAB**	"For a successful intercultural communication we've to respect others points of view. So I try to understand my peers' ideas comparing with mines, in order to create a perfect mediation among our thoughts" (Riccardo, PD_week 6)
Group	**GRP**	"See ya" (Vania, PD_week 3)
Feeling	**FEEL**	"What about the first Skype session? Well, from the very beginning I wasn't so excited about that meeting on Skype. I was worried about technical problems and the noise that could have been, but fortunately everything worked" (Anna, PD_week 1)

Table 7. Codebook with examples

As I moved along in the analysis, each diary entry was broken down into segments of relevant information, and each unit of information was assigned a code based on the themes identified in the scheme. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985: 345), units of analysis are "the smallest piece of information about something that (…) can be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than the broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out". In this study,

units of meaning of various length were accepted, ranging from a single word to an entire paragraph. In addition, in some cases embedded codes were adopted when the content of a unit allowed for the coexistence of multiple categories, as can be seen in the following example:

> <TECH> <EVAL-NEG> Unfortunately, I had some technical problems. My microphone worked whenever it wanted and the audio was bad. I hope that next time will be better at this regard because it was very annoying. </EVAL-NEG> </TECH> <EVAL-POS> All in all it was a very interesting conversation and even though Elena was "new" to the group, everything went well :) </EVAL-POS> (Emma, PD_week 3).

Although several computer programs (e.g. NVivo[34]) now exist to store, organize and retrieve the information that emerges from the qualitative coding of texts (Merriam 2009: 182), the whole process of classification and data analysis was carried out manually by using a word processing computer program. This decision was taken for two main reasons: the relatively small number of texts that were to be investigated; and the lack of complex and variegated sets of data such as images or audio files. As my investigation only focused on quite a limited amount of textual data, I felt I could comfortably cope with manual coding – something that I was already familiar with, and which therefore made me feel I was in control of the data.

As already suggested above, the first qualitative strand described in these few pages was related to both processes of analysis, namely that focusing on the data derived from the diaries and that undertaken to investigate the data from the students' posts to the Facebook forums. In both cases, the first strand was followed by a second, quantitative strand, which is described below.

[34] http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx

5.5.2 Second strand (QUAN)

Responding to the same mixed methods research question outlined above (*RQ1*, see page 227), the second strand had a quantitative nature, and relied on the conversion of the qualitative data collected and analyzed in the first strand. As suggested above, data transformation occurred at the experiential stage of the first strand: as a result, the same set of data from the first strand was converted into quantitative data, and analyzed as such. As in the first strand, the strategies used in the second strand relate to the transformation and analysis of the data derived from both the students' diaries and their comments to the Facebook forums. Thus, the use of the word 'diaries' is to be considered as also including the participants' Facebook posts.

After coding all the personal journals, the codes for each participant were quantified, week by week, in a spreadsheet: at this stage of analysis, 'counting' the occurrences for each category helped me gain a more immediate idea of the patterns that emerged over time, across the diaries, as well as between the individual students. In addition, this quantitative stance helped identify the patterns which recurred more often in the diaries, and which therefore required closer attention in the analysis.

After quantifying the occurrences for each category in the individual students' diaries, the investigation took on a wider perspective by calculating the frequency with which the most salient themes appeared at the level of the whole class of Italian participants. For the purposes of this research, the categories that were considered as most relevant to answer *RQ1* were those related to the dimensions of ICC, namely *attitudes* (<ATT>), *knowledge* (<KNW>), *skills of discovery and interaction* (<DIS>), *skills of interpreting and relating* (<INT>), and *critical cultural awareness* (<CCA>). For each of these, the total number of occurrences in the whole collection of diaries was calculated in order to identify whether and how ICC had been manifested at the level of the whole group of students. As some of the themes

from the classification scheme had been further divided into subcategories, the sum of the latter was obtained and merged into the main theme they belonged to: thus, for instance, the various derivates of <CCA>, namely <CCA-COM>, <CCA-PO> and <CCA-IC>, were analysed as integral parts of the dimension of critical cultural awareness.

The methodology adopted up to this point, in both its qualitative and quantitative form, allowed me to draw some observations on the *savoirs* that the students activated during the Skype sessions and later manifested in their diary entries. These qualitative and quantitative inferences will be the core of the following Chapter.

5.5.3 Integrating mixed methods case studies

As will be seen in Chapter 6, the collection and analysis of the students' diaries and posts to the Facebook forums was useful to form a holistic picture of the intercultural dynamics and strategies at stake at the level of the whole Italian group. Yet, after completing these two processes, I felt that more in-depth and specific information was needed in order to capture the way ICC was manifested by individual students in their writing. In order to move from general observations concerning the whole class to the interpretation of more specific data related to single students, two mixed methods case studies were undertaken.

Defined as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam 2009: 40), a case study involves the exploration of a single entity that is an example of some phenomenon. In this sense, case studies focus on the particular (Langford 2001), in that they investigate a specific situation or event for what it reveals about the phenomenon of interest. In case study research, therefore, knowledge about the issue of interest is rooted in the context in which a particular

situation, event or program takes place. In this light, case studies can be defined as heuristic, in that they "illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Merriam 2009: 44). As Merriam further remarks (2009), case studies have a descriptive nature, in that their final aim is to provide a "thick description" (Geertz 1973), in other words a rich and comprehensive account of the entity being inspected. In line with these observations, the case study was felt as the best means to gain deeper insights into intercultural communicative competence and the way it was manifested in the telecollaboration exchange. This choice was not only triggered by the need to provide vivid examples of the *savoirs* that the individual students activated and manifested in their texts, but also by the awareness of one of the possible limitations of this study, namely the risk of drawing generalizations from extremely personal processes such as those related to ICC, and the consequent need to avoid formulating general conclusions from such a small amount of data.

In his well-known classification of case study typologies, Stake (2005) distinguishes between intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies. The former type encompasses all those studies in which the research is specifically interested in a particular case itself, and not in a broader or generic phenomenon. In Stake's words (ibid.: 445), intrinsic case studies are undertaken "because of an intrinsic interest in, for example, this particular child, conference, or curriculum". On the contrary, instrumental case studies are examined to provide further insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Although the case is still inspected and described into depth, it principally plays a "supportive role" in that it "facilitates the understanding of something else" (ibid.). Finally, collective case studies are undertaken when a number of cases is studied together in order to investigate a broader phenomenon or general condition. Drawing on this classification, the two case studies that will be presented in this thesis can be considered as instrumental, in

that they help gain better understanding of intercultural communicative competence and its manifestation in the telecollaboration exchange.

Although case studies have traditionally been seen as a type of qualitative research - together with ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative analysis (Creswell 2007; Merriam 2002 and 2009) -, they potentially allow for the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches and constitute therefore a "comprehensive research strategy" (Yin 2003: 14) that transcends the rigid dichotomy between the two research orientations. Luck, Jackson and Usher (2006) further argue that, in case studies, the use of multiple methods for data collection and analysis enables the interpretation of "complex interrelated phenomena" (ibid. 107) and allows for the combination of different paradigmatic positions. This is reinforced by Stake's (2005: 443) claim that case studies are more a "choice of what is to be studied" than a methodological choice: in case study research, therefore, the main focus is on *the case*, and not so much the method that is adopted. According to Luck and her colleagues, this manifests the "paradigmatic flexibility" (2006: 106) that is inherent in case study research and that can make case studies a form of mixed methods approach, in other words a "bridge across the paradigms" (ibid.). If seen in the light of Stake's observations reported above, the reference to paradigmatic flexibility reveals an intrinsic link between case studies and the pragmatic stance that is typical of mixed methods research. This, in turn, explains why case studies were included in the mixed methods approaches used in the present research: as outlined above, the whole research presented in this thesis was deeply rooted in a pragmatic stance, and therefore adopted the approaches and methods that could best illuminate the phenomena I was interested in.

The *mixed methods case studies* discussed in Chapter 6 will attempt to provide vivid examples of the *savoirs* that two specific Italian students, Ester and

Matteo, activated and translated into their written output over the course of the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange. The case studies primarily originate from the mixed methods design illustrated above: this means that their purpose was the same as that stated in the first research question (*RQ1*) – although this was re-defined to look in particular at two bounded systems and not at the whole group of students. In addition, the link with the mixed methods design adopted in the investigation of ICC also relies on the fact that the qualitative and quantitative strands outlined in the previous section provided the primary source of data for the two case studies. As suggested above, the collection and analysis of data in the two strands was carried out on the personal narratives and – in a secondary process – on the Facebook posts for each single participant. This allowed me to analyze the data both holistically – considering all the texts for the whole group, as outlined previously – and with a more specific focus on individual students – something which informed the implementation of the case studies.

Although essentially rooted in the multistrand conversion design described above, and therefore relying on the students' diaries as the primary source of data, the two case studies also integrated further data sources, in an attempt to include a wider range of insights into the exploration of intercultural communicative competence. This responded to the essentially pragmatic stance adopted in the study, which advocated the use of multiple methodologies, instruments and theoretical positions to best respond to the research question. In this light, the case studies presented in this study can be seen as an example of *integrative* enquiry, described by Andrews (2009: 176) as a method that involves "combining and transforming professional judgments and/or measurements decisions, thereby enabling the researcher to thicken description, reinforce findings, and create new meanings". Andrews (ibid.) specifically defines integrative inquiry as an orchestration of

multiple data sources, ranging from observations and interviews to questionnaires and measurable tests. The instruments utilized for data collection are interrelated "so that relationships can be identified during the analysis and interpretation of the data" (ibid.: 175). In this way, integration can be obtained throughout the research process.

The concept of integrative inquiry suggested by Andrews (2009) is not only linked to pragmatism, but also to the notion of triangulation. As suggested above, triangulation can be seen as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomena" (Denzin 1970: 297). In this sense, it implies "taking different perspectives on an issue under study or more generally in answering research questions" (Flick 2007: 41). In the field of social sciences, Denzin (1970) identified four forms of triangulation: data triangulation indicates the use of different sources of data using the same methods. This means, for instance, collecting data through observations at different points in time or with different persons. Methods triangulation, on the contrary, implies the use of different methods for data collection: in this sense, a researcher may adopt interviews, observations and documents within the same study. Triangulation also occurs when multiple investigators collect and analyze data: also defined as investigator triangulation by Denzin (ibid.), this form of triangulation helps reveal and minimize biases derived from one individual researcher. Finally, theory triangulation occurs when the researcher approaches the data "with multiple perspectives and hypotheses in mind" (ibid.: 303). Whatever the form, triangulation aims to extend the chances to learn about a given phenomenon, and to produce more solid observations on it. In turn, this has the potential of increasing the credibility of findings, and therefore enhance the validity of a study (Merriam 2009).

In the two mixed methods case studies, triangulation was obtained by adopting different methods of data collection. Thus, the additional sources that were

adopted to enlarge the variety of data for both case studies included Ester's and Matteo's responses to the pre- and post-questionnaires, their answers to the final self-assessment on ICC, their answers to brief semistructured interviews, their posts to the activities on the wikispace, as well as my own observations throughout the project. A graphic representation of all the data sources that were used in the case studies is provided in Figure 31: as can be noticed, the students' diaries still occupy a central position, in that they were the main source of data and functioned as a reference point against which all the other sets of data were analyzed, integrated and compared. All the additional data sources are better illustrated below.

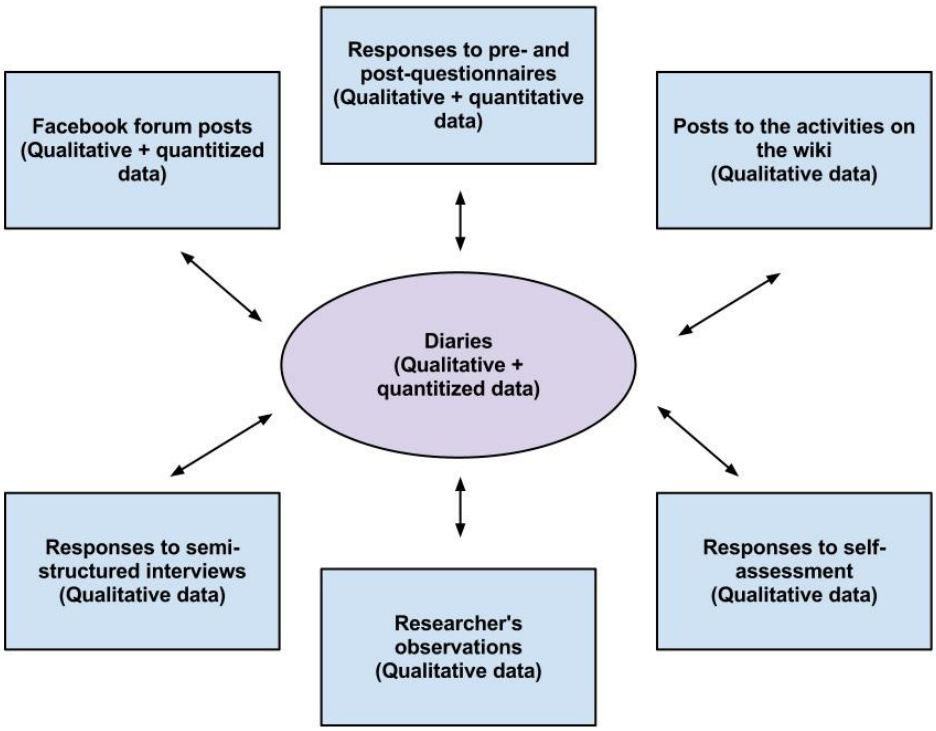


Figure 31. Data sources for the case studies

As outlined above, questionnaires are commonly associated with quantitative approaches, while interviews, textual documents and field observations are characteristic of qualitative research. Yet, in Ester's and Matteo's case studies, both types of instruments for data collection were used: their combination, therefore, reveals the inherent mixed methods nature of the two case studies presented in this

thesis. The heterogeneous nature of the case studies is further enhanced by the specific features of the pre- and post-questionnaires, which included both closed-ended and open-ended questions and were therefore the source of quantitative and qualitative data. Mostly taking the form of Likert-scale questions, the closed-ended items of the questionnaires aimed at obtaining numerical answers quantifying the students' experiences or impressions about a given item. An example of this is provided by the question '*How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your reading skills?'* (post-questionnaire), which required the students to select an answer from a closed set of possible choices ranging from 'nothing' (1 point) to 'very much' (5 points). The second type of questions was open-ended, and thus encouraged the students to provide full and complete responses to the given item, as in '*What do you expect to learn/improve from this exchange, in terms of both: a. intercultural competence; b. language skills?'* (pre-questionnaire). More exhaustive examples of both types of questions can be found in Appendices B and C, which contain Ester's and Matteo's responses to the questionnaires, as well as all the data provided by the other data sources for their case studies (diary entries, personal introductions, posts to the wikispace, comments in the Facebook forums, and responses to the self-assessment and the semistructured interviews).

Of all the data sources, only the pre- and post-questionnaires provided both qualitative and quantitative data. The students' answers to the self-assessment, their personal introductions, their various comments relating to the activities on the wikipages, their responses to the interviews and my personal observations were, in fact, all sources of qualitative data, which were therefore collected and analyzed following a qualitative approach. As suggested in Chapter 1, a self-assessment was assigned at the end of the exchange: based on Byram's model for intercultural communicative competence, the prompts in the self-assessment aimed to help the

participants from both groups to reflect on their experience and provide evidence of episodes in which, in their online interactions, they had been able to put into action the various *savoirs*. The prompts included, for instance, the following statement: '*Episodes in which I was able to ask meaningful questions to discover more about my peers' cultures and opinions'*. In order to complete the self-assessment, the students were encouraged to re-read all their personal journals and think about episodes that could provide evidence of their intercultural skills and attitudes. For the specific purposes of the case studies, Ester's and Matteo's responses to the self-assessment were saved in Word format and qualitatively investigated so as to find further evidence of the two students' *savoirs*: the primary aim of this exploration was to enrich the observations obtained from the analysis of their diaries with new meanings. The same method was applied to the data provided by the personal introductions and posts to the weekly activities that Ester and Matteo had written on the project wikispace (see Chapter 4), and that were thought to offer potential insights into the way the two students had approached the whole experience of the exchange as well as the specific metacultural topics proposed every week.

As already suggested, further data sources were provided by the students' answers to interviews. In qualitative research, interviews can be defined as "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (deMarrais 2004: 55). In this light, interviews are conversations prompted by a specific purpose, namely that of obtaining information on a phenomenon of interest (Merriam 2009). While analysing Ester's and Matteo's data, I felt the need to ask the two students to clarify or expand on some of the passages, episodes or feelings that were emerging from their texts. The 'conversations' I had with them, therefore, aimed at testing, confirming and/or explaining aspects in the data that, in my view, required closer attention or

clarification. Both interviews were semistructured (Merriam 2009) in that they were guided by a brief list of open-ended questions that had no predetermined wording or order, and that were used flexibly so as to allow other themes or points to emerge and be expanded upon. In both cases, the language used for the interviews was Italian, a choice that was expected to put the interviewees at greater ease when responding to my questions. Matteo's interview took place in January 2012 and consisted of a twenty-minute face-to-face conversation. Ester's interview took place via Skype and lasted approximately thirty minutes. As in both cases electronic recording was not feasible due to logistic constraints (in Matteo's interview) and technical problems in the videoconferencing system (during Ester's interview), interview data were recorded by taking down notes during the interviews. The data obtained in this way were then used to enrich the meanings offered by the analysis of the other data sources.

To conclude this overview of the data sources used for the case studies, a few words must be said about my personal observations on the way the students – and Ester and Matteo in particular – were performing and approaching the telecollaboration exchange and its activities. As Merriam suggests (2009: 117), a researcher's observations are a form of fieldwork that can take place "in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs". Despite being highly subjective, observations are a useful data-gathering technique since their represent "a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest" (ibid.). In my case, real-time observations were a useful means by which to monitor how the course developed, but also a valuable way of gaining understanding of the individual students' behaviours, feelings and attitudes across the various weeks. Throughout the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project, therefore, my role was not only that of course instructor but also that of a *participant observer*, in other words someone whose observations are

"subordinate to the researcher's role as a participant" (Merriam 2009: 124): besides being fully involved in the organizational and educational aspects of the exchange, I observed and took notes on the students' feelings, levels of engagement in the activities and Skype sessions, behaviours and challenging moments, as well as on the dynamics at play within the various groups. Given the nature of telecollaboration, all my direct observations concerned the Italian group of participants, with whom I had continuous face-to-face contact. Yet, the diary that I used to collect all my notes – or *fieldnotes* (ibid.) – also contained observations on the Austrian students' behaviours and attitudes as they emerged from the descriptions of the instructors at Innsbruck university and from the personal conversations that I had with both groups per email or through private messages on Facebook. Over the course of the exchange, notes were also taken that explicitly related to Ester's and Matteo's participation in the activities and group dynamics. These were taken into account in the analysis as they provided further insights into the two students' experiences.

The data obtained from participant observation and the interviews add an ethnographic stance to the case studies presented in this thesis since, as Merriam suggests (2009: 28), it is through immersion in the site and conversations that ethnographers primarily obtain useful data for their research. Originating from the work of anthropologists, ethnography can be broadly defined as a qualitative approach "in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group" (Creswell 2007: 68). As a process, ethnography relies on extended on-site observations of the behaviours and meanings attributed by the members of a given group. These observations, also known as *fieldwork* (Wolcott 1999), allow one to collect information in the form of observations and interviews which, therefore, constitute the main data gathering techniques. Despite the ethnographic stance that

appears to emerge from Ester's and Matteo's case studies, however, it is important to note that the data collected through my observations and interviews only played a peripheral role in the study, in that they simply aimed at providing additional insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

5.5 Applying MMR in order to investigate third space and subject positions

A further aim of this thesis was to investigate how the participants in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange perceived and related to their telecollaborative experience. Through the linguistically-grounded exploration of the students' weekly diaries, forum posts and contributions to the activities on the wikispace, the study attempted to identify whether the participants' written output was an indication of the emergence of a third, shared space, and how the two groups positioned themselves in relation to it. It is worth noting that, for the purposes of this specific study, the investigation was applied to the texts produced by both classes of students, including the group from Innsbruck university. Although the Innsbruck group produced fewer texts in comparison with their Padova peers, their contribution still played a key role in determining the emergence of shared spaces and subject positions: as both these concepts are deeply grounded in the principles of collective negotiation and mutual construction of meanings, ignoring the Austrian participants' voices would have implied failing to fully understand the phenomenon under investigation. That said, the present study tried to respond to the second research question outlined in Chapter 1 (page 23):

RQ2 *Does the students' written output (diaries, forums, wiki posts) signal the co-construction of a shared space? If so, which discursive features did the participants*

adopt in their written production to convey this 'third space', and how did they position themselves in relation to it?

The way the question – or, rather, the set of questions – reported above was conceptualized suggests that a mixed methods stance was needed to explore the phenomenon of interest. As will be clarified later on in this thesis, the first part of *RQ2* aimed to identify and quantify any potential indicators of third space and subject positions; the second part of *RQ2*, in turn, implied the adoption of a qualitative stance so as to pinpoint the discursive features that were adopted to convey third space and subject positions. In this sense, the formulation of *RQ2* implied the combination of MM approaches at the very stage of conceptualization.

As suggested above, mixed methods research informed the choice of the techniques, approaches and methods that were used to respond to the second research question. In this case, too, a pragmatic stance was taken to determine the methodology that could best illuminate the research issue, namely corpus linguistics. Before embarking on a description of how corpus linguistics was implemented in the study of third space and subject positions, a few words must be said on its main characteristics and applications.

Corpus linguistics can be defined as the empirical study of language through the compilation and the exploration of corpora of examples of authentic language production (Baker, P. 2006). As suggested earlier in this thesis, a corpus is generally described as a collection of texts in electronic form which can be manipulated and processed by an electronic software tool in order to obtain consistent and objective data on language use. As such, corpus linguistics is strictly linked to computer technology, which explains the relative youth of this field of research: as Baker, Hardie and McEnery suggest (2006: 51), although some studies on corpora had already been carried out in the 1960s, it was only thanks to

technological improvements in the 1980s and to the greater availability of the computer that corpus analysis "began to grow and be accepted as a valid means of language enquiry". Since then, corpora have been extensively used to investigate various linguistic issues: lexicography is certainly one of the first disciplines to have benefited from corpus analysis, since real-life productions can reveal new meanings and contexts for existing words and may thus contribute to the compilation of updated dictionaries.

Over the past few years, corpus linguistics has also been applied to sociolinguistics (Baker, P. 2010). As a result, a number of sociolinguistic studies have been carried out on the basis of corpus analysis to examine differences and similarities in the language used by different social groups or in different social and pragmatic contexts (e.g. Gabrielatos *et al.* 2010). The study of corpora may also contribute to the analysis of cultural keywords: according to Prat Zagrebelsky (2004: 29), observing the authentic use of the words which express "controversial issues in a society", such as those related to race or gender, may lead to a better understanding of the society under investigation. The importance of keyword analysis as a means to comprehend a culture and its values is also stressed by Wierzbicka (1997: 17), who argues that their investigation can lead researchers to "the center of a whole complex of cultural values and attitudes, expressed, inter alia, in common conversational routines and revealing a whole network of culture-specific "cultural scripts"". From a cross-cultural cultural perspective, the investigation of keywords and recurrent linguistic patterns may help researchers map out some of the similarities and differences that exist between cultures (Spinzi 2011).

One of the main fields of application of corpus analysis is certainly that of linguistics, which also greatly influences foreign language teaching and learning. Innovative descriptions of the language facilitate, for instance, the compilation of

corpus-based grammars and reference books which are closer to real usage: as Adolphs points out (2006: 9), as great discrepancies still exist between the information on language use provided in textbooks based on intuition and that derived from empirical electronic studies, corpus-based teaching materials can be of great benefit for language learners since they provide more reliable and authentic data. This is particularly true in the case of foreign language teaching: native speakers' as well as foreign language learners' real-life examples can be illuminating tools to prompt metalinguistic discussion in the classroom, and can therefore be used by teachers to enrich the learning environment. Examples of the use of corpus analysis for the development of learners' linguistic and pragmatic competence have already been discussed in Chapter 2, and include works by Belz (2006; 2007a), Belz and Vyaktina (2005), Dalziel and Helm (2012), Guarda (2012a), as well as the brief description – offered in Chapter 4 - of how corpus-based activities were integrated in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange to stimulate the Italian students' focus on form.

Within the wide range of research and practice areas in which corpus analysis has been adopted, a few studies have also addressed the potential of such an approach to investigate intercultural learning processes: in their joint work on the Interculture Project, for instance, Eppler, Crawshaw and Clapham (2000) collected and analyzed a corpus of British students' accounts of their language and cultural learning experiences while studying abroad. The data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively to identify and classify situations in which cultural or linguistic problems had occurred, and to develop data-based teaching materials to enhance the preparation of further students prior to departing for periods of study or work abroad. Overall, the corpus offered rich insights into students' perceptions of their own experiences, and concurred to shed some light on the dimension of

intercultural competence. In a more recent paper, Helm (2009) adopted corpus analysis to look for evidence of intercultural learning in a small corpus of diary entries written by 25 English language learners from the University of Padova who had participated in a telecollaboration project with a class of US students of Italian. In her study, the author first calculated the keywords in the corpus, and then explored the contexts in which they were used so as to identify common concerns and attitudes across the group of students. The same aim underpinned the calculation of a wordlist, that is a list of words which appear in the corpus in order of frequency, and the consequent extraction and investigation of adjectives conveying the students' positive and negative attitudes towards the online experience. This horizontal analysis was followed by a vertical approach, thanks to which quantitative findings were complemented with qualitative observations of each student's set of personal narratives, so as to explore their individual processes of intercultural learning and their evolution over time. Overall, Helm's study shows the potential of quantitative corpus analysis as a way to support and enhance qualitative investigation of intercultural communicative competence as it emerges from learner diaries.

Corpus processing tools have also been used to explore the features of Communities of Practice emerging in a variety of different contexts: within the realm of medical discourse, for instance. Al-Sayed and Ahmad (2006) investigated the key terms used in a specialist Community of Practice to identify the existence of a shared lexicon related to cancer care across the three subgroups of the community, namely experts, professionals and patients. Their analysis revealed that the different parts of the community did share some key terms, while also adopting others which were almost exclusive to each subgroup. In the field of language teacher education, Riodan and Murray (2012) chose a corpus-based approach to analyse the features of an online Community of Practice of novice ELT teachers, and found evidence of

mutual engagement (expressed by acts of requesting and offering support), joint enterprise (through the construction of a common identity as members of the community), and shared repertoire (conveyed by the use of technical discourse related to pedagogy, as well as insider jokes and shared stories).

Despite the wide range of research areas in which corpus analysis has been applied, none of the studies that have appeared so far have used a corpus-based methodology to investigate the emergence of a co-constructed third space, either in face-to-face or online contexts. To date, the only exception is Guarda, Guth and Helm's (2011) analysis of the personal narratives written by a group of students from the University of Padova, in which corpus investigation was the key to understanding the negotiation of identities and shared spaces among the participants in the Soliya Connect project. Given this premise, the study included in this thesis represents one the first linguistically-grounded interpretations of third space in telecollaboration.

5.5.1 Developing a corpus-based mixed method design

As Biber, Conrad and Reppen observe (2006), two kinds of observation are essential in any corpus analysis: quantitative and qualitative. As for the former, computer software tools easily and quickly calculate word lists in alphabetical or frequency order which give a clear and immediate idea of the words which are mainly used in the texts of a corpus; what is more, other kinds of statistical analyses can provide relevant information on the number of sentences and words in a corpus, as well as on the type/token ratio, in other words "the proportion between different words and their occurrences in a text" (Prat Zagrebelsky 2004: 24). Quantitative analysis, however, cannot be fully relevant and meaningful if it is not complemented by qualitative research because, as suggested by Sinclair (1986: 202), any linguistic description "which is not supported by the evidence of the language has no credibility".

Frequency lists, for example, just provide hints to the nature of a text, and it is only through their examination that researchers can "get an idea of what further information would be worth acquiring" (ibid.: 188): in corpus analysis, therefore, qualitative research is a further stage of linguistic enquiry, which aims in particular at examining the textual environments within which the words of a text occur. In this sense, qualitative analysis can take place through the observation of concordances, in other words, lists of all the occurrences of a particular word and the various contexts in which it appears. Similarly, qualitative observations can be made on the collocations of a specific item, which may reveal the way words occur in combination with other words in certain contexts, thus highlighting the "patterned nature of language" (Meunier 2002: 135).

As can be inferred from this brief description, corpus linguistics naturally combines qualitative and quantitative methods of enquiry: as such, I would define it as a form of mixed methods approach to research. In the body of literature on corpus linguistics, however, only a few authors have explicitly described their use of corpora as mixed methods (Bednarek 2009; Jimarkon and Todd 2011; Leone *et al.* 2012; Reinhardt 2010). Most corpus-based studies, on the contrary, do not mention the "third methodological movement" described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003a) as underpinning their methodological choice. This apparent lack of awareness among corpus linguists seems to be even more true in all those cases in which corpus linguistics has been combined with traditionally qualitative approaches to language study such as discourse analysis (e.g. Baker, P. 2006; Baker *et al.* 2008; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; Grundmann and Krishnamurthy 2010; Hardt-Mautner 1995). What these studies emphasize is the utility of using corpus linguistics methods – especially those based on numerical and statistical counts – together with the qualitative strategies derived from discourse analysis, something which results in a successful

"methodological synergy" (Baker *et al.* 2008). Yet, despite these examples of cross-fertilization, which appear to bring out the mixed methods potential of corpus-based research, none of the authors cited above seem to take into account the philosophical and methodological assumptions that inform MMR. For their part, researchers and theorists of mixed methods do not appear to have considered the inherently 'bridging qualities' of corpus linguistics: as a result, none of the major volumes, handbooks and documents on MMR (e.g. the ones cited in section § 5.3) have yet included corpus linguistics among the possible approaches to conducting mixed methods research.

Interestingly, the scarcity of corpus-based studies explicitly adopting a mixed methods stance (see above) is accompanied by the lack of in-depth descriptions of appropriate corpus-based designs: as none of the MM designs discussed above was seen as responding to the specific needs of a corpus-based methodology, I felt the need to develop a novel design that could embrace the specificities of a corpus linguistics approach while at the same time highlighting its vocationally mixed methods nature. This was in line with Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2006: 25) remark that researchers may be in the condition to "develop a new mixed methods design, because no one best design exists" for their research.

Specifically planned to meet the purposes of the present study, the research design presented in Figure 32 can be defined as a *corpus-based multistrand mixed methods design*: as such, it is composed of two strands (QUAL and QUAN), which are combined at all stages. As in Figure 28, the qualitative strand is identified by rectangles, and the quantitative strand is indicated by oval shapes. Although the prompting research question entails both qualitative and quantitative elements, only one set of qualitative data is collected. What distinguishes this mixed method design is that the data that have been qualitatively collected initially undergo a first,

quantitative analysis: this refers to the stage in which frequency lists are calculated through corpus-based tools. The numerical data obtained at this point are then further inspected through a qualitative stance, in other words by qualitatively investigating the concordance lines for each of the items in the frequency list that are potentially useful to shed light on the phenomenon of interest. By undertaking this process, the researcher is able to identify and distinguish between the various meanings associated with the search item he/she is interested in. Unlike the conversion mixed methods design of Figure 28, no data conversion occurs in this phase. Instead, data transformation takes place only once the qualitative phase has been completed: at this point, the resulting data are quantitized and subjected to a further quantitative exploration, which aims at calculating new statistical and numerical counts. In the Figure below, the process of transformation is identified by the zigzag line going from the qualitative analytical box to the quantitative analytical box. In this sense, the design developed so far maintains some inherent features of the multistrand mixed methods design, but adjusts them to the characteristics of corpus-based methodology. The inferences drawn from this quantitative stage, as well as those obtained from the qualitative investigation, are finally combined together into meta-inferences, so as to build up a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon and respond to the initial research question. A more detailed description of all the procedures that were followed on the basis of this design is provided in the next subsection.

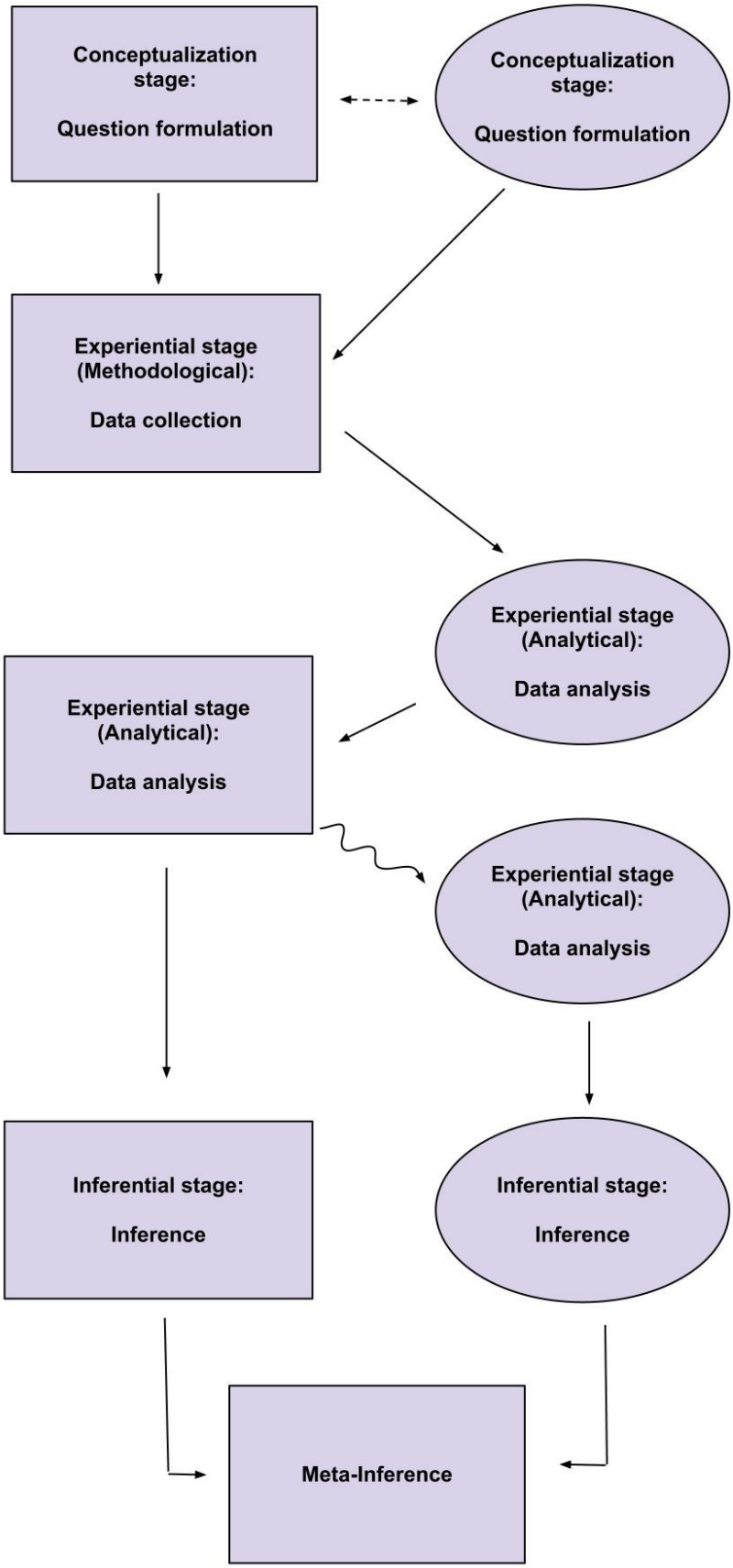
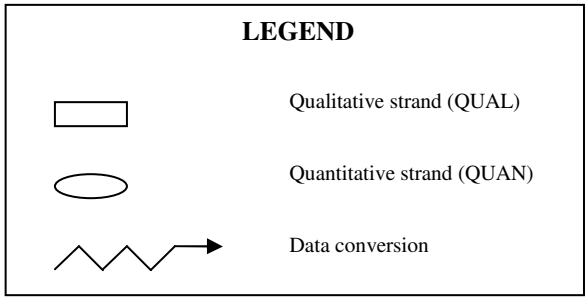


Figure 32. Corpus-based multistrand mixed methods design developed for this study



5.5.2 Corpus-based methodology

Adopting a corpus-based multistrand mixed methods design, the rationale that underpins the methodology used to answer *RQ2* (see above) mirrors the investigation procedures that guided Guarda, Guth and Helm's study (2011) mentioned at the beginning of section § 5.5. On that occasion, the analysis consisted in the corpus-based exploration of a variety of linguistic and pragmatic choices such as in-group identity markers, words of praise, adjectives and agreement expressions. The findings of the analysis indicated the emergence of a third space among the participants in the online project, where negotiation of identities and shared meanings occurred together with the establishment of meaningful relationships. As the methods used in the study proved to be effective in shedding some light on the spaces and identities constructed among the students participating in the Soliya Connect Program, I decided to adapt them to the context and aims of the present research project.

In this case, too, the starting point for identifying the linguistic features to be analysed was Bretag's (2006) study on teacher-student relationships as they were constructed in online asynchronous interaction. As already described in Chapter 3, the author used computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2004) to investigate the email correspondence between a group of 10 ESL learners and their lecturer, and

identified a series of linguistic and pragmatic features that indicated the gradual emergence of a third space. These were classified into four main categories according to whether they aimed to claim common ground (as in the case of emphatic words, agreement expressions, in-group identity markers, jokes and reference to others' thoughts), convey cooperation (as expressed by offers and promises), give gifts to others (including tangible gifts such as invitations, and more abstract ones such as blessings and good wishes), or share intimate information to signal closeness and trust.

The value of Bretag's classifications is explained by the number of studies that have drawn on it to explore the emergence of shared spaces: among these, Pegrum (2009) also adopted computer-mediated discourse analysis to explore the construction of an educational third space within the context of online discussion forums. Drawing on Bretag's codification scheme, and combining it with that developed by Belz to investigate the attitudinal component of ICC (2003), Pegrum constructed a comprehensive code system tailored to the data at his disposal. This allowed him to codify each online text under investigation both at the word/phrase and at the sentence/post level, on the basis of linguistic indicators for solidarity (including politeness formulae, and expressions of in-group membership), co-operation (such as expressions referring to common knowledge, and agreement formulae), and tentativeness of claims (as expressed by mitigations and use of modals).

Although not linked to Bretag's work, Clarke's (2009) investigation of the potential of online forums to foster the emergence of a virtual Community of Practice also mapped out a series of linguistic features that conveyed the idea of a "sub-culture" or shared space. By inspecting the uses of pronouns such as *we* and *you*, as well as agreement and appreciation expressions, the author identified the discursive

strategies through which the participants in the online forums co-constructed communication within the community.

Neither Bretag's (2006), Pegrum's (2009) or Clarke's (2009) studies adopted a corpus-based approach to data analysis. However, the coding schemes that they proposed were found to be an interesting starting point in order to identify the linguistic and pragmatic features to be selected as indicators of third space in the texts under investigation in this study: as in Guarda, Guth and Helm's 2011 report, these included in-group identity markers such as the pronouns *you*, *we* and *they*, agreement and disagreement expressions, explicit reference to group members and group dynamics, as well as the adjectives used by the students in their posts and diaries to evaluate the experience. In addition to gaining some understanding of the construction of a shared space, the investigation of in-group identity markers was seen as playing an important role in defining how the students had positioned themselves in relation to the other members and their online experience, thus providing some insights into the social and cultural identities that they activated in their writing. The link between third space and subject positions is highlighted by Dooly's claim (2011: 325) that the construction of membership identities indicates cohesion and commonality within a group of interactants.

Before starting the analytical phase, the Italian and Austrian students' written contributions to the personal journals, Facebook forums and wiki activities were saved as simple text files and were divided into two corpora according to the group to which their authors belonged. As a result, the Padova collection of texts had a total of 39,038 words, while the Austrian corpus amounted to 22,634 words. Each collection of texts was divided into three subcorpora on the basis of the genre they represented (weekly diaries, posts to the activities on the wiki, and forum comments respectively).

In line with the mixed methods design illustrated above, the investigation of the two corpora first adopted a quantitative approach (QUAN) so as to generate linguistic descriptions of the language used in the texts. In this light, frequency lists of both corpora were produced using Laurence's software program *AntConc 3.2.4w*[35] (2011). The choice to use this software was influenced by the fact that I was already a confident user of *AntConc*, a freeware toolkit which, like Mike Scott's Wordsmith Tools, can run concordance searches, calculate collocations and generate frequency as well as keyword lists. The frequency lists that were obtained from both corpora were useful in revealing the most recurrent words in the students' texts, as well as the number of occurrences of potentially relevant indicators of third space.

Besides showing the most recurrent words in a collection of texts, the frequency lists provided useful hints on the words that could be worthy of further inspection. In this light, the calculation of frequency lists was not seen as the final goal of corpus investigation, but rather as an exploratory means into further qualitative inspection. Drawing on Sinclair's claim that any linguistic description needs to be supported by the evidence of language (1986: 202), the exploration of the two corpora took on a qualitative stance so as to "go beyond simple counts of linguistic features" (Biber, Conrad and Reppen 2006: 5), and allow for the interpretation of the data revealed by the frequency lists. In corpus analysis, qualitative investigation relies on the examination of the textual environments within which the words of a text occur. As Paul Baker suggests (2006: 97), words can only take on meaning by the context they occur in, so that in order to understand their meaning "we have to compare them in relation to other words". In particular, it is through the observation of concordances that one can provide information on the "company that a word keeps" (Baker, Hardie and McEnery 2006: 43) and the

[35] http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html

meanings associated with it. In order to undertake a qualitative investigation of the textual environments in which the words from the frequency list occurred (QUAL), concordance lines for each of the linguistic features selected for the analysis and/or revealed by the calculation of the frequency lists (in-group identity markers, agreement and disagreement expressions, adjectives and other forms of explicit reference to the group and its members) were generated. These were carefully read, examined and compared so as to identify the meanings conveyed by the searched word within its various contexts. Figure 33 exemplifies some of the concordances for the search word *we* in the Padova corpus: as can be noticed, the format below takes the form of Key Word In Context (KWIC), in that it displays the search word (node) with its surrounding text so that it can be seen in context.

```
                          On Friday 22 of October we started our Skype Exchange with the Austrian st
Innsbruck University. His name is D       .  First we have presented ourselves talking about hobbies,
Geography and he'd like to become a teacher. Then we have to confont our ideas about intercultural c
 about intercultural communication, in particular we've discussed the importance of it. We have alsc
 particular we've discussed the importance of it. We have also talked about the use of dialects in I
d about the use of dialects in Italy and Austria. We've found out that in both countries dialects ar
f Mafia or corruption; - TV programms and movies: we've discussed about trash tv and series we like;
movies: we've discussed about trash tv and series we like;  - Music and concerts: He likes all kinds
n more possibilities to get a job, while in Italy we still have problems with useless contracts. Our
reign students lifestyles and thoughts. Obviously we are very different, but we also have lots of th
nd thoughts. Obviously we are very different, but we also have lots of things in common. I hope next
uite smooth. During this first skype conversation we talked about ourselves, our hobbies, the places
e talked about ourselves, our hobbies, the places we visited, our universities, etc. But we didnt ta
the places we visited, our universities, etc. But we didnt talk only about these things We had an as
 etc. But we didnt talk only about these things We had an assignment, which we successfully finishec
y about these things We had an assignment, which we successfully finished, and some guidelines for t
 and some guidelines for this first conversation. We found some rules that, in our opinion, make a c
even thought theres no personal contact. I think we had quite good ideas; now the important thing is
he other girl from Innsbruck she is really good! We also talked about politics, especially about the
pecially about the last news on and our opinions. We learned that in Austria this news didnt strike
take part in the war (thats what K        said). We also asked her some questions about their univer
 that comprehends both these subjects. Truthfully we didnt talk much about cultural issues, also bec
nt talk much about cultural issues, also because we preferred getting to know each other before star
fore starting a serious conversation. And I think we did a good move, in fact, now that we know each
And I think we did a good move, in fact, now that we know each other, we can be more honest and rela
```

Figure 33. Concordance lines for the search word 'we' in the Padova corpus

For each potential indicator of third space, the qualitative analysis allowed me to identify a series of recurrent themes, some of which were related to the research issue: put another way, the inspection of concordance lines led to the identification of all the instances in which the students, through their linguistic choices, had explicitly addressed and made reference to other members of the group, or had positioned

themselves as members of a common collaborative group. These instances were categorized as indicators of third space or subject positions, and were distinguished from other uses of the searched item which conveyed more generic or external meaning.

At this point, the analysis took on a further, and final, quantitative stance (QUAN): through the conversion of qualitative data into quantitized data, the last analytical phase of the study aimed at calculating the number of occurrences in which the search item was used to indicate third space or inclusive subject positions from those in which the same item carried a more generic meaning, and was therefore not relevant to gain understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, the observations and inferences that emerged from the qualitative and quantitative strands described so far were combined together to gain a more comprehensive picture of the issue under investigation. The resulting meta-inferences will be the focus of Chapter 7.

5.6 Ethical considerations and possible limitations of the study

In any research involving human subjects, one of the researcher's central concerns is that of ethical issues. Especially in social sciences, in which the researchers are "guests in the private spaces of the world" (Stake 2005: 549), ethical responsibilities assume a primary role, and include "the protection of subjects from harm, the right to privacy, the notion of informed consent, and the issue of deception" (Merriam 2009: 230).

In the current study, informed consent was imperative: in this sense, all the students were informed about the purposes of my inquiry, and were asked to give their permission for the use of their written texts for such objectives. When

conducting the case studies, which also involved personal interviews, this issue was felt even more urgently, and the students were informed of the aims of such an activity. Only once they had agreed upon being interviewed did we start to plan our meeting. When asked to give their informed consent to the use of their written production for research purposes, all the students were assured that any use of their materials would always protect their privacy: this is why, for instance, all the students' real names have been substituted by pseudonyms throughout this thesis, and no reference to their real identity is made.

In social sciences, ethical issues do not just emerge when collecting data from documents, interviews or questionnaires that human subjects have produced: the researcher, in fact, may also have to deal with ethical concerns in the analytical phase of his/her study. Since, as Merriam notes (2009: 232), "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection", all data have to be filtered through his/her lens, and may therefore contain an inherent bias. When analysing the data for this study, I often felt a sense of responsibility in engaging in such a challenging task, since I was the only one to decide what was relevant to my research purposes. In my view, this certainly represents one of the greatest possible limitations of the work conducted for this thesis, despite my effort to gain emic perspectives on the phenomena under investigation. In some cases, as in Ester's and Matteo's case studies, the use of multiple methods for data collection allowed me to gain a wider range of insights into their intercultural experiences, and thus helped me to set a minimum limit to the inherent bias of my observations. Despite this, however, I am fully aware that the analyses described in this thesis may unconsciously reflect my particular theoretical positions.

5.7 Summary

The aim of this Chapter was to outline the methodology embraced in the current study to answer the two initial research questions. To do so, the Chapter first described the main features of quantitative and qualitative research, giving particular emphasis to the ontological, epistemological and methodological differences that have often made them appear irreconcilable and opposing research approaches (§ 5.2). Originating as a response to this apparent clash of standpoints, philosophical assumptions and methods, mixed methods research was then presented as an ideal bridge across opposing views which – taking the best from both quantitative and qualitative approaches – can offer more comprehensive insights into research problems. After describing the strengths and potentials of mixed methods research and some of its major design typologies (§ 5.3), the Chapter then outlined the way MMR was applied into the current study in order to investigate ICC (§ 5.4): in doing so, my aim was to present a detailed picture of the research strands that were implemented to respond to *RQ1* (see page 227) as well as of the mixed methods case studies that were adopted to describe the phenomenon of interest in a more exhaustive and detailed way. In section § 5.5, the Chapter first provided a brief overview of corpus linguistics, its main features and fields of application, and then described the *corpus-based multistrand mixed methods design* that was specifically developed to answer *RQ2* (see pages 254-255) and thus investigate third space and subject positions. Finally, the last section (§ 5.6) gave a brief account of the ethical issues that were taken into account in this research, as well as of one of the main limitations that, in my view, still permeate my work.

CHAPTER 6

INVESTIGATING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

6.1 Introduction

In our journey across the various disciplines that have informed the development of this work, the present Chapter represents a fundamental step in the exploration of the potential benefits of *lingua franca* telecollaborative activities on the students' intercultural learning processes. On the basis of the mixed methods approach illustrated in the previous Chapter, the following sections will try to give evidence of the Italian students' intercultural communicative competence and of the way – if any - this was manifested in their personal narratives and posts to the Facebook forums. Thus, as already outlined previously in this thesis, the question that informed the analysis presented in this Chapter is as follows:

RQ1 *What evidence do reflective diaries and other forms of written output (forum posts) give of the Italian students' intercultural communicative competence and of its activation through the intercultural encounters and activities promoted by the exchange?*

In order to get to the heart of this Chapter, the following sections will present the findings of my investigation. Drawing on Byram's ICC framework, the analysis presented in section § 6.2 will focus on the primary source of data, namely the Italian students' diaries, and will try to outline the various *savoirs* that were activated and manifested to engage with otherness over the course of the 'Padova-

Innsbruck 2011' project. In doing this, each dimension of ICC will be taken separatedly, although links between the various components will be drawn in order to obtain a more holistic picture of the phenomenon. After illustrating the findings derived from the analysis of the personal journals, the Chapter will shift its focus on the observations drawn from the investigation of the Italian students' comments in the Facebook forums (section § 6.3), in an attempt to gain deeper understanding of ICC and its manifestations. Finally, section § 6.4 will look more specifically at two mixed methods case studies which are thought to be representative of the group of students. As described in Chapter 5, the choice of moving from general observations concerning the whole class to the interpretation of more specific data related to single students was made for two main reasons. Firstly, there was a need to provide vivid and detailed examples of the *savoirs* that individual students activated and manifested in their approach to the intercultural encounters and activities promoted by the exchange. Secondly, there was the awareness of one of the risks of the analysis presented in the previous sections, namely that of drawing generalizations from extremely personal processes such as those related to intercultural communicative competence.

6.2 Analysis of the whole group's ICC: findings from the investigation of weekly diaries

As described in the previous Chapter, the 'plan of action' that was chosen to respond to *RQ1* was a *multistrand conversion mixed methods design* adapted from Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006 and 2009). As such, the design was composed of two interrelated strands: qualitative and quantitative. The following paragraphs will illustrate some of the actions undertaken in the analytical component of each strand,

so as to provide authentic examples of how the analysis was carried out, and thus prepare the ground for the presentation and discussion of its findings.

The first strand was essentially qualitative. After collecting the individual students' personal journals, each diary entry was broken into units of meanings on the basis of the comprehensive classification scheme that had been constructed to capture recurring patterns throughout the data (see Chapter 5). The following extracts, taken from two of the Italian students' personal journals, exemplify the way units of meanings were assigned to specific categories through the attribution of codes. No changes have been made in the texts, either in terms of structure or lexico-grammar: this means, for instance, that misspelled words have been kept as they were in the original texts. The only exception concerns the names of the students, which have been all replaced by pseudonyms. The first extract is taken from Elisabetta's third diary, in which she reports on her latest Skype session, when she and her peers (Denis from Italy and Oliver from Innsbruck) engaged in a discussion about identity.

Dear Diary,

here we are with the third Skype session of the project.

I wasn't with my usual group this time, because my Austrian peer was missing. So I spoke with <NAME> Denis </NAME> and <NAME> Oliver </NAME>. <FEEL> I was a little nervous because I didn't know them, <EVAL-POS> but everything went well and it was great. </EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> They both have a lot to say and love to express their opinions about everything. </COLLAB> </FEEL>

<TASK> We started with a nice game, about our own rank of values. We all agreed that the most important one is the family, followed by friends and religion for <NAME> Oliver. </NAME> </TASK> <INT-DIFF> That was interesting, because religion doesn't seem to be so important to us (in fact <NAME> Denis </NAME> said to him it isn't important at all, because he doesn't believe in God). </INT-DIFF> <INT-SIM> We also don't see nationality, language, study/jobs as values, and if we had to give up any of them, we would get rid of nationality and language. Even if they are crucial in the creation of our own identities. </INT-SIM>

<TASK> Then we talked about <CCA-IC> 'multiple identities' </CCA-IC>, reflecting on this matter. </TASK> <CCA> In our opinions every person has multiple identities, according to the people they are with, the place they are, etc.. It's something they don't do consciounsly, it just comes out. People don't even think about it. I'm with my usual friends? I behave and speak in a certain way, letting some sides of my personality emerge. I'm at work or at university? I show other sides of me and I behave and speak in a different way. And is this acting? Being a different person from the one you are? Or are we all these people in one? I

think it's not acting. And I agree that ‘In one person, many’. </CCA>

<CCA> The video of a young student showed us how identities are not immutable and stable over time. This girl has travelled a lot, living in several different places, always meeting new pwople and cultures. We wondered how long a person can do this kind of life. Is it possible to do it for a whole life? or do we need a place where we come back, feeling at home**?** <CCA-PO> I believe we all need to feel we belong to somewhere, to feel we have a home, to fell we have some stable things and people in our lives. </CCA-PO> </CCA>

<CCA> As online identities are concerned, we all agreed we tend to be different people in online communities. We tend to show only our best sides, hiding our private stuff, our weaknesses. <CCA-IC> I personally feel a little different when I'm online, because I feel I can be the best part of me, not trying to be another totally different person, but showing the best of me. </CCA-IC> </CCA>

<EVAL-POS> The topics we touched were absolutely interesting, and gave us the chance to touch other related arguments, understanding which are our thoughts about them. These are all things we are not used to reflect about but we are fortunately given the chance to do it. </EVAL-POS>

Elisabetta

As can be noticed by reading through the personal journal, the student opened her diary by introducing the circumstances under which her online meeting took place, and by honestly expressing her feelings towards the fact that she had to join a different discussion group. The first paragraph, in which a variety of categories was identified (<NAME>, <FEEL>, <EVAL-POS>, <COLLAB>), is followed by a longer section: here, Elisabetta described one the tasks of the day, namely an ice-breaking game in which the students where asked to discuss how they would rank a series of given values from the most to the least important (see Chapter 4). In her description there are several segments which can be associated to Byram’s skills of interpreting and relating, a category which – in the classification scheme illustrated above – also includes the ability to interpret differences (<INT-DIFF>) and similarities (<INT-SIM>) between two or more cultures and standpoints.

The following three paragraphs of Elisabetta’s journal get to the heart of the topic discussed during the Skype session, namely multiple identities. Throughout the three sections, most chunks of information were identified as being related to the category of critical cultural awareness (<CCA>), in that they report on the group’s processes of negotiation of ideas and meanings, and shed light on the three

participants' ability to reflect collectively on metacultural issues under a critical light. This is exemplified, for instance, by the fact that Elisabetta constantly reported on some of the questions that guided the groups' exploration of the topic, and that – in the diary – seem to give an idea of the pace of their discussion. Besides revealing some of the group's negotiation processes and the way these were internalized and reported by the author of the personal journal, the three paragraphs also show Elisabetta's ability to reflect on the metacultural topic under discussion and to provide her own critical and personal perspective of it (<CCA-PO>). The diary concludes with a short section in which the writer comments positively on the Skype session by showing her appreciation for the topics under discussion and for the opportunity of exploring her peers' opinions: for this reason, the whole paragraph was considered as a whole unit of information, and was assigned the code <EVAL-POS>.

The second extract is taken from Maria's personal journals: in the text, the Italian student reported on her fifth Skype session, whose main topic was gender and sexual discrimination. As can be seen, the first paragraph focuses on one of the tasks of the online meeting, without any particular reference to the student's intercultural learning processes, and was therefore coded as <TASK>. The second section, on the contrary, is quite a long account of the group's discussion on the condition of women in society. Here, some stretches of text were codified as belonging to the dimension of skills of interpreting and relating and, in particular, to its subcategories (<INT-SIM> and <INT-DIFF>): this is exemplified, for instance, by Maria's critical stance towards the situation of women in her own country as compared to Austria, as well as by her effort to tell her Innsbruck partner about a popular Italian television show which, in her view, strongly discriminates against women by presenting a stereotyped image of them. In the same paragraph, other chunks of text were

identified as falling into the category of critical cultural awareness, and were therefore coded as <CCA>: one example is provided by the student's awareness of situations in which men, too, may be discriminated against or labelled because of their profession. Like the previous extract composed by Elisabetta, Maria's diary entry concludes with some final comments on the Skype session (<EVAL>) and reports on her feelings towards it (<FEEL>).

<TASK> This week's topic was gender and sexuality. We started with a game in which we had to tell each other the things that we hate. In general, we hate unfinished works, when people finish the things you were doing, double-faced, hypocrite and "close-minded" people (the ones who don't want to learn from others). </TASK>

<TASK> Then we talked about the role women have in our societies. <INT-SIM> In Italy and in Austria, women are treated differently, </INT-SIM> <INT-DIFF> but in Austria people are trying to change things, while here in Italy the situation is worsening. We also had to talk a little about politics, since in the last 20 years it has affected the way that italian society sees and treats women. I think we shocked <NAME> Petra <NAME> when we showed her a typical italian transmission with "le veline" and told her that in the summer there's a competition to "win this title". </INT-DIFF> Then of course we talked about the role of women in other societies (for example in muslim countries). <CCA> When we tried to find a solution for women discrimination we agreed that people should change their minds, and to do so it's essential that mass media change first. </CCA> <CCA> However, not only women are discriminated. Also men, in some work fields, are discriminated. We talked, for example, of hairdressers. In fact, most of the male hairdressers are considered gay, even if this is a kind of prejudice. Probably men don't suffer a real and actual discrimination, it's just a discrimination related to what others think of them. </CCA> <CCA> Concerning the last topic, gays and lesbians, we talked about our attitude towards them. We all are very liberal and open-minded, but we would probably be a little shocked if, for example, our parents told us that they've become gay. Of course we would accept them, but this kind of revelation still would cause a shock! </CCA> </TASK>

<EVAL-POS> <FEEL> xDI really liked this topic, I'm really interested in this kind of things, especially the role that women have in different countries. So, thanks for choosing this topic! :) </FEEL> </EVAL-POS>

As described in the methodology chapter, the qualitative analytical strand was followed by a second phase of analysis, in which all the codes for each participant's personal journals were quantified, week by week, in a spreadsheet. In this sense, the qualitative data were quantitized so as to allow for more in-depth investigation. This quantitative stance not only provided me with more immediate

insights into the patterns that characterized each students' set of diaries, but also allowed me to pinpoint recurrent patterns across the various weeks and between the students. Figure 34 reproduced below exemplifies the distribution of categories across the personal journals of one of the Italian students, Roberta: here, as can be noticed, the themes and subthemes that are related to Byram's *savoirs* are highlighted in bold.

ROBERTA						
	WK 1	WK 2	WK 3	WK 4	WK 5	WK 6
ATT				1		
KWN					1	
INT						1
INT-SIM				1		
INT-DIFF						
DIS			2			1
DIS-OO						
CCA		1	1	4	3	6	1
CCA-COM						1	
CCA-IC					2		
CCA-PO					2	1	
LAN		3	1			1	
TECH					1		1
TASK		2	3	4	3	1	1
NAME		6	4	6	6		5
GROUP		1	1		1	1	2
FEEL		3			2	1	1
EVAL-POS		3	2	1	2		3
EVAL-NEG					1		1
COLLAB		2	1				4

Figure 34. Distribution of categories across weekly diaries (Roberta, PD)

Although the quantitative findings illustrated in Figure 34 appear to be rather sterile if taken as mere figures, and are therefore far from suggesting any conclusion, the visualization of their distribution across the various diary entries can indeed help to shed some light on the processes that occurred during the weekly Skype sessions and that were internalized and manifested by the student in her personal journals. Thus, for instance, the dimension of critical cultural awareness (<CCA>) appears to accompany all the reflective diaries written by Roberta. Similarly, a description of

the tasks carried out during the Skype sessions (<TASK>), as well as the explicit reference to other group members (<NAME>), appear to constitute a sort of *leitmotiv* across all the student's personal journals. Other categories, on the contrary, seem to have a more marginal role in the diaries: the dimensions of attitudes (<ATT>) and knowledge (<KNW>), for example, only emerge in the student's third and fourth journals respectively. This does not imply that Roberta did not approach the Skype sessions with curiosity, or that she did not learn anything new from her intercultural encounters: instead, these findings may suggest that her curiosity and knowledge were particularly stimulated by some specific sessions, and were therefore manifested in the student's reflective journals.

The quantification of all the occurrences for each category in the single students' diaries was followed by the calculation of the frequency with which the most salient themes appeared at the level of the whole class of Italian participants. As suggested previously in this thesis, the categories that were considered as most relevant for this purpose were *attitudes* (<ATT>), *knowledge* (<KNW>), *skills of discovery and interaction* (<DIS>), *skills of interpreting and relating* (<INT>), *and critical cultural awareness* (<CCA>). For each of these, the total number of occurrences in the whole collection of diaries was calculated. The following Figure illustrates the results of the quantitative observation of all the themes of interest: as explained in Chapter 5, the frequency of the subcategories was considered to be an integral part of the main dimension they belonged to.

Padova students	week 1	week 2	week 3	week 4	week 5	week 6
ATT	22	7	5	5	3	2
KWN	6	3	1	7	**1**	**2**
INT (sum)	**9**	**3**	**18**	**7**	**8**	**1**
INT		1	2	5	2	1
INT-SIM	2	1	10	2	4	
INT-DIFF	7	1	6		2	
DIS (sum)	**14**	**12**	**11**	**5**	**5**	**1**
DIS	12	12	6	5	5	1
DIS-OO	2		5			
CCA (sum)	**11**	**18**	**47**	**31**	**38**	**7**
CCA	8	17	23	15	27	6
CCA-COM		1	8	1	2	
CCA-IC	1		11	9	5	1
CCA-PO	2		5	6	4	

Figure 35. Distribution of categories related to ICC across the weekly diaries of the Padova group

After analysing the data from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, I was finally able to draw and merge together the various observations on the *savoirs* that the students activated during the Skype sessions and later manifested in their diary entries. These observations are now presented in the subsections that follow: there, the discussion will mostly focus on each of the *savoirs* defined by Byram in his 1997 framework. Despite the fact that each dimension will be taken singularly, links between the various components will be drawn as well, so as to respect the "dependency relationships" (Byram 1997: 104) that exist between the various elements that form ICC, and in an attempt to capture the phenomenon from a holistic standpoint. Throughout the subsections below, both quantitative and qualitative information will be provided; this should ensure greater understanding of the intercultural learning processes at stake over the course of the exchange.

6.2.1 Attitudes

As can be seen in Figure 35, and as illustrated in Figure 36 below, the occurrences for the category of attitudes (<ATT>) reach a peak in the diaries written by the students in week 1 of their telecollaboration exchange (22 occurrences).

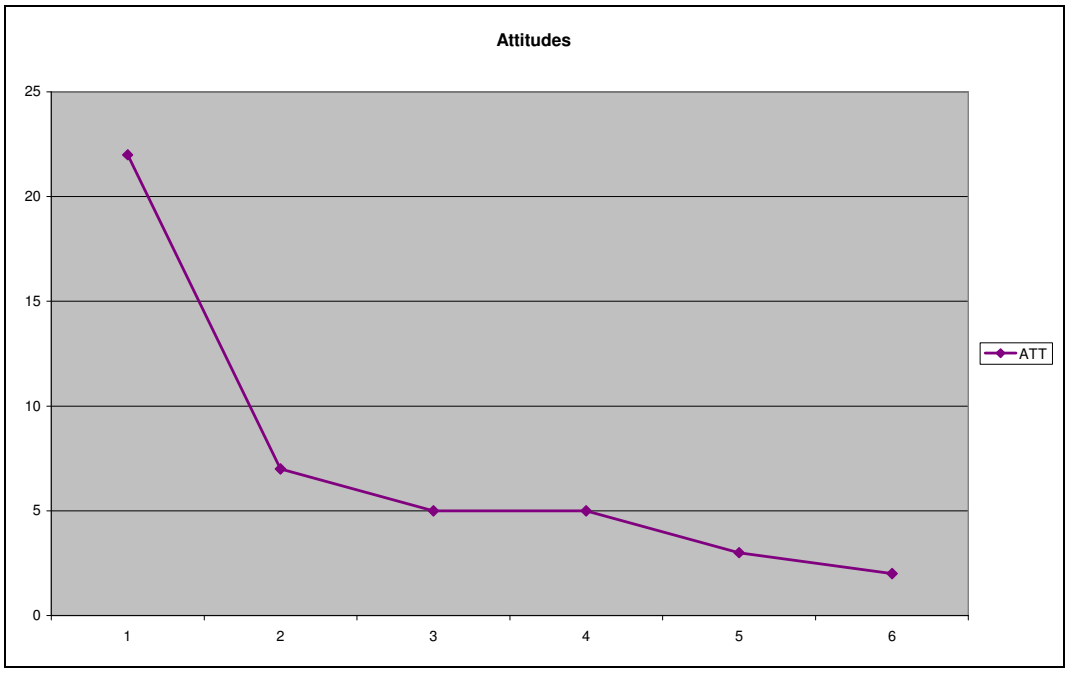


Figure 36. Distribution of attitudes (<ATT>) across the weekly diaries of the Padova group

The striking frequency of <ATT> in week 1 may be explained by the fact that that diary entry was the first, reflective space in which the students could give vent to all the expectations they had nourished prior to the beginning of the session, as well as to their keenness to meet and interact with their Austrian partners. Before the first Skype session, the participants had been preparing for their meeting, for instance by writing a short introduction about themselves and recording a self-presentation on Fotobabble (see Chapter 4). In addition, they had been reading and listening to their peers' personal introductions, and had prepared questions to break the ice and get to know them. In their personal journals, then, several students commented that the environment promoted in their discussion group had further fostered their interest and willingness to communicate. In this sense, therefore, the relatively high frequency of the attitudinal dimension in the first diary may indicate that the students' curiosity had been stimulated to quite a high extent, both before and during the Skype session. An example of this is provided in the following extracts:

"<FEEL> At first I was very nervous (in fact the first 10 minutes I barely spoke), <ATT> but after a while I felt more and more curious about the other people. </ATT> </FEEL>" (Maria, PD - week 1).

"<FEEL> At the beginning of the Skype session, I was a bit nervous because I wondered if <NAME> Hilde </NAME> and <NAME> Daniela </NAME> would have understood all my questions and explanations concerning the different topics we had to talk about, but, while the conversation was going on, all my fears disappeared and <ATT> I became even more curious about my peers' experiences and ideas. </ATT> </FEEL>" (Anna, PD – week 1).

To facilitate the interpretation of the excerpts above, it is worth noting that the category of attitudes differs from that of feelings (<FEEL>): as suggested in the classification scheme (Figure 30), in fact, the former refers to a person's willingness to engage with otherness, while the latter identifies the emotions that accompany the intercultural encounter (e.g. fear, embarrassment), and that may not be necessarily linked to curiosity.

In the diaries, the dimension of attitudes does not only identify the students' desire to learn more about their partners and their sets of values. Attitudes of curiosity, in fact, are sometimes also explicitly expressed in relation to the topics proposed in the exchange, as the following two excerpts appear to suggest:

"<ATT> In the next session I'd like to talk about different views that them and we have about different arguments, such as religion, gay marriage, politics in both countries, violence against women, etc. </ATT>" (Maria, PD – week 1).

"<ATT> This issue [homosexuality and discrimination] really touches me, as I have some friends who are homosexuals. They are great people, they aren't doing anything bad. </ATT>" (Elisabetta, PD – week 5).

As the first example indicates, the choice of topics seems to have stimulated Maria's eagerness to explore her peers' views and opinions. Elisabetta's comment, in turn, would appear to suggest that the topic chosen to prompt reflection and discussion helped enhance her motivation and commitment to the tasks promoted in her fifth Skype session. In both cases, the students' words seem to highlight a potential link between topic selection, task design and the intercultural dimension of attitudes.

The fact that the attitudinal dimension does not appear with the same frequency in the diaries of the weeks that followed the first Skype meeting does not necessarily mean that the students' curiosity had suddenly and significantly decreased. Positive attitudes, in fact, seem to permeate all diaries, but are often not made explicit and were therefore not coded as <ATT>. This may be exemplified, for instance, by the following statement, which concludes one of the reflective journals of week 4: "There's always so much to say when you talk with the right people!" (Elisabetta, PD). Although the sentence was tagged as <COLLAB> in that it conveyed the writer's appreciation on the way the group members were collaborating, the student's words may also be seen as an indirect way to express her positive attitudes and her keenness to learn more from her peers.

Besides their relative decrease after the first Skype session, the attitudinal dimension of ICC still emerges in the subsequent diaries, and is embedded in significant comments and reflections such as the one reported below:

> "<EVAL-POS> <ATT> Talking about gender has been very interesting for me because it's one of the problem that I put on the prominent place. I was absolutely curious about what my peers thought about it: many times men have a different opinion because they are sexist but other times they simply can't see things in the same way of women. </ATT> <DIS> It has been great realizing that we had the same opinion (… and my peers was with me when I said that gender

problem starts also from family and the education youths receive!). </DIS> </EVAL-POS>" (Melinda, PD – week 5)

In this comment, Melinda reports on her interest in exploring her peers' (two male students) opinions on the role of the woman in society: her words do not only show her keenness to discuss the issue, but also her readiness to put herself in her peers' shoes, and to learn how to look at things from their perspective. As this extract would appear to confirm, therefore, the attitudinal component is a prerequisite for manifesting a willingness to ask further exploratory questions, and an ability to discover more about other people's opinions and cultural meanings. In this sense, the dimension of attitudes appears to be strictly linked to that of the skills of discovery and interaction, which in the analysis was coded as <DIS>.

6.2.2 Skills of discovery and interaction

As highlighted in Figure 35 above, the theme <DIS> and its subcategory <DIS-OO> (discovering other people's opinions) emerge with significant frequency in the diaries related to the first three weeks of online collaboration, with a sum of 14 occurrences for week 1, 12 occurrences for week 2, and 11 occurrences for week 3. In the weeks that followed, the frequency with which the category of <DIS> emerges in the students' diaries gradually decreases, as can be visually noticed in the Figure below:

Figure 37. Distribution of skills of discovery and interaction (<DIS>) across the weekly diaries of the Padova group

Interestingly, in the personal journals related to the first Skype meeting, the dimension of <DIS> is often related to the discovery of information about the other participants' hobbies and lives. This may be linked to the fact that the first audio-conferencing session aimed to help the students get to know each other and build a trusted and familiar environment for collaboration. The relatively high frequency of this category in the first diary entries, therefore, might be justified by the emphasis placed by the students on the discoveries that accompanied their initial encounters, in which their respective cultures, together with metacultural discourse, seem to have fallen into the background, while their personal lives remained central among the themes that guided the interaction. This aspect emerges, for instance, in the following extract:

> "<DIS> We talked about ours hobbies and our attitudes and we found out our common intrerests, for example both me and <NAME> Hans </NAME> are playing an instrument and we discussed about music and th history of rock'n'roll. </DIS>" (Bruno, PD – week 1).

Although this excerpt does not explicitly report on the questions that the participants asked each other during the Skype meeting, Bruno's diary seems to suggest that the student was able to activate some skills of discovery in order to engage in the exploration of his Austrian partner's hobbies and interests.

If interpreted in this light, the category of <DIS> as it emerges from the very first reflective journals can be interpreted as being strictly related to the dimension of critical cultural awareness (<CCA>), intended here as the ability to understand and choose the best time to ask for either deeper or more trivial information, according to the level of familiarity and the mode of communication, and under the constraints of real-time interaction. The link between the two dimensions can be inferred from the following reflection, which signals Maria's awareness of the importance of establishing trusted relationships before embarking on the exploration of more complex issues:

> "<CCA> Truthfully we didn't talk much about cultural issues, also because we preferred getting to know each other before starting a serious conversation. And I think we did a good move, in fact, now that we know each other, we can be more honest and relaxed while we talk about our culture. </CCA>" (Maria, PD – week 1).

Compared to the very first reflective journals, in the diaries linked to the subsequent Skype sessions the category of <DIS> emerges with diminishing frequency: yet, this does not mean that the students did not activate the ability to ask exploratory questions in interaction. Interestingly, in these cases <DIS> is increasingly related to the students' ability to elicit new or further information – and subsequently report on it – not only about their peers' lives and hobbies, but also on their experiences and points of view on the cultural and metacultural topics under discussion. At several points in the journals, therefore, skills of discovery and

interaction emerge as a strategy used by the students to obtain some knowledge in a transnational and transcultural context such as *lingua franca* communication, in which little or nothing is known about the various Cs3 (Cultures-three: other than C1 and C2, and including all the interlocutors' cultures[36]) involved in the interaction. An example of this is offered by Roberta's fifth diary:

> "<DIS> I asked <NAME> Sanja </NAME> about the situation of women in Austria and she anwered that they are more evolved in this sense,they consider the women more… </DIS>"

Below is a further example of the emergence of <DIS> as an indicator of the students' ability to explore the variety of cultures at play within the discussion group. In the extract, Vania reflects on the answer given by one of her Innsbruck peers – an Italian-born student who grew up in the German-speaking area of Northern Italy - to her question on what it means to be raised between two cultures:

> "<DIS> We talked also about ethnicity and regarding this issue I asked <NAME> Mara </NAME> about the situation in Bolzano (her native city) and how she lives (or had live) the <CCA-IC> 'comparison' </CCA-IC> with German people. She explained us that actually she did not have so much contact with them; for example she attended a school for Italian people. I had a completely different idea of what is the lifestyle in Bolzano and the relation between Germans and Italians..I really had a stereotype! </DIS>" (Vania, PD – week 3).

As this extract appears to suggest, skills of discovery and interaction include a willingness to expand on previous, partial knowledge on the other person's culture, as well as an ability to acquire an understanding of new meanings and experiences that are inherent in the specific phenomenon of interest. This can be achieved by

[36] See Chapter 3

asking questions that help build up further knowledge, and that may even change one's own previously-hold assumptions, as was the case with Vania. In this sense, the dimension of discovery is strictly linked to that of knowledge, as new and more detailed information can be acquired in interaction through effective exploratory questions.

6.2.3 Knowledge

The relationship between the knowledge and the discovery dimensions clearly emerged during the coding phase of data analysis: in the quantitative exploration of the students' texts, I often felt the challenge of distinguishing the two categories, since on several occasions the stretches of information that made up the personal journals seemed to be applicable to both dimensions. As suggested above, the strong tie between knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction seems to be especially true in *lingua franca* communication, where exploratory questions are often the precondition for the acquisition or the refinement of knowledge. In order to limit the fuzziness of their contours, the code <DIS> was used when the writer explicitly mentioned the processes that were activated to "elicit further knowledge" (Byram 1997: 99) from the other members of the discussion group, whereas <KNW> was adopted to identify the units of meaning in the text that referred to already existing knowledge or the new information that the students obtained from their peers, also independently of discovery questions.

Overall, the Italian students did not write extensive accounts of the knowledge they had shared or acquired during the Skype sessions: as can be seen in Figure 35, in fact, the category coded as <KNW> - with a total of 20 occurrences across the six weeks - is the least frequent among the ones related to ICC.

Interestingly, explicit reference to the knowledge dimension reaches a peak in the diaries related to week 1 and week 4 (Figure 38).

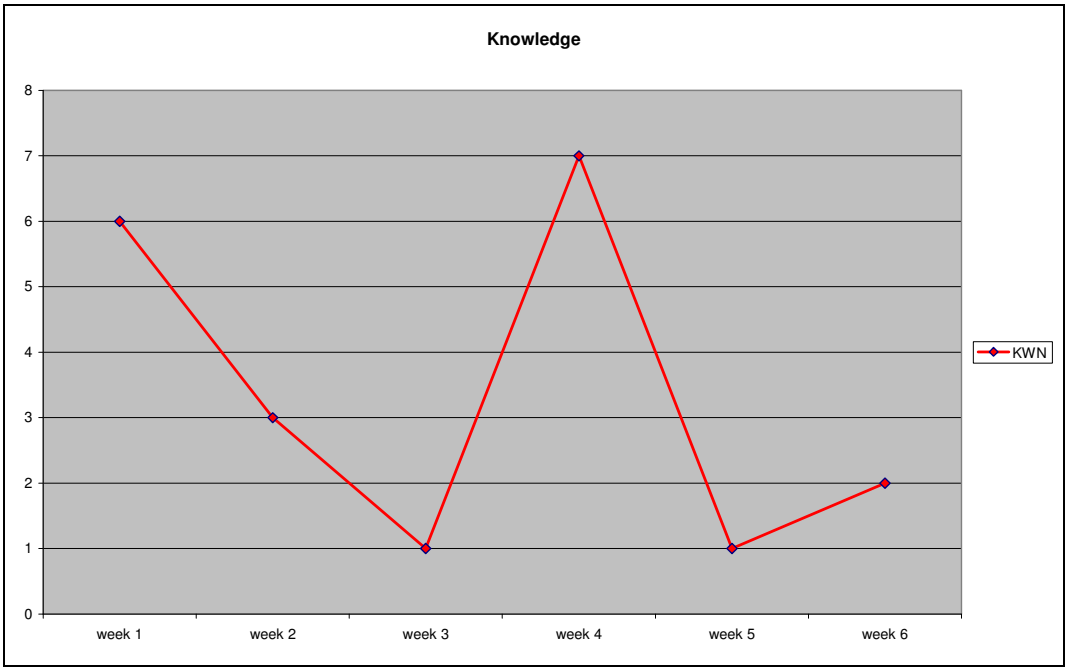


Figure 38. Distribution of knowledge (<KNW>) across the weekly diaries of the Padova group

As regards week 1, the relatively higher frequency of <KNW> may be justified by the fact that, as already suggested above, the very first Skype session stimulated the students' curiosity and willingness to learn more about their peers' lives and hobbies to such an extent that they later reported on them in their personal journals. Similarly, the diaries of week 4 were a repository for the new knowledge that the students had shared and obtained during the Skype session, and in particular thanks to one of its tasks: as part of the ice-breaking game, the students had to choose three significant places in their university city and describe them to their partners, highlighting why they found them special or particularly attractive. After the Skype session, several Italian students commented with enthusiasm on what they had learnt about Innsbruck, its monuments and places, as well as their value and significance for the Austrian participants. In addition, some students also drew on their pre-existing knowledge about their own university city to formulate their personal

journal on the activity, thus apparently showing that – in order to effectively complete the information task – they had reflected on the products of their culture before sharing them with their peers. The following extracts exemplify the knowledge component of ICC as it emerged from the diaries for week 4:

> "<TASK> Anyway as usual we start our conversation with a simple game. We had to think about 3 things we could let them visit/see once they come to Padua. <KNW> <NAME> Bruno </NAME> and I chose 3 places we thought were most important in our opinion, such as Bo's building, Prato della Valle and the 3 squares downtown, where students hang out and drink the typical Spritz (we explain to <NAME> Hans </NAME> how to party when one of our friends graduate). Also <NAME> Hans </NAME> shown us 3 marvelous places and we could notice they live in the middle of the nature unlike us. We saw where he studies, his university but I observed their university looked more like a firm than a faculty and this because the building is not very old as Palazzo Maldura </KNW> </TASK>" (Renata, PD – week 4);

> "<TASK>…we started with a game, we had to tell our patner about some momuments or buldings or special parts that are importnat in our town, me and <NAME> Chiara </NAME> talked about Caffè Pedrocchi, Scrovegni chapel and the cathedral of Saint Antonie, <NAME> Eike </NAME> was impressioned from Prato della Valle ahaha and than we spoke a little bit about our university. <KWN> We appreciated the history of our university for example the university of Padua is very old, from Galileo Galilei (1600) so it's very old! </KNW> <KWN> Also <NAME> Eike </NAME> told us that the university of Innsbrucks is very old! </KNW> </TASK>" (Vanessa, PD – week 4).

As these extracts would appear to show, in some cases the students were able to draw parallels between their own university and that of their peers. Although such comments were not assigned to the category of interpreting and relating skills (<INT>), in that they did not explicitly address cultural issues, they seem to signal that the students approached their encounters from a critical stance, and with a readiness to establish relationships between the various pieces of information that were promoted and shared during the discussion sessions.

6.2.4 Skills of interpreting and relating

In the first, qualitative strand of inquiry, the category of interpreting and relating skills (<INT>) was divided into two further subcategories, namely <INT-SIM> (interpreting similarities) and <INT-DIFF> (interpreting differences). The quantitative distribution of the single subcategories across the Padova students' diaries is an interesting indicator of the cognitive processes that were activated and manifested over the course of the project: this is why the following Figures will first highlight the trend for each subtheme (Figure 39), before showing the sum of all subcategories as they merge into the main theme <INT> (Figure 40).

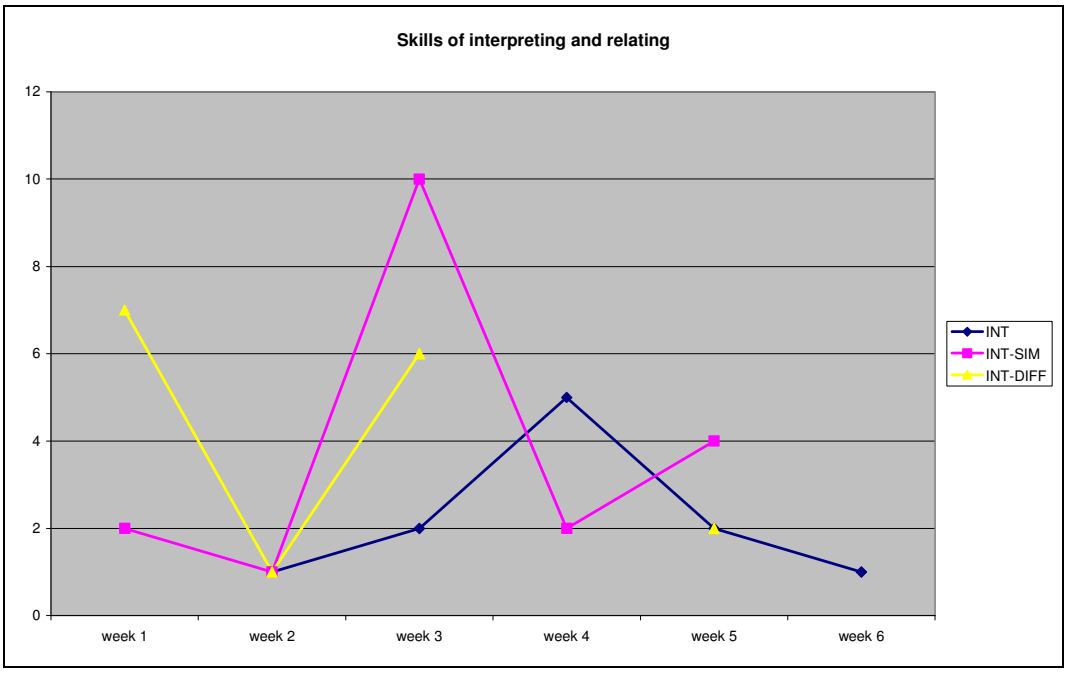


Figure 39. Distribution of the subcategories for <INT> across the weekly diaries of the Padova group

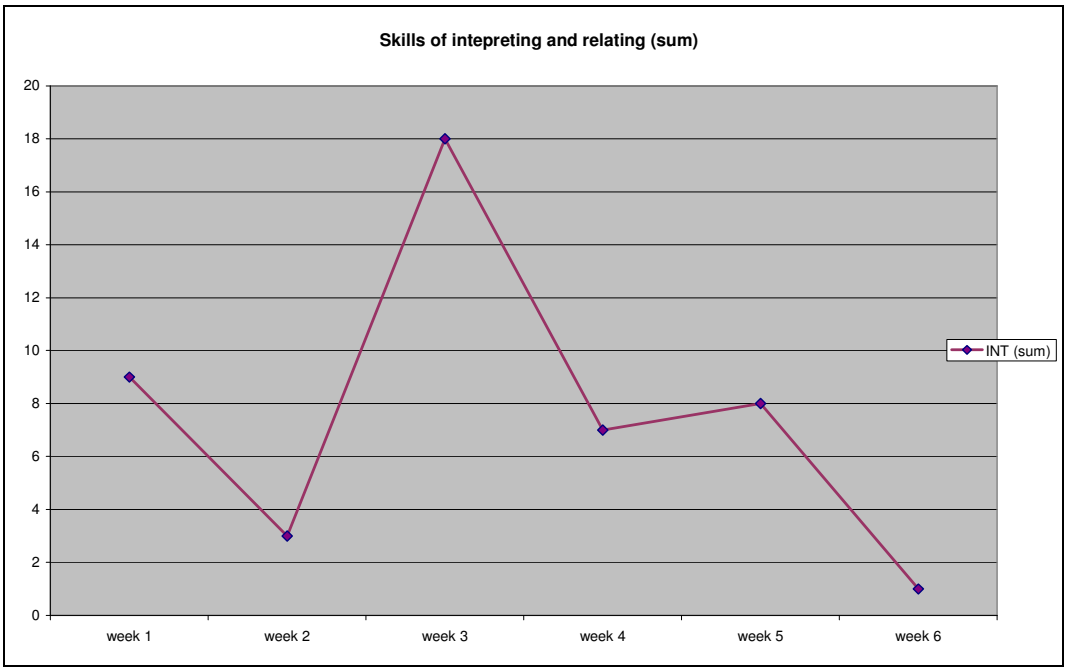


Figure 40. Distribution of skills of interpreting and relating <INT> across the weekly diaries of the Padova group (sum of subcategories)

As can be noticed in Figure 39, some of the diaries related to the various weeks of online collaboration are characterized by the students' efforts to draw parallels between the cultures and meanings at play in the interaction, identifying both differences and similarities between them. In particular, the ability to interpret

cultural differences (<INT-DIFF>) appears to stand out in the personal journals for week 1 and 3. In week 1, when the participants first met online and started to get to know each other, exploring their lives, interests and studies, <INT-DIFF> emerges in the diaries as linked to the students' reflections on the differences between their lifestyles, also in terms of the institutions and the political systems of the two countries. This is exemplified by the following examples:

> "<DIS> <INT-DIFF> We also asked her some questions about their university system, which is different from the Italian one. She is attending a course to become a teacher, <KNW> but there, if you want to become one, you have to choose TWO subjects, and then you'll have a single degree that comprehends both these subjects. </KNW> </INT-DIFF> </DIS>" (Maria, PD - week 1);

> "<INT-DIFF> From them I learnt a lot of things and one thing that stroke me was that, in Austria, universities are free, they have no tuition fees!! That's impressive! And in this field I'm very critical about Italy because we are the 10th country in the world that has the most expensive tuition fees…</INT-DIFF>" (Vanessa, PD – week 1).

In week 3, when the Skype session was entirely devoted to a discussion on the nature of identity, <INT-DIFF> emerged in relation to the values that, in the students' eyes, concur to shape their identities. Discussing their points of view and beliefs at a metacultural level, the students noticed some differences in the personal linguacultures at play in the interaction, and commented on them in their diaries, as the following brief extract exemplifies:

> "<TASK> We started with a nice game, about our own rank of values. </TASK> We all agreed that the most important one is the family, followed by friends and religion for <NAME> Oliver. </NAME> <INT-DIFF> That was interesting,

because religion doesn't seem to be so important to us (in fact <NAME> Denis </NAME> said to him it isn't important at all, because he doesn't believe in God). <INT-DIFF>" (Elisabetta, PD – week 3).

Interestingly, in the diaries for week 3 the ability to interpret differences often emerges together with the awareness of similarities <INT-SIM>: in some of the students' reflective journals, these aspects appear to intertwine and to be seen as natural and co-existing intersection points of the beliefs and sets of values at play in the interaction. The following extract exemplifies the variegated nature of the students' reflections on metaculture, in which both similarities and differences are identified:

"<INT-SIM> Starting with the six-words game (family, friends, etc…) we discovered that we were all agree on the fact that family and friends are important in the forming of an identity. </INT-SIM> <INT-DIFF> However, I differed to them about religion because they considered it the less important, while I put it at the third position. </INT-DIFF> <INT-SIM> During this game, another interesting aspect came out has been the question of nationality. Is it very important in the forming of an identity? We were all agree that it is not important and I think that <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> gave the best conclusion affirming that she feels European and I agreed with it. </INT-SIM> <INT-DIFF> <NAME> Maria </NAME> and I differed to our Austrian peers about language because of different usages. As a matter of facts, we don't use dialect in any conversation, it depends on the person we are speaking with, while <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> and <NAME> Petra </NAME> use it as everyday language. </INT-DIFF> (Ester, PD – week 3).

Besides revealing a number of reflections on the differences between metacultural meanings, the diaries for week 3 also allow the ability to see similarities (<INT-SIM>) to emerge with relatively high frequency (see Figure 39): the session on identity, therefore, seems to have stimulated the students' ability to relate the ideas, experiences and values of their peers to their own. This is exemplified, for instance, by the following extracts:

> <TASK> <INT-SIM> First of all, we started with the game of our rank of values in life. We all agreed with the fact that family and friends are the most important and influential components since they guide us from the very beginning of our life. Religion instead turned out to be the less influential one. </INT-SIM> </TASK>" (Emma, PD – week 3);

> "<CCA> <INT-SIM> We asked him [Hans, from Innsbruck] some questions from the list and realized that he had our same ideas, every time I talk with them I realize how similar we are, we got the same ideas and the same attitudes even if we never met. That's really impressive because we're far one from the others and that makes me think that there will be thousands of young people like us, with whom we could potentially become friend and share our ideas and our opinions </INT-SIM> </CCA>" (Bruno, PD – week 3).

As regards the main theme <INT>, the analysis identified a number of stretches of text in which the students showed an ability to draw parallels and interpret a variety of cultural meanings, although without necessarily pointing out differences and similarities between them (see Figure 39). In week 4, <INT> appears with relatively high frequency, and is exemplified by the following extract:

> "<EVAL-POS> <INT> <CCA> This conversation in my opinion was the most interesting and enlightening because for the first time I really understood how

Italian people are still far from the way that other European countries are, and that's a point that we need to better, thanks to the inspiration given by other countries like <NAME> Hans </NAME> did with us </CCA> </INT> </EVAL-POS>" (Bruno, PD – week 4).

In sum, looking at the category of interpreting and relating skills from a wider and holistic perspective (Figure 40), this dimension of ICC appears to have been particularly stimulated in week 3, in a discussion on identity which – as the findings would seem to indicate – triggered quite vivid cognitive processes of identification and interpretation of both similarities and differences between metacultural meanings, beliefs and sets of values.

6.2.5 Critical cultural awareness

Of all the dimensions of ICC that were categorized and analysed in this investigation, critical cultural awareness is certainly the one which emerges more frequently in the diaries, and in particular in those for week 3, where <CCA> and its derivates amount to a total of 48 occurrences (see Figure 35 above, and Figure 41 below).

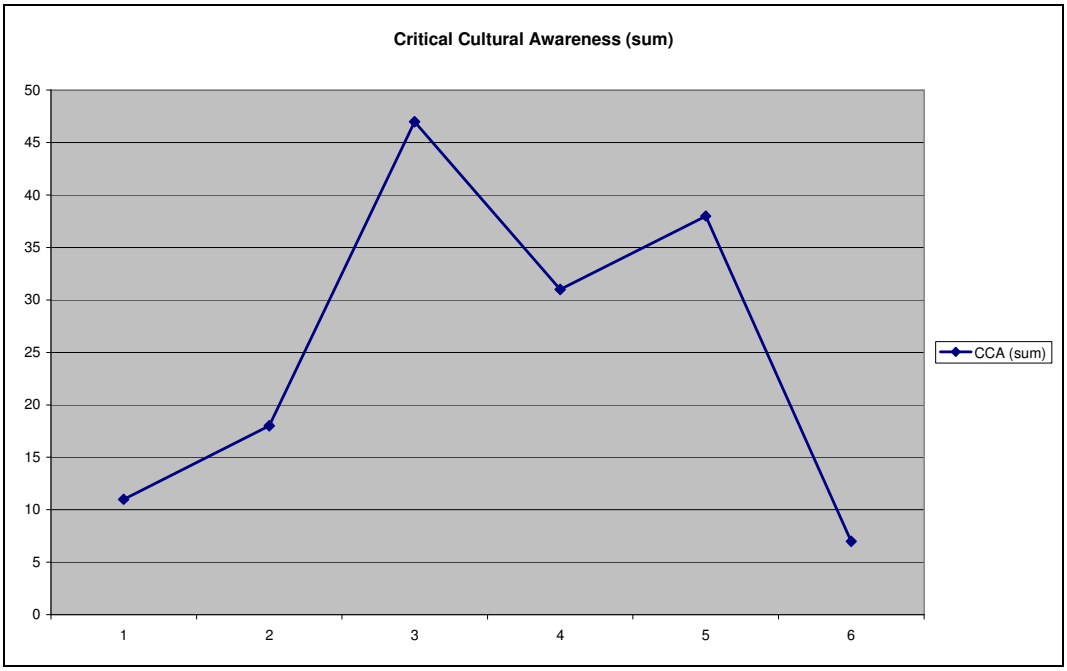


Figure 41. Distribution of critical cultural awareness <CCA> across the weekly diaries of the Padova group (sum of subcategories)

The high frequency of the dimension of critical cultural awareness in the diaries for week 3 is due to the relatively important number of stretches of text in which the students show an ability to 'decentre' and look at cultures – their own, those of their peers, and a variety of Cs3 addressed in the Skype sessions – as well as at metacultural meanings, from a critical stance. The peak in frequency that characterizes the personal journals for week 3 may be explained by the nature of the topic chosen to stimulate discussion: as has been outlined above, the third Skype session required the students to reflect on identity, a theme for which they needed to activate metacultural and critical thinking. A significant number of them later translated this dimension into their diaries: this is why, during the analysis, the students' texts were identified as providing evidence for their critical personal opinions (<CCA-PO>), as well as for their awareness of the complexity of metacultural discourse (<CCA-COM>) and of the cultural meanings that certain words assume (<CCA-IC>). These aspects are exemplified by the following extracts:

> "<CCA> We agree that the etnicity influences a lot our identity. The country or the region where we are born and we live develop our personality that surely it will be different from the identity of another person that lives in a different country. It refers to the cultural traits that distinguish a particular community so it plays an important role. Through socialization young people assimilate lifestyles, customs and beliefs of their communities. </CCA> <CCA-PO> I don't think a person can have two completely different identities. For example, if to person try to act like another person on Facebook won't have to completely different identity because still have something that belongs to him, values or customs that belong to what he really is. </CCA-PO>" (Renata, PD – week 3);

"(…) <CCA-COM> the problem is, first of all, define what is identity. <COLLAB> There was a little argument of what is identity and what is NOT identity. </COLLAB> <CCA-PO> For example for me identity is really linked with personality, </CCA-PO> but <DIS-OO> for example for <NAME> Eike </NAME> identity is also being a woman, a student in few words a <CCA-IC> ROLE. </CCA-IC> </DIS-OO> </CCA-COM>" (Vanessa, PD – week 3).

The findings discussed so far suggest that the choice of the topics – and in particular metacultural topics - to discuss in intercultural encounters can stimulate critical cultural awareness, and that evidence of this is then likely to be found in the participants' personal narratives. In this sense, therefore, these findings would appear to indicate that a link exists between the topics selected to stimulate dialogue in intercultural exchanges and intercultural communicative competence. Figure 42 below illustrates the emergence of <CCA> and its various subcategories across the weekly diaries, and suggests the important role played by the third Skype session in the activation and manifestation of this dimension of ICC.

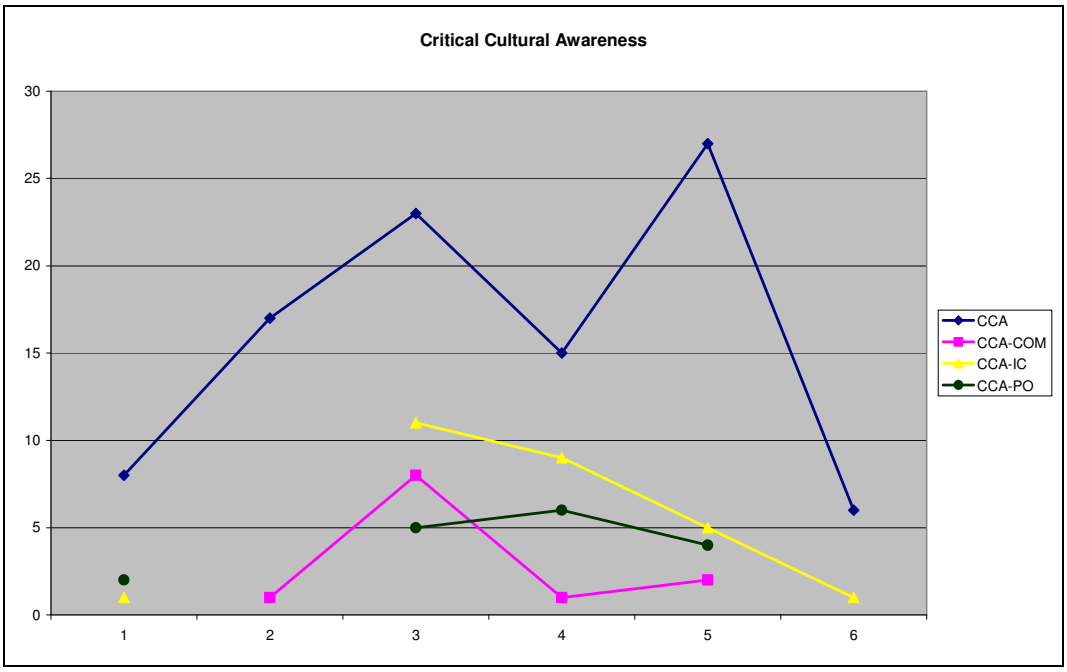


Figure 42. Distribution of the subcategories for <CCA> across the diaries of the Padova group

As can be noticed in Figure 42, a further set of diaries providing significant evidence of critical cultural awareness are those for week 5. Apparently, the fifth Skype session aroused the participants' critical thinking to a great extent, and the diaries later became a repository for the cognitive processes that the students activated in the interaction. In this case, too, the topics chosen to prompt discussion may have played a triggering role: during the fifth Skype meeting, the participants were encouraged to discuss the role of women in society, as well as the impact of gender discrimination in their countries and in the world. On that occasion, a high number of students reported their reflections in the personal journal, many of which signalled their critical cultural awareness, as the following extract exemplifies:

> <CCA> We spoken for a long time of the role of the woman in the society. During the years women learnt how trade up, especially in industrialized countries; think more about themselves instead of being worried about others. Unfortunately it's not the same all over the world. Despite the progress the world is facing there are still countries where women must do only what their husbands/fathers say. Countries where still nowadays women still don't have the possibility to study, to assert themselves. </CCA> <CCA-PO> More I feel around speaking about inferiority and discrimination and more I want to succeed in reaching the target I thought about. </CCA-PO> (…) What can we do to improve the condition of women? <CCA-PO> Well I think a woman shouldn't only stay at home and looking after children or taking care of the house. I'm a woman and I think women should have the possibility to study, to be independent with their own job. Concerning homosexuality, none of us wouldn't accept these people. I don't have homosexual friends but if I would get to know one day a homosexual person I would accept it. </CCA-PO> (Renata, PD – week 5).

To a lesser extent, <CCA> and its subcategories were also found to emerge in the diaries composed in the other weeks of the online exchange. At the end of the second Skype session, for instance, in which the participants engaged in the discussion of three episodes of intercultural misunderstanding, some of the students' diaries reveal the ability to question cultural beliefs and behaviours from a critical standpoint. This is exemplified by the following excerpt:

> "<TASK> We delved into some particular topics. One was that of cultural misunderstandings, <CCA> and we agreed that when getting in contact with another person, with a different culture, a different background, people should try to inform themselves and try to inform each other about their own traditions, uses, etc.. If something unfortunately goes wrong, if someone feels offended, the best thing to do is talking, explaining, confronting. People tend to be very narrow-minded sometimes, also depending from their own culture. But just make each other understand, we should take nothing for granted. </CCA> </TASK>" (Elisabetta, PD – week 2).

The diaries for week 4, too, provide evidence of the students' awareness of the causes and dangers of stereotypes and discrimination, thus signalling their ability to engage with metacultural discourse in a critical way:

> "<CCA> Then we read the comic-strip story about an old mother who has lots of prejudices and fears concerning her daughter 's new boyfriend. The story is funny but also sad because before giving a judjement on everyone we should know and meet the person. Often there's a link between <CCA-IC> 'labels' </CCA-IC> and actual discrimination because if we don't know well something or someone as a consequence we are scared and frightened about this new experience. The only solution is getting to know who we want to enter our life. Parents are surely

worried about foreign boyfriends but when they know them it will be easier to accept them and their new culture and traditions. The problem is always the same: a lack of information and a consequent fear of the unknown. </CCA> <CCA-PO> I think my parents will accept everyone loves me because they only want me to be happy.</CCA-PO>" (Roberta, PD – week 4).

As can be noticed in Figures 41 and 42 reproduced above, the personal journals for week 1 and week 6 do not reveal much about the students' processes of critical cultural awareness: as regards the first diaries, this may be explained by the fact that the very first Skype session was devoted to socializing and to preliminary cultural explorations, and therefore stimulated the dimensions of attitudes, knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction to a greater extent – something that has been outlined earlier on in this section. Nevertheless, the investigation of the diaries for week 1 allow an interesting aspect to emerge, which reveals a particular facet of the dimension of critical cultural awareness: as suggested in section § 6.2.2, <CCA> was found to nourish a close link with the skills of discovery and interaction (<DIS>), in that it indicates the ability to understand and choose the proper time to ask questions, on the basis of the specific context of interaction.

While the first personal journals principally gave an account of the initial contacts among the exchange participants, in the sixth diary entry most of the students focused on the description of the tasks that they had to complete, namely the analysis of three films on intercultural encounters and the 'whole group' Skype session (see Chapter 4), and consequently provided detailed information on the way they had collaborated to produce their joint film presentation. In these diaries, critical cultural awareness seems to have remained in the background, while a predominant number of units of meanings were interpreted as falling into the categories of *task*

and *collaboration*, and were therefore coded as <TASK> and <COLLAB> respectively, as can be seen in the following example:

> "<TASK> Last time on 2 of Decembre we finally presented our final project. We had to collaborate with the Austrian peers for this project. </TASK> <COLLAB> What I want to point out is how easily we collaborate with them because we have more or less the same ideas and we have a lot in common. I created a group of Facebook where everybody posted its own ideas and opinions, where we decided how to do the powerpoint presentation and what each member had to do. I think we did a great job. </COLLAB>" (Renata, PD – week 6).

Despite the high number of occurrences for categories that were not explicitly related to ICC, some of the texts did reveal the students' ability to address culture and metacultural discourse from a critical standpoint, as the two following extracts appear to suggest:

> "<TASK> On 2nd of December we've had our 6th Skype Session, but this time it was different. In fact we've to work in groups of about 10 people in order to create a Power Point presentation discussing three movies we've watched: 'East is East', 'Brick Lane', 'Ae fond kiss. Our group aim was to analyze 'East is East' movie. </TASK> <CCA> In these three movies there are many issues in common. I'm talking about problems with religions, cultures, habits, forced marriages and generation collisions. We've highlighted the differences between Islam and Christianity, and how these religions face between themselves. The films depict some little <CCA-IC> 'battles' </CCA-IC> between different lifestyles and way of behaving. But on the other hand families we've analyzed are great examples of intercultural cohabitation. I've understood that a <CCA-

IC> ‘melting pot’ </CCA-IC> family is possible, obviously with some problems, but it’s possible. </CCA>” (Riccardo, PD – week 6);

“<CCA> We have watched the film ‘Brick Lane’. I think it is a multifaceted film as it explores into depth a lot of problems strongly related to everyday life, such as immigration, racism, but also family and marriage difficulties. I believe that all the 3 films we were asked to watch represent what actually happens when two different cultures come into contact for the very first time. Maybe at first they reject each other and maybe they collide. But in the end you learn something new and through this collision you can experience a kind of reborn, which is what Nazneen (the main character) felt in the film. I think this is what I’ve learnt from this film, and also from this exchange. I’m glad to say that coming into contact with a different culture can broaden your horizons and you can become more broad-minded person too </CCA>” (Emma, PD - week 6).

6.2.6 Discussion

The qualitative and quantitative findings reported in the previous section would appear to suggest some preliminary answers to the initial research question: through the categorization of the various units of meaning that make up the Italian participants’ personal journals, evidence was found of the dimensions of ICC that the students activated during the Skype sessions and later translated into their weekly diaries. In addition, as with the skills of discovery and interaction, the research unearthed some strategies which facilitated the understanding of how the participants engaged with otherness in a transnational and transcultural ELF environment.

The trends that were outlined for each dimension of ICC across the weekly diaries seem to indicate that a potential link exists between topic selection, task design and intercultural communicative competence. Thus, for instance, the tasks

proposed in the first Skype session seem to have encouraged the participants to explore their peers' lifestyles and learn more about their interests and studies, thus activating and manifesting their attitudes, knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction to quite a significant extent. In turn, the skills of interpreting and relating, as well as critical cultural awareness, appear to have been particularly stimulated by the topics and the tasks of the third Skype session, in which the students engaged in a discussion on the nature of identity, and were able to identify and critically evaluate a variety of metacultural meanings, as well as to interpret similarities and differences between them. In this light, these observations also seem to indicate that the sequence of topics chosen for the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange (see section § 4.3.1), as well as the tasks in which it was embedded, may have facilitated the students' gradual exposure to the learning opportunities promoted in the project, moving from the exploration of the other participants' lifestyles and personal experiences to the negotiation of wider processes of metacultural discourse, in which critical cultural awareness and interpreting abilities were required to interpret a variety of linguacultures.

The findings discussed above would appear to suggest that, in the limited collection of texts that were included in this analysis, ICC does not simply emerge as a competence with differing degrees of development on the way to a threshold of proficiency (Byram 1997). Instead, ICC includes a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes that the students involved in the project manifested when appropriately stimulated, through meaningful intercultural interaction and thanks to the topics and tasks chosen to prompt discussion. This does not imply that ICC is an innate quality: yet, the students involved in the project appear to have nourished the seeds of intercultural communicative competence – regardless of the number of intercultural experiences that they had had prior to the exchange – and to have stimulated them

through their engagement in meaningful activities and encounters. The fact that the participants activated intercultural communicative competence, therefore, appears to have depended on the quality of the tasks and encounters they were exposed to, the depth of their commitment (something already outlined in O'Dowd 2003), as well as their readiness to reflect critically on the experience when writing their personal journals.

These tentative observations seem to highlight the importance of selecting appropriate topics and tasks so as to provide the participants of telecollaboration projects with opportunities that can stimulate intercultural communicative competence in their approach to otherness, something that appears to confirm previous research findings in the field (Müller-Hartmann 2000). In order to provide further evidence for this, the analysis conducted on the Italian students' weekly diaries was complemented by the investigation of other texts that were produced throughout the project, namely the students' comments in the forums on Facebook. As indicated in Chapter 5, this second process of investigation adopted the same methodological and analytical strategies that were implemented for the collection and investigation of the Italian students' personal journals, and therefore consisted in two interrelated strands. The following section will highlight some of the findings that were obtained from the qualitative and quantitative exploration of the data derived from the participants' posts to the Facebook forums.

6.3 Analysis of the whole group's ICC: findings from the investigation of Facebook forums

As the analysis illustrated in the previous section has attempted to highlight, diaries can be considered a precious resource for the exploration of personal processes, such as those related to ICC, as they are perceived by the writers themselves. Despite their

enormous potential for qualitative research, the fact that diaries originate from their authors' personal feelings and perceptions also makes them a sometimes limited source of data, which needs to be constantly interpreted and integrated in order to obtain a clearer picture of the phenomenon of interest. This is especially true in relation to ICC, whose investigation, as already stressed above, touches a deeply personal and private sphere. To complement the view offered by the analysis of diaries, the investigation described in this section will focus on the dimensions of ICC that emerge from the Italian students' posts to the Facebook forums, in an attempt to identify whether and how any attitudes, knowledge and skills were activated by the topics and online activities promoted on the Group page. While diaries mainly give a picture of the writers' individual cognitive and affective processes, and only offer a retrospective account of the processes that took place in the Skype sessions within the discussion group, the potential of forum postings lies in their interactional nature, which can reveal the group's processes as they unfolded in interaction, and may therefore shed some light on the dimensions of ICC as they were activated through the social and cognitive engagement in an online community of practice.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the contributions to the Facebook forums offers interesting insights into the way the participants manifested elements of ICC while interacting with their peers in the asynchronous mode. The investigation was approached following the methodology described in Chapter 5, and therefore consisted in the collection of data from the 65 comments that the Italian students had posted in the two Facebook forums, and their consequent qualitative coding on the basis of the themes and sub-themes outlined in the classification scheme of Figure 30. After identifying and coding the various units of meaning in both sets of forums messages, a quantitative stance was taken, which allowed for the

calculation of the frequency of each category (see Figure 43 below). At this point, the inferences drawn from the qualitative and quantitative strand were combined to gain a more comprehensive and complete picture of the phenomenon. The resulting meta-inferences are presented and discussed below.

Padova students		
	Forum 1	Forum 2
ATT	2	
KWN	2	
INT (sum)	21	
INT	21	
INT-SIM		
INT-DIFF		
DIS (sum)	2	
DIS	1	
DIS-OO	1	
CCA (sum)	44	35
CCA	30	18
CCA-COM		15
CCA-IC	12	2
CCA-PO	2	
LAN	2	1
TECH		
TASK		
NAME	17	1
GROUP	19	7
EVAL-POS	7	
EVAL-NEG		
COLLAB		

Figure 43. Distribution of categories in the posts to the Facebook forums (Padova students)

Like the observations shared in section § 6.2, the investigation of the Facebook forums seems to confirm that the nature of topics and tasks played a role in stimulating the manifestation of certain intercultural *savoirs*. On the basis of this, the following discussion will take on a different perspective on the phenomenon: instead of presenting the findings for each dimension of ICC – as was the case in the previous section -, the discussion will focus on each forum as taken singularly, so as to highlight the emerging processes that characterized the students' negotiation of meanings, knowledge and cultural awareness as a response to the tasks and topics

promoted in the forums.

6.3.1 Forum 1: challenging stereotypes

As outlined in Chapter 4, the first forum aimed to stimulate a discussion on stereotypes. Within the 45 comments that the forum generated and that were qualitatively and quantitatively analysed, most units of meaning gave evidence of critical cultural awareness (<CCA> and its derivates <CCA-IC> and, to a minor extent, <CCA-PO>) and skills if interpreting and relating (<INT>), which emerge 44 and 21 times respectively (Figure 43). This appears to suggest that Forum 1 encouraged the students to post comments in which they were able to interpret and relate other values, meanings and behaviours to their own culture, as well as to critically reflect on differing points of view and cultural practices. This seems to have been especially true when, in the discussion promoted on the Facebook Group page, it came to challenge existing stereotypes about Italy. As the analysis demonstrated, the Italian students were stimulated by some of the pictures that were shared on the forum and that caricatured common stereotypes about their country: consequently, Forum 1 saw a lively discussion arise on how their culture and country were seen from an outsider's perspective. When, for instance, one of the participants from the Innsbruck group asked why Italy had been described in one of the pictures as the country of ‘pizza and museums’ (see Figure 44), the Italian students started a process of collaborative ‘decentering’ and critical reflection, which attempted to challenge the stereotype and, through the negotiation of the value attributed to both food and arts in the country, helped them co-construct and interpret cultural meanings.

Figure 44. Caricature of European stereotypes: "Europe according to Germans" (©2009 by AlphaDesigner[37])

Partly reproduced in Figure 45 below, this dialogic process culminated in the final statement "we should be proud of being seen the nation of 'pizza and museums'" (Elisabetta, PD), as if the whole negotiation had actually led to a renewed, critical awareness of their own country and its values:

[37] http://alphadesigner.com/

Daniela, PD:

"<CCA> I think museums are associated to Italy because Italy has a huge cultural heritage due to the influence of many cultures that inhabited our country during the past centuries (see Greek culture in the southern part of Italy, Etrurian culture in Tuscany, the Romans who managed to obtain an enormous empire thanks to their expansionist policy..just to mention some of them..). Many of these ancient cultures who contributed to build our history left us many remnants we can now admire in the museums spread all over the country. </CCA>"

Antonella, PD:

"<GRP> I agree with <NAME> Mara </NAME> </GRP> <INT>..I don't think that 'Museums' for Italy is a good definition because I think that there are a lot of museums all over Europe and not only in Italy. But maybe, as <NAME> Daniela </NAME> said , they mean that in Italy we have the biggest cultural heritage of all Europe! But I'm not so convinced yet :) </INT>"

Chiara, PD:

"<INT> well, I'm not sure that pizza and museums could be the right imagine to define Italy, first of all because museums are not a typical characteristic of Italy, I mean there are a lot of other countries with a magnificent cultural heritage or beautiful museums, so I don't think that it could be a peculiarity of Italy..maybe pizza and colosseum!;) (…) </INT>"

Elisabetta, PD:

"<CCA> I think we should be proud of being seen the nation of 'pizza and museums'. Italy is famous all over the world for its great food and pizza is a sort of symbol. There are lots of wonderful museums in Italy, think of cities as Rome, Florence, Venice, Milan, etc.. People or tourists who come here, come thanks to our beauties and to our cultural and historical heritage. </CCA> <INT> Maybe Italy differs from other countries famous for their museums because here they lie around all Italy, almost all regions. While, in other ones, you can find them only in the capital cities, or in the major 2 or cities. So I believe that this is a true stereotype we should be proud of. </INT>"

Figure 45. Examples of collective 'decentering' and dialogic negotiation of meaning in Forum 1

The example illustrated above cannot be interpreted as a single individual's process, but as the fruit of joint collaboration within a community that operates through mutual engagement in a common enterprise – in this case the negotiation of Italian cultural values and meanings as seen from both an etic and emic perspective. This episode also seems to suggest that a single prompt, namely an amusing picture, if used in a meaningful and appropriate way can help participants manifest intercultural communicative competence.

While a high number of stretches of text fall into the categories of <CCA> and <INT>, Forum 1 does not provide much evidence of the students' skills of

discovery and interaction (<DIS>), since only two instances were found in the Italian students' posts, namely:

> "<DIS-OO> Do you believe in people who say 'I don't have prejudices?', would you say that?" </DIS-OO> (Daniela, PD);

> "<DIS> oh my god! we are godfathers? really? only because we have the pope, well this is also a good stereotype=) </DIS>"(Vanessa, PD).

This finding might seem paradoxical, in that online discussion forums are expected to be places where asking questions and eliciting further information are the norm. Yet, after carefully observing the students' comments in the forum, I would suggest that, although not made explicit and therefore difficult to code and interpret, skills of discovery and interaction are indeed present in the posts and can be noticed in the way meanings and information were negotiated, also thanks to the ability to link one's contributions to the ones written by the other participants. This seems to be further confirmed by the high number of occurrences of the categories coded as <GROUP> and <NAME> (see Figure 30), which reflect the interactive nature of the forum. An example for this is provided by the excerpts illustrated in Figure 46: trying to explain a picture caricaturing the stereotypes commonly hold by Americans towards Europe, in which Italy was identified with the term 'godfathers', Emma and her peers engaged in the interpretation of the etic meanings attributed to their country. Although Emma's use of the question tag 'isn't it?' was coded as <GRP> in that it addressed the rest of the group, her post may also be interpreted as an indicator of skills of discovery and interaction, since it clearly aimed to stimulate the other participants' responses. Her question de facto prompted several comments, some of which are reported below, which helped her discover her peers' opinions and, at the

same time, contributed to the collective interpretation processes at play within the group.

Emma, PD:

<INT> I think Godfathers is related to the film 'The Godfather'. I suppose Italy is called 'Godfathers' because of Mafia, <GRP> isn't it?? </GRP> </INT>

Roberta, PD:

<GRP> I agree with <NAME> Emma </NAME> </GRP>... <INT> I think that the other countries associate us with mafia (camorra,andrangheta etc), mainly for historical reasons. </INT>

Chiara, PD:

<GRP> I totally agree with <NAME> Emma </NAME> ..<INT> I think that the majority of foreign countries associates Italy with mafia, but <CCA> I don't think only for historical reasons bacause problems related to mafia in the south of Italy are stll current and worryng!! </CCA> </INT>

Figure 46. Example of post that triggered discovery and interpreting processes

With a much lower frequency, the dimensions of attitudes (<ATT>) and knowledge (<KNW>) also emerge in the forum, although the number of occurrences does not allow one to formulate a reliable interpretation of the extent to which they were manifested implicitly in the discussion board. An example for both dimensions can be found in the following post, which relates to the picture presented in Figure 44 above:

<ATT> I found interesting the stereotypes concerning the former West and East Germany </ATT> because <KNW> as we know after the second World War Germany was divided into 2 completely different part..the west was based on capitalism. For this reason 'Sparkasse' means that money and a bigger industrial level developped quickly, the east 'proletariat' because for historical reason comunism adopted a certain lifestyle that characterized that part of Germany. </KNW> <INT> I think that this stereotype is true but only if we refer to the past

but now (2011) I suppose that this <CCA-IC> ‘difference’ </CCA-IC> does not exist any longer. </INT>” (Roberta, PD).

Interestingly, the student who wrote this post shared her reflections on the history and values of a specific country - Germany - which was different from and external to the countries and cultures involved in the project. In this light, the student was able to show her knowledge and attitudes to attract her peers’ attention towards what I would call a ‘Culture-three’ (C3) and its stereotypes. Considering that the language used in the comment was a *lingua franca*, this observation would appear to highlight the transnational and transcultural nature of the reflections and interactions that were taking place in the telecollaboration project.

6.3.2 Forum 2: the complexity of culture

The investigation of the 20 comments that make up Forum 2 give an even clearer view of the dimensions of ICC that were stimulated by the prompts and guidelines proposed on the Facebook Group page (see Figure 12 in Chapter 4). As can be seen in Figure 43 above, the forum showed no evidence of interpreting and relating skills (<INT>) nor of skills of discovery and interaction (<DIS>). This may be due to the fact that, compared to the lively discussions that took place in Forum 1, in the second forum the students gave less direct responses to each other’s posts, something that appears to be indicated by the fewer occurrences of explicit reference to the group (<GROUP>) and its members (<NAME>). This does not mean that collective negotiation of meaning did not take place: indeed, some students still linked their contributions to previous posts by other peers, thus constructing a collaborative environment and engaging in a common enterprise. Yet the general impression that emerges from the analysis is that the very nature of the task that was to be carried out in this forum may have not favoured certain dimensions of ICC. It is worth

remembering that the second discussion board required the students to provide their own definition of culture as well as a metaphor to describe it: given the type of task, the students may have felt less stimulated to explore and interpret other people's perspectives, and more interested in giving their own viewpoint. This might be the reason why critical cultural awareness and, interestingly, its derivate <CCA-COM>, emerged with relatively high frequency in the forum, while other *savoirs* remained in the background.

In an effort to describe what 'culture' meant to them, the Italian students posted a series of comments which highlighted their awareness of the complexity of the issue: all of them expressed their difficulty in finding an exhaustive definition of culture, and attempted to respond to the three metaphors (culture as 'Iceberg', 'Onion' and 'Ocean') proposed in the guidelines by suggesting their own. The following Figure illustrates a few of the comments left by the Italian students in the forum, and aim to show how critical cultural awareness, including its subcategory <CCA-COM>, was manifested.

Renata, PD:

"<CCA-COM> It is difficult to give a clear definition of culture. </CCA-COM> <CCA> We had the opportunity to talk about it during this exchange and depends from what point of view we intend to define it. I can define culture as everything I succeeded picking up to now or rather that cultural background developed since I was born till now. We don't have to forget all the values, traditions and habits that are typical of each society. Culture is what brought us to be who we are. </CCA> <CCA> Concerning culture through metaphors from a certain point of view I think that culture can be seen as an organism that grows day by day enriching itself with what each person experince every day.</CCA> <CCA-COM> On the other hand however culture is at the same time chaos. We live in a society where not everything is clear, sometimes it's difficult to understand why certain things happen. </CCA-COM>"

Chiara, PD:

"<GRP> Well, like <NAME> Renata </NAME> has already said </GRP> <CCA-COM>, it is impossibile to give a precise definition of culture because it includes too many elements. </CCA-COM> <CCA> The word culture include different aspects such as personal identity, values, tradition, habits, experiences and every kind of things that has helped every singol person to grow up and learn something new. Culture is part of everyone of us, our life could be defined as a great puzzle that becomes even more big day after day. Each piece of this puzzle represents a particular element of our life that make everyone of us unique and different from the others, depending on our personal identity, personal experiences, traditions and so on. So culture could represents a part of this big puzzle, made up in turn by other little pieces. At least this is the image of culture in my mind:) </CCA>"

Maria, PD:

"<CCA-COM> I think that there isn't a real definition for culture..or better, there are many different types of cultures, so it is impossible to define it. <CCA> Also, a person can't belong to a sole culture, since it changes relating to the different situations. There may be some times that a particular identity emerges in a person's behavior while others remain hidden and vice-versa. </CCA> <CCA-COM> I totally agree on the last view of culture [the ocean metaphor]. I think that identities and culture can't be defined, and they change with time and according to the situation. In my mind I imagined culture as an enormous blob, but the ocean metaphor perfectly corresponds to what I think of it. </CCA-COM>"

Antonella, PD:

"<CCA-COM> Well, in my opinion it's not easy to define culture. A lot of times I've been asked to do it, but every time there were differences of thought. </CCA-COM> <CCA> I would say that a lot of things can compose the culture of a person, town, country.. Something like literature, art, music, food, language, history, traditions, laws, type of society and so on. I think that culture evolves everyday..something old is lost and something new is added. For this reason I was thinking about the earth..the primary components remain the same, but on the crust things change everyday..And so I agree with Professor Fang's thought that culture is not static and also with his metaphor of the ocean. </CCA>"

Figure 47. Examples of critical cultural awareness in the students' posts to Forum 2

6.3.3 Discussion

The analysis of the contributions to the online forums on Facebook leads into two directions: firstly, it appears to confirm that the choice of appropriate stimuli – in terms of both topics, tasks and materials – can encourage participants in telecollaboration projects to engage in the collaborative negotiation and construction

of meanings, and to manifest their critical thinking and interpreting skills. In this sense, the analysis proposed in this section has provided several examples of collective 'decentering' (Forum 1), as well as of the individual students' ability to reflect on metacultural issues (Forum 2). Interestingly, the forums may have not stimulated the activation of previously acquired or of new knowledge among the students, but this might be due to the fact that the prompts were not explicitly aimed at giving and sharing information about one's own or other cultures. Yet, gaining insights into the way external people considered the students' own culture – as was the case in Forum 1 – helped the Italian participants negotiate their knowledge and vision of the country's values. Indirectly and implicitly, therefore, the process of 'decentering' may have also stimulated knowledge of one's own country and cultural values.

The second observation that is worth sharing relates to the use of a tool such as Facebook to promote intercultural communication and critical reflection: considering that social networks are typically used for socializing and enjoyable activities, and therefore encourage their members to post very quick and instinctive comments, the way the participants used Facebook to carry out part of the exchange activities seems to highlight its potential in providing a friendly meeting place, where students can feel motivated to explore the assigned topics in an informal, yet enriching way, and reflect on cultural and metacultural issues with the help of their peers' experiences and critical thoughts.

6.4 Case studies

After discussing some of the findings related to the analysis of the whole Italian group, this section will attempt to provide more detailed examples of the *savoirs* that two specific students, Ester and Matteo, activated and translated into their written

output over the course of the exchange. Given the deeply intimate nature of ICC, the analysis presented in this section will not attempt to draw any generalizations on the way intercultural learning occurred in the project: instead, it will explore and describe the personal processes that accompanied the two students' experience in the project, so as to highlight the complex nature that characterized their intercultural telecollaborative encounters. In this sense, the analysis will take the form of a "concentrated enquiry" (Stake 2005: 444) into two single case studies, the object of which will be two specific entities, in other words two "bounded systems" (Merriam 2009). As already outlined in Chapter 5, each case will be examined to provide more specific and focused insights into the ways ICC was manifested in the students' written output: in this sense, Ester's and Matteo's case studies can be defined as "instrumental" (Stake 2005), in other words as playing a "supportive role" (ibid.: 445) in the broader attempt to respond to the first research question.

Besides being essentially instrumental, the two case studies presented below can be defined as *mixed methods case studies*, in that they combine qualitative and quantitative theoretical assumptions, data sources and approaches so as to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon. As explained in Chapter 5, the choice of undertaking the two case studies was driven by the same pragmatic standpoint that informed the whole research, and that led me to embrace the approaches and methods that could best respond to the initial research question. The combination of different approaches is perfectly illustrated by the introduction, alongside the qualitative and quantitative analyses of data from the two students' diaries and Facebook posts (something that was part of the *conversion mixed methods design* exemplified earlier on in this thesis), of several other data sources. These had a heterogeneous nature and included the two students' responses to the pre- and post-questionnaires, their answers to the final self-assessment on ICC, their answers to

brief semistructured interviews, their posts to the activities on the wikispace, as well as my own observations on their behaviours and attitudes throughout the project. Through the use of a variety of qualitative and quantitative data sources, my aim was to approach the data from a multiplicity of perspectives, so as to decipher as many meanings as possible, and deepen my understanding of the phenomenon of interest. In this light, the use of multiple data sources and approaches responded to the need for triangulation (see Chapter 5), in the attempt to formulate more solid inferences on the issue of interest and to increase the validity of my interpretations.

There were several reasons for the choice of illustrating and discussing the findings of Ester's and Matteo's case studies. Firstly, both students had completed a sufficient number of texts among those required in the exchange, and therefore provided a rich set of data that was useful to shed more light on their experience in the project. A second, fundamental aspect that played a role in the selection of the two students is strictly rooted in the purposes of this research: since the analysis aimed at gaining insights in the processes activated by both female and male participants with differing degrees of intercultural experiences, Matteo and Ester were considered to be representative of the entire Padova group. Matteo, in particular, was chosen because he had had very limited previous contact with people from other cultures and countries, a condition which he shared with the vast majority of the Italian students. Ester, in turn, was selected because, having lived and worked abroad for more than one year, she had had a more direct experience with 'otherness'. The third reason why the two students' written output was chosen as data source for the case studies is that, among all the texts that were analysed for the purposes of this research, those composed by Ester and Matteo were felt to have a higher potential for learning about the phenomenon of interest: as Stake suggests (2005: 451-452), one of the primary criteria for case selection lies in the opportunity

that a certain set of data offers to expand one's understanding of the issue under investigation. In this light, Ester's and Matteo's texts – besides being representative of their group - were also found to be the ones from which I personally learnt the most over the course of the analysis.

6.4.1 Case Study A: Ester

Ester is an Italian girl who, at the time of the exchange, was 22 years old and was studying English and Spanish at the University of Padova. Although she was born in a small town near Padova, Ester had recently decided to move to her university city to be more autonomous and put all her energies in her studies. Unlike her classmates, she had spent over a year in Barcelona, Spain, where she had worked as an airport hostess. In the personal introduction that she posted on the wikispace before the first Skype meeting, Ester explained her love for the two languages she was studying in the following way:

> "I'm studying Spanish and English at University and I have to admit that between these two languages I prefer Spanish for its cheerful and melodious sounds and above all because I've lived in Spain for a year and this experience has changed me in many ways. Otherwise, I love English in a different way from Spanish: it fascinates me for its culture, literature, history, wonderful places and living style".

Her experience abroad, as well as the fact that, at the time of the exchange, she was living in a flat with other five young people, seem to have helped her "understand that there is not only my way of thinking but many others" (personal introduction) and become more respectful and open towards diversity. Curiosity and openness to other viewpoints, cultural products and living styles appear to be the leitmotiv of

Ester's life, something that she also displayed throughout the project. Besides wishing to improve her language skills, curiosity was what made her choose the telecollaboration exchange with Innsbruck: as she wrote in her personal introduction, she decided to take part in the experience "to get in touch with people from an unknown country for me (as I've never been to Austria and studied German)!" In the questionnaire that she was asked to complete at the end of the exchange, Ester revealed that what she liked most in the project was the opportunity to compare her ideas with those of others – a comment that would appear to confirm the depth and strength of her initial commitment.

Over the course of the project, Ester wrote a total of 12 posts. Her written output, entirely available in Appendix B, consists of the following texts:

Ester (PD)	**Number of texts (tot. 12)**
Personal Introduction (on the wikipage)	1
Weekly diaries	3
Posts to wikipages	3
Posts to Facebook forums (Forum 1 + Forum 2)	2 + 2 = 4
Other posts to Facebook	1

Table 8. Ester's written output

Drawing on the mixed methods methodology described in Chapter 5 and exemplified in section § 6.2, the weekly diaries were the main source of data for the purposes of this research. As can be noticed in Table 8 above, Ester only completed three diaries: despite this, her writings were found to offer rich and deep insights into her intercultural communicative competence, and were therefore valued for their high

potential for learning. The reason for Ester's quite limited number of personal journals appears to be rooted in the student's little confidence in her abilities to write in English: in the pre-questionnaire, for instance, the student assessed her writing skills in English as reaching B1-B2 level and revealed that, by taking part in the exchange, "I would also like to improve my writing skills because I know that I'm not very good in writing". In addition, at the very beginning of our class meetings in the computer laboratory, the student showed her concern by explicitly asking for feedback on the texts that she would post as part of the project activities. Early in December 2011, Ester sent me a private message on Facebook, apologizing for her delay in posting the comments in the wikipage and forums, and admitting that writing in English took her a great deal of time. In the brief interview that we had at the end of the project (see Chapter 5), Ester revealed that her low confidence with her abilities was the reason why she had not completed all the diaries requested as part of the project. Despite her personal feelings and impressions, however, Ester's written output was felt to be very articulate and clear, revealing a very thoughtful and deep process of reflection on the issues dealt with during the exchange. This is why, despite the quite limited number of diaries, her texts were still found to provide useful insights into the way the activities and encounters promoted in the project had stimulated her intercultural communicative competence. The following Figure illustrates the distribution of categories that was obtained though the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data gathered from Ester's personal journals:

ESTER						
	WK 1	WK 2	WK 3	WK 4 no diary	WK 5 absent	WK 6 no diary
ATT		3				
KWN		2				
INT						
INT-SIM				1		
INT-DIFF		2		1		
DIS			1			
DIS-OO						
CCA		1	1			
CCA-COM				1		
CCA-IC				1		
CCA-PO						
CCA-CAU						
LAN						
TECH						
TASK		1	3			
NAME		5	6	3		
GROUP		1	2			
FEEL		2	3	1		
EVAL-POS		1	2	2		
EVAL-NEG						
COLLAB		1	1			

Figure 48. Distribution of categories across Ester's diaries

The investigation of Ester's first diary entry provides evidence of the student's curiosity and positive attitudes towards her peers (Petra, from Innsbruck, and Maria, from Padova), as well as of her ability to feel integral part of a group despite the initial embarrassment. The attitudinal dimension, coded as <ATT> in the diaries, is exemplified in the following extract:

> "<FEEL> I had my first skype session with <NAME> Petra </NAME> and <NAME> Maria </NAME>. At the beginning I felt quite nervous because I didn't really know how I could interact with them but consequently I understood that they felt excactly like me, so I decided to start speaking in order 'to break the ice' </FEEL>. We have talked about our experiences, what we like doing, which university course we're attending.. ect. <ATT> Curiosity allowed us to know each other even though we didn't follow completely the main topic of the session. <CCA> Moreover, it is important to know a bit who you are talking to before starting to speak about more 'serious matters' </ATT> (…) </CCA>".

Ester's first diary also shows the student's awareness that a certain level of familiarity and closeness is essential so as to make the most of any interaction. In addition, the student's words also reveal that, especially in intercultural situations, it is fundamental to understand when it is appropriate to explore less controversial topics such as education and language, or touch upon more delicate and complex issues. To illustrate this aspect, which in the diary was coded as <CCA>, Ester brings an example from her initial session:

> "<CCA> (…) A clear example of this, during the skype session, has been the topic of the death of Gheddafi which I tried to introduce in order to understand what <NAME> Petra </NAME> thinks about it, and how the mass media of her country related to this issue. Maybe it was too early to discuss about it..as I felt <NAME> Petra </NAME> quite reluctant of starting this conversation I decided immediately to change the topic! <FEEL> (and I felt sorry) </FEEL> </CCA>".

Despite the fact that the conversation on the first session focused on familiar and 'safer' topics, Ester seems to have benefitted from the information provided by her Austrian peer by trying to build parallels with her own world. The following extract shows how, in her diary, the student was able to report on the session by relating the knowledge that she had gained about the other culture and country (<KNW>) to her own experience, thus giving evidence of interpreting and relating skills (<INT>):

> "<INT-DIFF> We've also talk about university, and I noticed an enormous difference between our university system and the Austrian one. <KNW> As a matter of facts, <NAME> Petra </NAME> has to study two subjects, which are completely different, in order to become a teacher. </KNW> Actually, I don't completely understood if their system is better then our, above all because we

didn't talk about of pro and cons of our respective universities. <ATT> I will ask it her next week! </ATT> </INT-DIFF>

<KNW> We have also talked about dialects. In Austria there are many as in Italy; each region has its proper dialect. <INT-DIFF> However, they use it also in the evereyday language and this is a big difference between our tradition; for example they can address to their university professors in dialect, wherease we are not used to do so. As a matter of facts,we consider dialect rude. </INT-DIFF> </KNW>".

As can be inferred from the extracts presented above, Ester's first Skype session seems to have stimulated a variety of intercultural skills, from her curiosity and eagerness to learn more about her peers, to her ability to relate new information to her own experiences, as well as her awareness of the importance of creating a familiar atmosphere before exploring complex cultural issues.

Compared to the first online session, Ester's second Skype meeting was for her a very different experience. Half-way through the session, in fact, the student came to speak to me and confessed that she was feeling inhibited and could not handle the conversation: using English in an online environment to communicate with people that she was not familiar with was a new and challenging experience for her. This was making her feel uncomfortable and nervous, since she could not find a way to express herself as she would have wished to. As she was sincerely sorry about this, I suggested that she told her peers about her feelings, and that, if she wanted to, she could simply listen to the discussion without actively participating in it. Ester agreed to this solution and, as I later wrote down in my fieldnotes, I had the impression that she was feeling more at ease. This episode was later commented on in the semistructured interview conducted at the end of the exchange, during which Ester told me that she had felt embarrassed because of her level of English, which

she felt was lower than that of her peers. As she noticed during the interview, her uneasiness may have been further increased by the fact that a new student from Innsbruck had joined the group: as, in the Italian student's words, the new peer's language level was apparently better than her own, Ester had started to feel inadequate. In the final self-assessment, Ester admitted that her second session was the only one in which she had felt uncomfortable:

> "The first time I knew Alexandra I felt unconfortable because I didn't know her and I was too nervous to speak to her. This was also due to the fact that she can speak English better than me and this difference didn't allow me to speak!".

Despite this initial challenge, Ester was able to benefit from her second Skype session by applying successful strategies to overcome her difficulties, in other words quietly listening to the discussion without feeling obliged to intervene, and trying to become more familiar with her new peer: when she found out that they even had friends in common, Ester felt immediately closer and more comfortable with the new situation. As she later wrote in her diary,

> "<FEEL> It has been an unexpected discovery that made me feel closer to my Austrian peers because, actually, Innsbruck is not too much far from Padua! This sense of closeness let me feel free to invite them to our little city. </FEEL>".

The sense of 'closeness' within her group that emerges from the extract reported above is quite evident in other texts composed by the Italian student: in her responses to the final questionnaire, for instance, Ester commented that the use of English as a *lingua franca* had helped her immediately

> “feel part of a same ‘group’. Even if people who I'm speaking with don't belog to the same country of mine, we can exchange our ideas through the English and this is fantastic!”.

These impressions, which were also later confirmed in our interview (see Appendix B), seem to signal that Ester’s group was able to construct and share a third space also thanks to the use of a common contact language. Drawing on Ester’s reflections, this third space seems to have been also characterized by mutual help and understanding:

> “<EVAL-POS> Even if I had some problems interacting with my group (…) <COLLAB> <NAME> Petra </NAME>, <NAME> Maria </NAME> and <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> have been very kind and understanding. </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>” (Ester’s second diary);

> “Fortunately, my peers helped me to put my shyness aside” (Ester’s self-assessment).

Later, in our interview, Ester confirmed to me that the sense of group membership and shared space that she had felt during the exchange had allowed her to communicate with Alexandra even after the project was over, and to find it natural to engage in conversations about ‘difficult’ topics, such as politics or economics, in a spontaneous and stress-free way.

Despite the presence of uncomfortable feelings, the tasks proposed in Ester’s second Skype session seem to have stimulated the student’s ability to explore their peers’ cultures: an example of this is the word-association game, which apparently offered Ester an opportunity to manifest her skills of discovery and interaction (<DIS>). This aspect is mirrored in her diary, and in particular in the following extract (emphasis added):

"<TASK> During the last part of the session we worked on the word-association game and I discovered some interesting things about Austria and its tradition; <DIS> in the grid <NAME> Maria </NAME> and **I** read a strange word: Tracht ; **we** asked to our Austrian peers what it was. They explained us that it is a typical dress which is worn during a special Austrian events. </DIS> </TASK>".

As can be noticed in this excerpt, the fact that Ester switched from the first person pronoun 'I' to the pronoun 'we' so as to include her Italian peer might indicate and reinforce the idea of a Community of Practice, where actions are taken together, and where curiosity and discovery constitute shared values.

Besides providing evidence of the skills of discovery and interaction, Ester's second diary entry offers some insights into the student's critical cultural awareness (<CCA>). This emerges, for instance, in her reflection on the three stories of intercultural misunderstanding that she and her partners had commented on during the Skype meeting:

"<TASK> Then we followed with the second session's assignment and we discussed the three intercultural misunderstanding stories provided by our teachers.</TASK> <CCA> I think that everybody should be more comprehensive and tolerant towards people and the other girls agree with me about this. </CCA>".

Although not very articulate, this comment seems to give some indication on Ester's ability to reflect critically on cultural products and behaviours. In the student's post to the wikipage dedicated on the same topic, the dimension of critical cultural awareness emerges with more clarity (emphasis added):

"<CCA> <GRP> I agree with <NAME> Melinda </NAME> when she says that is not a question of 'no-respect' but only a lack of knowledge about the foreigner

culture </GRP>. Starting from the third story, we all agree about Mr Chang's exaggerate reaction but I think that Scott should have checked Chang's tradition before doing such a misunderstanding, above all if he was in a work meeting! The second story deals with two important companies that are both too close-minded. None of them tries to cooperate culturally (sharing ideas and so on) with the other. We can see the enormous differences between German and American cultures. The former is methodical and quite traditional, while the latter one is more dynamic and look more at the future. I think that the title [‘The trap of similarity’] suggests that even if these two companies seems to be very similar, actually they are completely different one another! it's not enough sharing money and power, but for having success you have to *share also your culture* (…) </CCA>”.

The idea of ‘sharing culture’ appears to be linked to Ester’s openness and enthusiasm towards other cultures, and her readiness to explore and learn from different values and points of view - something that, as suggested above, accompanied her throughout the project. In addition, her reflections on the three stories of failed intercultural encounters seem to offer a clearer picture of her awareness of the important role played by knowledge about other cultures and by what she calls ‘cultural cooperation’. In this sense, the extracts from Ester’s second diary entry and wiki post appear to give clear evidence of the Italian student’s critical cultural awareness (<CCA>).

The dimension of critical cultural awareness is also what permeates Ester’s third, and last, diary. Overall, the specific topic chosen for the third Skype meeting offered Ester and her peers the opportunity to engage in a metacultural discussion on their perception of identity. In this sense, the session seems to have stimulated Ester’s ability to look at culture and identity from a critical and ample perspective, and to

show her awareness of the complexity of the issue (<CCA-COM>):

> "<EVAL-POS> We had also a great discussion dealing with multiple identities. </EVAL-POS> <CCA-COM> Initially there were no doubts on affirming that we have multiple identities but afterwards, analyzing the point 2.2 we wondered if we were dealing with <CCA-IC> 'multiple identities' </CCA-IC> or simply facets of ourselves. I was very confused because I was agree on the multiple identity concept at once, but I think that we don't have to confound this concept with the fact that we have to behave differently in different contexts. It has been quiet a difficult topic to talk about, but it made me think a lot about myself and about the behavior I usually have with people in different contexts. </CCA-COM>".

Coded as <CCA-IC> and <CCA-COM>, critical cultural awareness emerges in this extract to indicate the way Ester approached the nature of identity metaculturally: without necessarily looking for an agreement nor for a quick and dismissing definition, Ester soon became aware that the issue could not be settled superficially, and therefore confessed that she felt puzzled by its complexity. Nevertheless, she shared her own critical view and seemed to appreciate the fact that the topic and its discussion had helped her reflect on her own behaviours.

Besides stimulating critical cultural awareness, the third Skype session also appears to have activated Ester's ability to interpret differences and similarities between cultural values and metacultural opinions (<INT>), especially when her group analysed the values that concur to make up identity, and discussed the importance of nationality and language in the shaping of it:

> "<INT-SIM> (…) During this game, another interesting aspect came out has been the question of nationality. Is it very important in the forming of an identity? We

were all agree that it is not important and I think that <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> gave the best conclusion affirming that she feels European and I agreed with it. </INT-SIM> <INT-DIFF> <NAME> Maria </NAME> and I differed to our Austrian peers about language because of different usages. As a matter of facts, we don't use dialect in any conversation, it depends on the person we are speaking with, while <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> and <NAME> Petra </NAME> use it as everyday language. </INT-DIFF>".

What is interesting in the excerpt reported above is that, besides capturing Ester's skills of interpreting and relating (<INT>), it also adds to the general impression that negotiation of meaning and collaborative construction of knowledge occurred in the group through the sharing of personal values and experiences: this is indicated, for example, by the girls' agreement on the word 'European' to denote the identity that they felt true for themselves.

Critical cultural awareness, and in particular the awareness of the complexity of metacultural issues, is also what emerges from Ester's posts to the two forums on Facebook. As indicated at the beginning of this case study, Ester often apologized for what she defined as her 'weak written English skills'. Yet, her comments in the forums reveal a capacity to use the social network to write very articulate critical comments. The example provided below comes from the forum on culture, in which the participants were asked to share what the word 'culture' meant to them, as well as to provide a metaphor to describe it, taking inspiration from three well-known images (culture as 'Iceberg', 'Onion' and 'Ocean'):

"<CCA-COM> I think we all agree in the fact that it's impossible to give a clear definition of culture and I think that is because culture it's something too close to our unconsciousness. </CCA-COM> <CCA> Culture is how we move, how we relate to people, how we greet, how we react in specific moments of our lives.

</CCA > <CCA-COM> It's something that we have inwardly but we cannot explain what it is. I would define it like a feeling that we always show but we don't know what is it. Is like our face: we know that we have it, we can see it reflected in a mirror but we cannot know how people see that face and its every single expression.. </CCA-COM> <CCA> During this exchange I've been thinking about the difference between culture, ethnicity and identity, but I couldn't solve this matter. Why couldn't they be the same thing? Why do we have to split these <CCA-IC> 'concepts' </CCA-IC> if they build up the same thing? Let's take another example: a paint. A coloured paint is made up by maany many colours and they are all mixed together. If we look at just one of them we just see a part of the whole paint. If I have to choose one of these metaphors, I would choose the last one (the ocean), because I totally agree that we are totally in a dynamic state (consequently our identities). However, I think that there are no suppressed facets, but it is simply a mix that we always show.</CCA> <GRP> Pay attention to this photo! This is quite my idea of identity!! </GRP>".

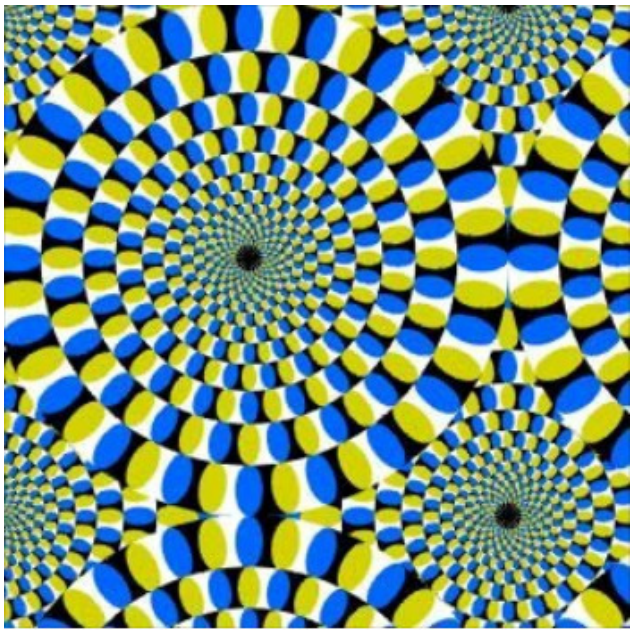


Figure 49. Picture chosen by Ester to illustrate her definition of 'culture'

Ester's reflective post to the Facebook Group page reveals several aspects of her ability to critically address metacultural issues: firstly, the comment starts by acknowledging the difficulty of providing a clear-cut definition of 'culture', and Ester did so by linking her comment to what her peers had already said before her. In this sense, the student was able to implicitly re-create an atmosphere of cooperation and negotiation of meaning, which is reinforced by the further comment that her post received, not to mention the various 'Likes' that appeared on Facebook as a sign of appreciation of her message. By attempting to give her own definition of culture – intended as something we always show but are not entirely aware of - Ester was also able to challenge the distinction between identity and culture by suggesting that they should be seen as components of the same complex picture, which she described as a richly coloured painting. In the post, her questions did not only aim to give evidence of her awareness of the complexity of the issue, but also to show her critical thinking skills and provoking similar reactions in the readers.

Ester's critical cultural awareness (<CCA>), together with her skills of interpreting and relating (<INT>), also emerged from the analysis of the forum on stereotypes that was hosted on the Facebook Group page. The Italian student's ability to analyse and interpret metacultural issues is evident in the following extract, which is clearly inspired by Chimamanda Adichie's talk on 'single stories' (see Chapter 4):

"<CCA> I decided to watch it [Chimamanda's video] one more time and many thoughts came up to my mind. I was wondering how much economical power and political situation could affect the development of steteotypes. <INT> If we pay attention on our (italian) situation and we read international newspapers we can realize that as a population, we are considered blind and uninterested whereas it is not so. </INT> Mass media have a big responsibility on it and they don't always consider this important aspect of their work.</CCA> <CCA> When I was living in Spain I felt often judged because of my nationality. People just see what the mass media <CCA-IC> LET </CCA-IC> them see. In this way, people who have come to me to discuss about Italy and its political/economical situation have the only negative figure of Berlusconi! What's more, the fact that Italians stood that situation made those people think that we were <CCA-IC> ALL </CCA-IC> agree with it and implicitly with <CCA-IC> BUNGA BUNGA </CCA-IC> , corruption and so on. </CCA>

<CCA> I know that it could be quite different to what Chimamanda wants to say but I think that this is another kind ok stereotypes. Nowadays we are badly seen because of our internal political problems. We are judged as stupid people eating pizza at every moment, <CCA-IC> BUT WE ARE NOT SO! </CCA-IC> <CCA-PO> In my opinion before stereotyping we should firstly, as Chimamanda 'advices', listen more than one, more than two, more than a billion of stories and secondly plunge into a culture to understand things that before you couldn't understand maybe becuause they are different to your culture. After doing these things we will understand that streotypes don't exsist, that I'm Ester, you are Mustafa, you are Maria and so on. Each person is different, is person must have the opportunity to be known. </CCA-PO>".

This post makes it possible for several aspects of Ester's ICC to emerge: firstly, the

student was able to bring into the discussion on stereotypes the issues of economic power and political situation, which she saw as trigger events for the creation and strengthening of national stereotypes. In order to do so, she effectively related Chimamanda's ideas of 'single stories' to her own culture and to her own experience as an Italian woman living in Spain and having to face stereotypical views on Italians. She also critically commented on the impact that the mass media have in spreading prejudices and single stories, often based on the role that a country plays at the political and economic level. In doing so, Ester did not only add an important element to the discussion on stereotypes (economic and political forces had not been mentioned in the forum), but also looked at the cultural values conveyed by the social and political situation of her country – at that time under Berlusconi's government – from a very critical and lucid perspective. Her final comment - "plunge into a culture to understand things that before you couldn't understand maybe becuause they are different to your culture" - highlights Ester's awareness of the relativity of all cultural values (an essential component of critical cultural awareness) and of the need to explore other sets of value orientations in order to promote true mutual understanding.

In sum, the analysis of Ester's diaries – complemented by her comments in the wiki and Facebook forums, as well as her answers to the self-assessment, pre- and post-questionnaires and interview – showed that some of the topics dealt with during the exchange (e.g. identity) and, in the case of the Skype sessions, the interaction with other peers, had stimulated the manifestation of her intercultural communicative competence. While some dimensions of ICC do not emerge with particular evidence in the diaries (<KNW> and <DIS>, for instance, were made explicit only in her first and third diary entries respectively), others – such as <INT> and <CCA> – seem to permeate Ester's entire written output, and reflect her ability

to critically explore other sets of values and metacultural issues, as well as to relate them to her own experiences and feelings. Overall, the richness of data and the depth of the insights that Ester's written output provides highlights the reason why, despite the quite limited number of diary entries, the Italian student's contributions to the exchange activities offered a great potential to learn about intercultural communicative competence.

6.4.2 Case Study B: Matteo

Matteo is an Italian student with a passion for music, motorbikes, Japanese martial arts and football. At the time of the project, he was 22 years old and was in the final year of his Bachelor's degree in *Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale* at the University of Padova, where he was studying English and Russian. Despite his interest in foreign languages, and unlike his classmate Ester, prior to the beginning of the exchange Matteo had had very little contact with people from other countries and cultures: as his answers to the pre-questionnaire reveal, the Italian student had travelled outside Italy only on very few occasions and for very short periods of time. His limited familiarity with intercultural communication seems to be further reinforced by the fact that, before taking part in the project, he had never used Skype, and was therefore not familiar with this tool for distant and intercultural communication.

In the exchange, Matteo was assigned to a three-student group, together with Melinda, from Padova, and Bernhard, from Innsbruck: like his group peers, Matteo attended all the Skype meetings, and completed the six the diaries as required. The following Table sums up the number of texts produced by the Italian student over the course of the project, an exhaustive collection of which can be found in Appendix C:

Matteo	**Number of texts (tot. 17)**
Personal introduction	1
Diaries	6
Posts to wikipages	4
Posts to Facebook forums (Forum 1 + Forum 2)	2 + 3 = 5
Other posts to Facebook	1

Table 9. Matteo's written output

Most of Matteo's writings reveal his extreme concern for his ability to use English, which he assessed as having reached B1-B2 level (pre-questionnaire), and about which he did not seem to be very confident. Matteo's apparent lack of self-reliance is well expressed in the personal introduction that he posted on the wikispace at the beginning of the project: "I'm very sorry for my English but I've made a full immersion of Russian for 4 mounths". After quite a long period of intensive study to further develop his skills in Russian, Matteo saw the telecollaboration exchange as an interesting and useful opportunity "to improve my language and in particular way to become more confident with the spoke interaction" (personal introduction). Matteo's deep concern for his language skills seems to permeate his personal journals: as can be seen in Figure 50 below, all his diaries contain stretches of text that can be related to the category of *language* (<LAN>), and therefore signal Matteo's constant attention to the role played by language in the Skype sessions.

MATTEO						
	WK 1	WK 2	WK 3	WK 4	WK 5	WK 6
ATT		2				1
KWN					1	2
INT						
INT-SIM					1	
INT-DIFF						
DIS						
DIS-OO						
CCA						1
CCA-COM				1	1	
CCA-IC						
CCA-PO						
CCA-CAU						
LAN		4	2	2	1	1	1
TECH						
TASK			2		2	1	1
NAME		3				
GROUP			2	2	2	1	1
FEEL		1				
EVAL-POS		3	3	2	3	1	1
EVAL-NEG		1	1			
COLLAB		1	2	1	1	1	1

Figure 50. Distribution of categories across Matteo's weekly diaries

The Italian student's concern for his language skills is particularly evident in the first diary entries, in which his need for improvement constantly emerges in connection with the feeling that his proficiency level might not be good enough for the purposes of the interaction:

> "<LAN> I found great the English level of <NAME> Bernhardt </NAME>, he is very good in, also from the point of pronunciation, and I think it will be very important also to improve my language, I need of speaking and he is a very good mate. </LAN> (...) <LAN> Of course I have to improve also my vocabulary and connected with the spoken interaction these could be the main goals for the next times. I want to be more fluent and clear, also in order to help the other who is listening to me. </LAN>" (Matteo's first diary entry).

In the personal journals, language also emerges as an obstacle to effective communication when approaching complex metacultural issues. An example of this is provided by Matteo's third personal journal, in which he reported on his group's discussion on identity:

> "<EVAL-POS> the last skype session went good enough, we talked a lot about personality, behaviour and identity </EVAL-POS>; <LAN> it has been interesting to focuse our attention on an abstract thing and try to explain it in English, as consequence it has been quite difficult, in particular try to let the other know what we meant by each concept. <CCA-COM> it's difficult also in italian try to expain this concept, even more in English; </CCA-COM> but it was usefull trying to move in a field which is not very common in a conversation. </LAN>".

As this excerpt would appear to suggest, in this diary, awareness of the complexity of certain cultural issues (<CCA-COM>) and of the meanings that people attach to them seems to be linked more closely to the incapability to express their ideas effectively in the foreign language than to the topics *per se*. Language, therefore, appears to have played an important and often challenging role in Matteo's Skype sessions, especially in the exploration of different personal linguacultures. From the fourth session, however, Matteo's approach to language seems to have been less problematic and frustrating. As his personal journal reveals, in fact, the student appears to have partly overcome his initial difficulties with the language: although the topics of the session included identity, discrimination and power, and were therefore still quite complex and abstract, Matteo's reflections reveal a more positive and optimistic attitude, an approach which may have been linked to an increased level of confidence with the language used for interaction:

> “<TASK> <CCA-COM> <LAN> Then we moved on the concept of identity again, and once more it was not so easy try to explain in English our ideas on an abstract concept; however we did, and also quite well I think. </LAN></CCA-COM> </TASK>”.

An increased confidence in his own abilities with the language and with the constraints of online synchronous interaction also emerges in Matteo’s fifth diary. At this point, the Italian student seems to have overcome some of his initial fears, and appears to be enjoying the Skype session more:

> “<LAN> we are also a bit more fluent in the dialogue, even if personally I have to improve a lot.. and we also run better the speaking turns, so it is easier understand the other who is speaking..</LAN>”.

It is interesting to note that, in the final diary, the only stretch of discourse that was identified as falling into the category of language does not refer to any difficulty of expression within the group, but to Matteo’s appreciation of the opportunity that the film ‘Brick Lane’ offered to access and appreciate a different accent in English:

> “<EVAL-POS> <KNW> I think this activity has been very usefull and it gave us the possibility to learn not only the cultural background and habits of that countries, <LAN> but also a different English accent,</LAN> the situation of that kind of immigrants in London and their way of living.</KNW> </EVAL-POS>”.

On the basis of these observations, Matteo’s relationship with English seems to have gradually evolved from an initial stage of uncertainty to an increased level of confidence in the use of the foreign language for authentic, real-time communication. As the analysis presented below will attempt to suggest, this progressive process

appears to be linked to the dynamics that characterized his group's collaboration over the course of the project.

Together with <LAN>, the category of *collaboration* (<COLLAB>) emerges repeatedly in the Italian student's weekly diaries: as can be seen in Figure 50, all his personal journals are studded with the student's comments on the way his group had been working to create a common stress-free environment. This attitude is mirrored, for instance, in the following extracts:

> "<EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> I think also all the elements for a satisfactory conversation have been respected, and we created the proper atmosphere for the conversation to let the new informations come out without any problems. </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>" (week 1);

> "<EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> this time I think went better than the previous one, first of all because we already known to each other, and we were less embarrassed. </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>" (week 2).

What emerges from Matteo's diaries is the idea of an online Community of Practice, created over the course of the project thanks to the students' efforts to negotiate and adopt common rules for communication. This seems to be confirmed by Matteo's responses to the final self-assessment, in which he commented on his group' collaboration in the following way:

> "I think that in all the moments of the communication you have to adopt successful rules, on the contrary probably there couldn't be a communication; we didn't have to suspend judgements and there has been respect in all the skype sessions. Many times when my peer was talking I used to ask him some more specific questions, in order to discover something more or just because I was curious".

If seen in this light, the "proper atmosphere" described by Matteo in his first diary entry can be interpreted as indicating the presence of a third space in which collaboration, respect and curiosity constituted the shared repertoire that facilitated the construction of meaningful relationships.

Besides shedding some light on group collaboration, Matteo's response to the final self-assessment appears to indicate that the Italian student was able to show attitudes of curiosity and openness to other people's opinions (something that could be identified as *savoir être*), and to ask meaningful questions in order to discover more about his peer's culture and experiences (skills of discovery and interaction). Observing his performance in the computer laboratory, where I could physically attend and monitor all the Skype sessions, these aspects emerged quite clearly: throughout the online meetings Matteo acted as a moderator, guiding the discussion and asking both his peers questions on the basis of the given guidelines and prompts. Yet, the analysis of Matteo's weekly diaries did not reveal much of these two dimensions: the category of attitudes (<ATT>), in fact, only emerged in the journals for week 1 and 6, while no stretches of text were found that could be classified as belonging to the skills of discovery and interaction (<DIS>). This apparent dichotomy may be explained by the fact that personal narratives tend to mirror what is particularly relevant and important to the writer. Evidence for certain categories to the detriment of others, therefore, can be interpreted as evidence of the cognitive, affective and social processes that the student felt as being important during the Skype session, and that he instinctively or consciously put into words and shared with the rest of the class and the tutors through his personal journals. In Matteo's case, the diaries composed over the course of the project seem to mirror the student's deeper concern for aspects of language and collaboration than for elements of intercultural learning which, as a consequence, fell into the background.

Nevertheless, investigation of the stretches of text that were categorized as <COLLAB> seems to shed some light on the attitudinal and discovery dimensions that characterized the student's experience with otherness: as will be seen later on in this section, this was one of the reasons why I felt Matteo's diaries to be a rich and significant source for deepening my understanding of intercultural communicative competence. The following paragraphs are an attempt to outline how the collaborative processes at play within Matteo's group appear to have had an influence of the student's manifestation of ICC – or lack of it - in the personal journals.

As the analysis of the diaries revealed, the construction of a community of practice within the small group of interactants was not immediate since, especially at the beginning of their joint work, it was hindered by some difficulties. In his first diary, for instance, Matteo admitted that, despite the positive atmosphere that was created in the group,

> " (…) <COLLAB> <EVAL-NEG> the last part on the other hand has been a bit fragmented, maybe because we didn't know what else to say, <LAN> or also because we are not accustomed to speak for a such long time in language, and we were a bit tired. </COLLAB> </LAN> </EVAL-NEG>",

and he concluded that:

> "<ATT> [f]or the next time I think I'll be ready with more questions, with the aim of not having waste of time. (or at least I hope so.. ;)) </ATT>."

A similar situation seems to have occurred during the second and third Skype sessions, which Matteo commented on in his third diary as follows:

> "<LAN> The next time I would try to use my English better with more attention and hopefully with less mistakes; we also have to find out some curiosities or questions in order to use the left time better. </LAN>" (week 3).

Probably due to the fact that the three members of the group were not already familiar with each other, the extracts reported above suggest that the group members had run out of things to say. The difficulties with the language, one of Matteo's major concerns, especially at the beginning of the project, appear to have also played a role in the emergence of a challenging situation within the group. Although this may be a normal condition in situations where the interactants do not know each other well, especially in online environments, Matteo's words might also be an indicator of the difficulty of being an entirely autonomous 'ethnographer' (Barro, Jordan and Roberts 1998) who continuously challenges his own and the others' assumptions and asks questions beyond given external prompts. In this sense, therefore, the excerpts reported so far might indicate that Matteo – and probably also his peers – was not able to put into practice fully his skills of discovery and attitudes of curiosity as he would have hoped to. This might be the reason why, for instance, the first two diaries were also identified as containing examples of <EVAL-NEG> (see excerpts above), something that would appear to convey Matteo's sense of frustration about not being able to get the most out of the experience. If interpreted in this light, the student's concern for the quality of group collaboration might justify the apparent scarcity of the dimensions of <ATT> and <DIS> in the weekly diaries.

Interestingly, collaboration within the group seems to have rapidly moved forward from the fourth week, which Matteo described using the adjective "great" for the first time:

<EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> I have to say that this time we had no problems at all with time, meaning that we finished the discussion exactly at the end of the session, without any empty-spaces; </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>".

As the analysis revealed, Matteo's fourth diary entry seems to indicate that his group had finally started to feel more familiar and to ask each other further questions beyond the given prompts, thus deriving benefit from the time spent together. Although the student did not explicitly mention the reason for this change, a factor which might have played a role is the ice-breaking game that introduced the Skype session, in which the students were asked to choose and explain three important places in their university city. In Matteo's words, the game was an inspiring activity since it allowed the interactants to explain and interpret the values connected to the various places that they had chosen to illustrate. Despite the fact that, in his diary, Matteo did not explicitly comment on what he had learned from his peers, the game seems to have stimulated the three group members to explore the physical places their partners came from, as well as the cultural values that were attached to them. In this sense, the task may have fostered the students' curiosity and positive disposition towards their peers, and thus encouraged them to be more autonomous in asking each other questions on their lives and experiences.

The fact that the situation in the group had started to change emerges again in Matteo's fifth diary, in which he commented on the Skype session in the following way:

"<COLLAB> Coming back to the skype session I can say that probably we have found the best way to attend the interaction, meaning that there are no more problems of time (…) </COLLAB>".

What this diary reveals is an evident sense of satisfaction and pleasure: at this point, the group members seem to have created an atmosphere which was conducive to successful communication, and have started to fully benefit from the time spent together so as to learn from each other in a more autonomous and, apparently, rewarding way. Parallel to this is the emergence of the student's more confident feelings towards the use of English in real-time interaction: as has been suggested above, the analysis of the weekly diaries revealed that the fifth Skype session represented for Matteo a turning point, at which the student experienced an increased level of confidence in communicating in English with his peers. Whether the two aspects are strictly interconnected is not explicitly clarified in the diaries: nevertheless, there is reason to suppose that the enhanced level of familiarity between the members and the increased quality of in-group collaboration may have played a role in raising the student's confidence with the foreign language, which in turn may have further fostered the construction of a successful Community of Practice.

It is probably thanks to the challenging but gradually developing collaborative environment that emerged within the group that Matteo, in the sixth diary, finally gave more explicit evidence for his openness and willingness to continue to learn more about his peer's culture, even once the exchange was over. Although not containing any particularly deep reflections, Matteo's sixth diary does indeed provide insights into the attitudinal and affective dimensions of his engagement with otherness, something that had remained almost dormant up to that moment:

> "<ATT> It was nice also to see our peers in Austria, it would be fantastic to have the possibility in the future to see all of them personally and to talk face to face with them.</ATT>".

As Matteo told me in the brief interview that we had in January 2012, the student later took part in a private trip to Austria together with another participant from Padova and a student from the University of Innsbruck. In his words, the experience in the telecollaboration exchange had opened up new opportunities for socialization and intercultural learning that extended beyond the institutional boundaries of the online project.

The analysis of Matteo's diaries and self-assessment did not however reveal much about his ability to critically reflect on his learning (<CCA>) and draw parallels between the cultures explored in the sessions (<INT>). In the first weeks, in fact, Matteo seems to have been more concerned about his language level and the challenges of creating an environment conducive to successful communication than on sharing his critical reflections on the topics discussed during the Skype sessions. Thus, in his first diaries, the student always reported on what the group had done – something that was coded as <TASK> - without actually sharing what he had learnt through the topics and activities. The following extract is an example of Matteo's rather dry account of his second Skype session:

> "<EVAL-POS> <TASK> Moreover also the words association game has been interesting, it gave us the possibility to share more information about our cultural point of view, to analyse the different opinions and to discuss also about stereotyped. </TASK> </EVAL-POS>".

Nevertheless, the findings obtained in the diary investigation do not imply that Matteo had not manifested critical awareness, nor skills of interpreting and relating, throughout the project. His posts to the activities on the wikispace, in fact, reveal some of his ability to critically evaluate cultural issues right from the early stages of the exchange. This is exemplified in the following text, which Matteo posted on the

wikipage as a comment to the three stories of intercultural misunderstanding that were proposed as preparation to the second Skype meeting:

> "<GRP> <CCA> As my peers have already said the main problem is first of all the <CCA-IC> 'unawareness of the other' </CCA-IC>, all the misunderstandings are caused because they don't know well the other cultures. </GRP> <CCA-PO> But what I find very interesting is the fact that no one stops for a second and tells himself 'why is the other doing so?', in all the cases the misunderstanding is taken as a direct insult, without the possibility of an explaination. We should stop for a moment and try to analyse all the causes which could have let the other doing a particular thing, maybe there would be less incomprehensions </CCA-PO> </CCA>".

Evidence for Matteo's critical cultural awareness also emerges from his comments in the Facebook Group page. The following post, taken from the second online forum, signals the student's ability to explore the notions of culture and identity from a critical standpoint, highlighting their complexity and providing his personal view through metacultural reflection:

> "<CCA-COM> I think that it is quite difficult also to define culture indeed, it's not easy trying to represent it; </CCA-COM> <CCA-PO> however I consider a core which is strictly connected with peripheral elements, and it influences and is influenced by all the elements around.. like the human heart more or less and the organs.. the core is identity, the influences which are costantly given by the dependent organs is culture.. there can not be one without the other.. more or less this is the vision which comes in my mind when I think about culture and identity..</CCA-PO>".

As these extracts appear to suggest, some of Matteo's posts reveal aspects of his critical cultural awareness, and therefore differ from the somewhat sterile accounts of facts and tasks that seem to make up the Italian student's initial diaries. This observation appears to suggest that the specific nature of certain activities – which, as in the case of the Facebook forums and the wiki entries, required the participants to write a personal comment on the issues under discussion – had triggered Matteo's ability to reflect critically on the topic. His weekly journals, on the contrary, appear to have been a repository for his major concerns, namely his language proficiency and the quality of his group's joint work, as they emerged during the online meetings. If seen in this light, the focus on aspects of language and collaboration that seems to accompany the student's diaries may have pushed his critical reflections on culture into the background, and this might explain why most of his personal journals do not give much evidence of his ability to internalize and reflect on the experience.

Within this scenario, however, the fifth session seems to mark the beginning of some change: in his diary, Matteo commented on what he had learnt by comparing the situation of women in Italy and in Austria, not only displaying the new knowledge that he had acquired during the session (<KNW>), but also revealing the seeds of his ability to draw parallels between the two countries and cultures (<INT>):

> "<INT-SIM> <KNW> We have found out that more or less the situation is quite similar, in both countries we see the most important forms of women descrimination in the work field; that is ti say that for women is even more difficult to succeed in carrer, and there are some work places you can not look for. </INT-SIM> At the same time we have also analysed the situation in other countries, and there are realities which are worse, and some situations which are quite unbelievable nowadays. </KNW>".

A similar process of critical analysis can be noticed in his sixth diary, in which the student reported his impressions on the film 'Brick Lane'. Interestingly, in this diary Matteo reflected on the culture of the protagonists of the film, in other words on a Culture-three (C3) with which he had not been very familiar before:

> "<KNW> Well, personally I have learnt some new aspects of Bangl. [Bengali] culture, for example the situation in the family, the roles, and the way of thinking; others were already known.</KNW> <CCA> It was interesting to see the woman position in that particular family, also the contrast between the new women generation represented by the daughters and the old one by the father, and I found a bit strange that the older had some strong discussions with her father, a sort of microcosmo attemp for the emancipation; at the same time also the father figure didn't respect the idea which I had in my mind, he is severe and open minded simultaneously. Then, the silence of the main woman character is strong too, maybe also stronger than the voice of all other charactres together; generally all the change line which goes through the film is very well expressed. </CCA>".

The fact that, in this diary, Matteo explicitly commented on his learning, and provided examples of this, is quite significant, as it may signal that the student finally felt motivated to show his ability to critically analyse and compare different sets of values and realities, thus not only applying his newly-acquired factual knowledge but also showing critical cultural awareness. Once more, this might be interpreted as a result of the new and improved environment that, in Matteo's view, had been created within the group: feeling more comfortable with his peers and tasks, and also probably more confident about his language skills, Matteo may have been more stimulated to translate his thoughts, impressions and critical reflections in his personal journal.

To sum up, the qualitative and quantitative investigation of Matteo's diary entries – triangulated with the exploration of his posts to the Facebook forums and the wikispace, my personal observation during the Skype sessions, as well as his answers to the questionnaires, final self-assessment and interview – leads one to formulate two observations. Firstly, the analysis highlighted that diary writing is a very personal process, in which the student-writer reveals aspects of his/her private world by giving prominence to what he/she feels is important to him/her. Matteo's personal journals, for instance, give quite remarkable evidence of aspects related to language and collaboration, thus apparently suggesting some of his major concerns and their evolution over time.

Secondly, the analysis proposed in Matteo's case study showed that the various dynamics that characterize in-group collaboration are a further element that, in this particular online telecollaboration exchange and for this specific student, seems to have played a role in the manifestation – or lack of - of intercultural communicative competence. As suggested above, Matteo was primarily concerned about his language skills and the various processes that characterized his group's collaboration. For this reason, his diaries only started to reveal more about his intercultural learning and cognitive processes once he felt more confident with the use of a foreign language under the constraints of real-time interaction, and once he and his peers found the most effective way to work together in the online environment. This does not imply that Matteo's ICC had increased over the course of the project: although this may well have happened, nothing in the diaries can provide objective proof of such a development. Instead, the exploration of the student's posts to the Facebook forums and wikipages demonstrated that Matteo indeed activated and manifested some dimensions of ICC right from the earliest stages of the project. What these findings suggest is that the specific nature of the reflective diaries seems

to have given prominence to certain features of the online meetings – language and collaboration – which were felt as important by the student, to the detriment of others such as those linked to ICC, which remained dormant especially in the initial journals. It is because of the richness and complexity of insights offered by the analysis that Matteo's written output was found to have a high potential for learning about the processes characterizing the student's experience in the telecollaboration exchange, and that were later translated in his diaries.

6.5 Summary

This Chapter attempted to answer *RQ1* by providing evidence of the Italian students' intercultural communicative competence and of the way this was stimulated and manifested over the course of the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange. Overall, the analysis proposed in sections § 6.2 and § 6.3 indicated that a potential link exists between the topics and tasks selected in telecollaboration projects, and intercultural communicative competence. As outlined by the trends that emerged across the weekly diaries and Facebook forums, certain dimensions of ICC appear to have been particularly stimulated in specific Skype sessions and by specific prompts: thus, for instance, skills of interpreting and relating (<INT>) and critical cultural awareness (<CCA>) appear to have been remarkably activated by the topics and the tasks of the third Skype session, in which the students engaged in a metacultural discussion on the nature of identity, as well as by the prompts of the first Facebook forum, which dealt with stereotypes.

The observations shared on the dimensions of ICC that were manifested at the level of the whole Italian group appear to be mirrored in the two case studies presented in section § 6.4. The findings obtained from the analysis of Ester's and Matteo's written output highlighted that the two students reacted to the stimuli of the

project in different and very personal ways: on the one hand, Ester's diaries and posts did not reveal much about the student's factual knowledge or skills of discovery, but were found to be dotted with stretches of text that captured her ability to critically reflect on metacultural issues and to interpret cultural behaviours and sets of values. On the other hand, Matteo's diaries revealed his deep concern about language and collaboration, and were therefore found to tendentially relegate the student's intercultural learning and cognitive processes to the background; yet, his ability to critically evaluate cultural and metacultural issues still quite clearly emerged from his contributions to the wikipages and the Facebook forums, thus signalling that some of the student's ICC dimensions had indeed been stimulated by the project. Despite individual differences, the analysis of Ester's and Matteo's production would appear to confirm that the nature of tasks and topics played a role in the way ICC was activated and conveyed in the two students' contributions to the written activities of the exchange.

From the analysis discussed in this Chapter, intercultural communicative competence emerges as a series of interrelated skills, knowledge and attitudes that the participants involved in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange – each at different times and under specific personal conditions - manifested when appropriately stimulated. As suggested above, this observation shifts the focus away from a view of intercultural communicative competence as being made up of differing degrees of proficiency: instead, it highlights and reinforces the importance of the role played by the topics and tasks selected to prompt discussion, as well as by the dynamics that characterize in-group collaboration, in the manifestation of ICC. Far from suggesting that ICC is an innate quality, the analysis described in this Chapter showed that the participants involved in the project appear to have nourished the seeds of intercultural communicative competence, and to have translated them –

or part of them – in their diaries and posts through their engagement in meaningful activities and encounters.

CHAPTER 7

INVESTIGATING THIRD SPACE AND SUBJECT POSITIONS

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this Chapter is to investigate how the participants in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange perceived and related to their telecollaborative experience. Through the exploration of the students' weekly diaries, forum posts and contributions to the activities on the wikispace, the sections below will attempt to identify whether the participants' written output indicates the emergence of a third, shared space, and how the two groups positioned themselves in relation to it. Interestingly, the discussion will not focus on what the students said in relation to the subjectivities that they activated throughout the exchange and the spaces/cultures that they negotiated with their peers, but on the way they used the language, intended as a semiotic system, to convey these dimensions. The sections that follow, therefore, respond to the second research question outlined in Chapters 1 and 5:

RQ2 *Does the students' written output (diaries, forums, wiki posts) signal the co-construction of a shared space? If so, which discursive features did the participants adopt in their written production to convey this 'third space', and how did they position themselves in relation to it?*

This set of questions entails two fundamental notions, namely those of third space and subject positions. As described at several points in this thesis, the concept of third space refers to the hybrid and fluid place which originates under the forces

activated by intercultural encounters (Kramsch 1993; 1996; 1998b; 2009b). In this light, a third space is a place in which the identities and cultures of the interactants are continuously questioned, reshaped and re-imagined in a dialogic process of exploration, confrontation and mediation between a variety of values, worldviews and meanings. This constant process of re-construction is at the basis of the ability to approach intercultural encounters by developing a third perspective, thanks to which all the cultures involved in interaction are seen under a critical light. This means that the continuous negotiation of meanings that is activated by intercultural encounters can potentially enable interactants to occupy an "intermediary place" (Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco 1999: 15) between their own and the others' cultures, and therefore activate the skills and attitudes that characterize intercultural speakers. The fact that there exists a link between third space and intercultural communicative competence (ibid.) makes the analysis presented in this Chapter highly relevant to the purposes of this study, in that the investigation of a shared space between the exchange participants is felt to contribute to gain better understanding of the ways in which the project was experienced by the two groups of students.

As suggested previously in this thesis, third spaces also seem to arise in *lingua franca* communicative contexts. In situations where a contact language is used by speakers from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the hybrid relationships that originate between the interactants' sets of values and their linguistic codes bring about the emergence of fluid spaces, in which a variety of cultures and identities intertwine under the continuously changing conditions determined by the nature of interaction (Baker, W. 2010; Canagarajah 2007; Fiedler 2011; Jenkins 2006). In all intercultural situations, and even more so in *lingua franca* communication, third spaces nourish the seeds of transnationality and transculturality, in that they offer interactants the chance to cross both their own and

the other's national and cultural borders so as to approach a fluid and constantly changing plethora of cultural meanings, thus shaping a new, shared culture with a life of its own. In the analysis proposed below, particular attention will be paid to identifying the potential seeds of transculturality that grew out of the intersection between the cultures and languages at stake in the telecollaboration experience.

The notion of third space is strictly linked to that of subject positions: in the dialogic and fluid process of negotiation that takes place in intercultural encounters, identities – like cultures - are continuously challenged and re-constructed (Kramsch 1996). This is likely to affect not only the way interactants perceive and position themselves in relation to their experience, but also the ways in which they present themselves through the use of symbolic systems, in other words through language. Inspired by previous research and drawing on the concept that subject positions are activated and expressed by language (Kramsch 2000 and 2009a; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004), thus constituting an "inherent feature of any text" (Vollmer 2002: 1), the analysis of subject positions that will be presented in this Chapter appears to be deeply grounded in the notion that the use of language can reveal how subjective realities, and therefore identities, are constructed and re-constructed by language users, under the influence of the social situations in which they find themselves. Within the context described in this thesis, investigating the subject positions that were activated by the exchange participants means accessing the meanings that were conveyed by the two groups of students over the course of their experience, in order to unveil the way social and cultural identities were imagined and re-imagined through the engagement in the telecollaboration project. As will be outlined in the following sections, the analysis of subject positions constitutes a key factor in the interpretation of third space within the group of exchange participants, in that it will

help to shed some light on the way the students positioned themselves in relation to their own, their peers' as well as their shared, co-constructed cultures.

Considering the specific context of telecollaboration from which this study originates, the following sections will also attempt to draw a link between third space and online Communities of Practice: as suggested by Dooly (2011) and as outlined in Chapter 3, CoPs share some of the features that characterize third spaces, in that they promote the continuous negotiation of a common culture, thus implying the co-construction of shared repertoires, identities and joint enterprises.

As explained in Chapter 5, a pragmatic stance guided the choice of approaches, methods and strategies that were implemented to answer *RQ2*: in this context, corpus linguistics was seen as best responding to the specific needs of this study, in that it allows for the linguistically-grounded exploration of texts from both a quantitative and qualitative standpoint. Given its potential, a *corpus-based multistrand mixed methods design* was developed for the purposes of this research (see § 5.5.1): this entailed both a qualitative and a quantitative strand, and made it possible to collect qualitative data from the students' written output and analyze them both quantitatively and qualitatively. As outlined in the methodology chapter, the data that were qualitatively collected and saved in the Padova and Innsbruck corpora were subjected to a first, quantitative analysis, during which frequency lists were calculated using the corpus-based software *AntConc*. The frequency lists that were obtained from both corpora revealed the most recurrent words in the students' texts, and offered initial insights into the nature of both collections of texts. Table 10 and Table 11 reproduced below exemplify the first 60 items of the frequency lists that were generated for the Padova and Innsbruck corpus respectively: as can be noticed, most of the top words in the lists are grammatical or function items (e.g. auxiliaries, personal pronouns, prepositions, articles), and highly polyfunctional

words such as *that* and *to*. Within this scenario dominated by grammatical words, some lexical items can also be identified, which include the nouns *people*, *identity* and *culture*, the adjective *different* and the verbs *to know* and *to think*: as they are clearly connected to the issues dealt with in the telecollaboration exchange, these lexical items can be seen as topic-sensitive words which offer a glimpse of what their corpora are about (Bowker and Pearson 2002).

FREQUENCY LIST_PADOVA					
Rank	**Occur.**	**Word**			
1	1672	the	31	208	all
2	1370	and	32	207	very
3	1235	to	33	204	had
4	1229	we	34	202	as
5	1192	I	35	201	can
6	907	of	36	187	not
7	873	a	37	186	so
8	753	that	38	185	different
9	752	in	39	185	or
10	498	is	40	183	what
11	464	about	41	166	other
12	456	it	42	163	us
13	375	are	43	158	more
14	374	with	44	151	also
15	356	our	45	138	me
16	339	was	46	137	at
17	328	have	47	136	some
18	310	this	48	135	really
19	308	t	49	131	which
20	277	but	50	127	identity
21	269	think	51	127	way
22	261	for	52	126	culture
23	256	s	53	126	she
24	253	be	54	125	there
25	251	people	55	118	don
26	250	because	56	116	from
27	235	on	57	116	like
28	225	my	58	115	were
29	221	they	59	114	if
30	221	you	60	113	time

Table 10. First 60 top words in the frequency list for the Padova corpus

FREQUENCY LIST_INNSBRUCK					
Rank	**Occur.**	**Word**			
1	938	the	31	101	s
2	701	to	32	100	also
3	630	and	33	97	they
4	520	I	34	94	think
5	497	a	35	90	all
6	497	of	36	88	my
7	469	we	37	88	one
8	353	that	38	87	which
9	305	in	39	85	because
10	246	is	40	83	session
11	223	was	41	83	The
12	222	it	42	82	really
13	177	are	43	80	can
14	176	with	44	75	me
15	175	about	45	75	what
16	160	our	46	73	from
17	142	for	47	73	know
18	131	on	48	73	more
19	130	have	49	72	very
20	129	be	50	71	were
21	128	you	51	70	different
22	123	but	52	69	some
23	123	this	53	68	culture
24	117	had	54	67	time
25	113	t	55	66	there
26	111	other	56	63	at
27	108	not	57	63	by
28	107	people	58	63	identity
29	103	as	59	62	so
30	101	or	60	61	do

Table 11. First 60 top words in the frequency list for the Innsbruck corpus

Among the top words in the frequency lists, it is interesting to highlight that the first-person pronoun *I* ranks very high in both collections of texts, with 520 occurrences in the Innsbruck corpus (rank 4) and 1,192 in the Padova corpus (rank 5). This was interpreted as an indicator of both the deep personal nature of diary writing - which promotes the expressions of intimate feelings and thoughts - and the potential of online discussion environments such as forums and wikispaces to give evidence of the writer's deep involvement in the issues under discussion.

Besides revealing the most recurrent words in both corpora, the calculation of frequency lists also allowed me to gain an initial picture of the frequency of potential indicators of third space and subject positions. As indicated in Chapter 5, these included in-group identity markers such as the pronouns *you*, *we* and *they*, agreement and disagreement expressions, other forms of explicit reference to group members and group dynamics, as well as the adjectives used by the students in their posts and diaries to evaluate the experience. On the basis of the quantitative information provided by the frequency lists, each potential indicator of third space and subject positions was qualitatively investigated through the generation of concordance lines. These were carefully explored so as to identify the instances in which the students, through their linguistic choices, had explicitly made reference to other members of the group, or had positioned themselves as members of a shared community. As explained in Chapter 5, these instances were categorized as indicators of third space or subject positions, and were distinguished from other uses of the search item which conveyed more generic or external meaning. After calculating the various meanings taken on by each search item, the observations drawn from both the qualitative and quantitative strands were merged together so as to gain a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. For each indicator of third space, the meta-inferences obtained from the analysis conducted on the two corpora

are presented below: thus, section § 7.2 will focus on in-group identity markers, while section § 7.3 will present the findings for the analysis of agreement and disagreement expressions. The section that follows, namely § 7.4, will discuss third space as it emerged from the investigation of other forms of direct reference to the writer's group peers, such as apologies and greeting formulae. Finally, section § 7.5 will explore the connotations of the adjectives that were used to evaluate the telecollaboration exchange and describe the students' feelings towards it: unlike the previous parts of the Chapter, in which the main focus was on the identification of third space, this section will attempt to define the features of such shared place as well as the students' stance towards it.

7.2 In-group identity markers

As Bretag suggests (2006), personal pronouns are used by language users to claim common ground and indicate group membership. For the purposes of this research, the exploration of the pronouns *we*, *you*, and *they* was seen as a means to access the writers' subject positions towards their telecollaboration experience, and to shed some light on the emergence of a potential third space within the group of participants in the exchange.

7.2.1 'We'

Overall, *we* ranks 4th in the Padova collection of texts: with 1,229 occurrences, it outnumbers the first person singular pronoun *I*, and represents the most frequently used pronoun of the whole corpus. At first glance, the predominance of *we* in the corpus conveyed a strong sense of community and in-group membership, and appeared to suggest the presence of a third space. In order to explore this in depth, close investigation of all the contexts in which the pronoun appeared was undertaken.

The analysis, in both its qualitative and quantitative form, revealed that *we* was used with a variety of different meanings, and therefore conveyed different subject positions according to the writers' intentions. More specifically, four uses of the pronoun were identified across the three subcorpora: in 68% of cases (857 out of 1,229), *we* took on an inclusive meaning and indicated membership within the group of participants in the telecollaboration project, as in "During this first skype conversation we talked about ourselves, our hobbies, the places we visited, our universities, etc." (PD_diaries subcorpus). This finding was interpreted as a clear indicator of third space: as noted by Clarke (2009: 2337), the inclusive use of the pronoun *we* reflects the writer's adoption of strategies aimed at building the community and delineating its boundaries, which in turn supports the emergence of a shared space.

The analysis of the concordance lines for *we* also revealed two further uses of the pronoun which did not specifically indicate the construction of shared spaces among the exchange participants, but were indeed useful to map out an interesting variety of subject positions. In a very limited number of occurrences (1%), for instance, the pronoun *we* was found to indicate a sense of belonging to other specific groups that were external to that of the exchange, such as friends or family members (as in "I remember being in a hotel in Spain with my family and before dinner the waiter asked us if we were mafiosi"; PD_Facebook subcorpus) and former classmates ("These 3 stories reminded me about a presentation my group and me prepared last year during the Second term. (…)We chose to treat 'business etiquette around the world'…"; PD_wiki subcorpus). Interestingly, on a number of occasions (32 occurrences, that is 3%) the Padova students also identified themselves as Italians, and therefore as distinct from their Austrian peers (as in "I think we should be proud of being seen the nation of 'pizza and museums'"; PD_Facebook

subcorpus), and/or as women ("I believe that women should have the same rights of men, we had to struggle to reach our currently situation, and it seems we will have to keep on struggling"; PD_wiki subcorpus), thus specifically positioning themselves as members of specific national and gender communities.

In addition to various forms of in-group membership, the remaining occurrences of *we* (335, that is 28%) revealed that the pronoun was extensively used with an impersonal and general meaning, as in "we all have multiple identities" (PD_diaries subcorpus), and was therefore far from indicating third space.

The four uses of the pronoun *we* in the Padova corpus and, consequently, the various subject positions that these conveyed, can be summarized in the graph reproduced in Figure 51 below: as can be noticed, the instances of the pronoun that convey an idea of inclusiveness represent the vast majority of all the 1,229 occurrences of *we*, namely 68%, and seem therefore to confirm the predominance of a cemented feeling of shared memberships within the community and, consequently, the emergence of a third space.

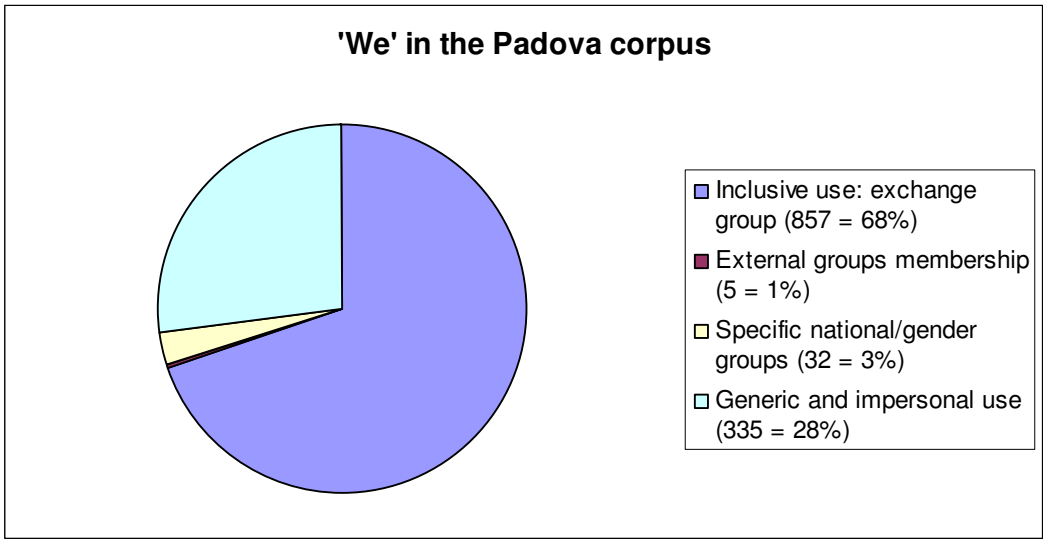


Figure 51. Distribution of the various uses of 'we' in the Padova corpus

All the results obtained from the investigation of the concordances for the pronoun *we* in the Padova corpus are exemplified in Table 12 below: for each subcorpus,

quantitative information is provided together with authentic examples, so as to give evidence of the different meanings taken on by the pronoun. The findings for third space can be found in the first column on the left, the headings of which are written in white:

	Inclusive use: exchange group/partners	**External groups (e.g. friends)**	**Specific national or gender groups**	**Generic and impersonal use**
Diaries	851 occurr. "The skype conversation lasted about 1 hour and 15 minutes and we never stopped talking or laughing, so I think it is a good starting point for us!"	0 occurr.	8 occurr. "I realized that in Austria they're probably more open minded than we are"	84 occurr. "I believe we all need to feel we belong to somewhere, to feel we have a home, to fell we have some stable things and people in our lives"
Facebook posts	3 "I think we all agree in the fact that it's impossible to give a clear definition of culture"	2 "I had the chance of watching to this video on my firt year at the University when we were requested to write a weekly report on a video"	11 "..as a population, we are considered blind and uninterested whereas it is not so"	83 "It is amazing how we have a fixed idea about a country or a person"
Wiki posts	3 "Starting from the third story, we all agree about Mr Chang's exaggerate reaction"	3 "We were attending the English course and our Professor asked us to think about an intercultural topic and then create a Power Point	13 "In America women often earn more money than their husbands, while here in Italy we must depend on someone else"	168 "We often live to please the others"

		presentation to introduce to the whole course"		
Tot.	**857 (68%)**	**5 (1%)**	**32 (3%)**	**335 (28%)**

Table 12. Occurrences of the pronoun 'we' in the Padova corpus and their contextual meanings

As the findings illustrated above suggest, the fact that a variety of meanings emerged from the analysis can be interpreted as an indicator of the co-existence of multiple subject positions within the same collection of texts: in this light, the findings indicate that the students activated and manifested fluid and often overlapping identities in their writing, feeling at the same time part of a transcultural/transnational virtual community as well as members of a larger national or gender group. Interestingly, this rich variety of subject positions appears to be linked to the various types of texts that make up the three subcorpora: thus, while in the posts to the Facebook forums and the wikipages *we* was mainly used with a general and impersonal meaning, in the diaries the same pronoun was selected to indicate group membership. This appears to be rooted in the very nature of the text types: thus, the frequent use of the inclusive pronoun *we* in the personal narratives mirrors the main goal that was attributed to diary writing, namely that of helping the students to keep track of and reflect on the interaction and collaboration taking place within the Skype discussion groups. This seems to explain why the participants' diaries show a greater emphasis on the group dynamics and collaborative processes that characterized the online sessions. The forums on Facebook and the activities on the wiki, on the contrary, were a repository for personal thoughts on the topics under discussion, and not on the tasks and processes that occurred within the discussion groups: this seems to explain not only the higher frequency of the impersonal

pronoun *we*, but also the greater number of examples of identification with specific gender and national communities.

The investigation of the Innsbruck corpus led to similar observations. In the subcorpora, the same four uses of the pronoun *we* were identified: of its 469 occurrences, the vast majority of them (82%) were used inclusively and revealed a sense of membership and identification with the group of participants in the telecollaboration exchange. Considered as an indicator of third space, this particular use of the pronoun can be exemplified by the following extract: "We also agreed that language plays a vital role in terms of identity because there is a lot of code switching going on" (IBK_Diaries subcorpus).

As in the Padova corpus, general and impersonal meaning was identified as the second most recurrent use of *we* in the Innsbruck texts: occurring 77 times across the three subcorpora, and thus representing 16.5% of the total occurrences of the first person pronoun plural, generic reference was identified in contexts such as

> "[a]fter briefly exchanging our opinions on the general role of women, we basically came to the conclusion that the general role of women has bettered in the last few years, but until the real change in attitude happens, it will take a lot more time." (IBK_wiki subcorpus).

In addition to these uses, membership within external groups of friends was also detected through corpus investigation. Yet, it only represented 0.2% of all the occurrences, since it was found to appear once across the three subcorpora: "I told the girls about the mistake I made during my stay in Cambridge (…). I had to go to the station and my hostmother wanted to bring me there by car. As we headed to the car I went to the right side of the car and she asked me if I want to drive".

Interestingly, gender identification was not present in the Innsbruck collection of texts: this seems to indicate that, in their writing, none of the female

students specifically positioned themselves as women when approaching the tasks and topics discussed in the project. In turn, national membership was further enriched by identification with other ethnic and cultural groups: this emerged from a few diaries and wiki posts (1.3%), in which two exchange participants used the pronoun *we* to express their sense of belonging to the South-Tyrolean and the Kurdish communities respectively, as in "In my native region there is a party who wants to part with Italy and to be reunited with Austria (it was once a part of Austria and we share ethnic, language, religion, and traditions etc.)" (IBK_diaries subcorpus).

Overall, the various meanings taken on by the pronoun *we* in the Innsbruck corpus are visualized in the Figure below: as the graph clearly illustrates, the instances in which *we* appears to convey membership and identification within the group are highly predominant in this collection of texts, as they were in the Padova students' written output. This would seem to confirm the existence of a third space among the exchange participants, in which both the Italian and the Austrian students felt they were belonging to a sole, shared community.

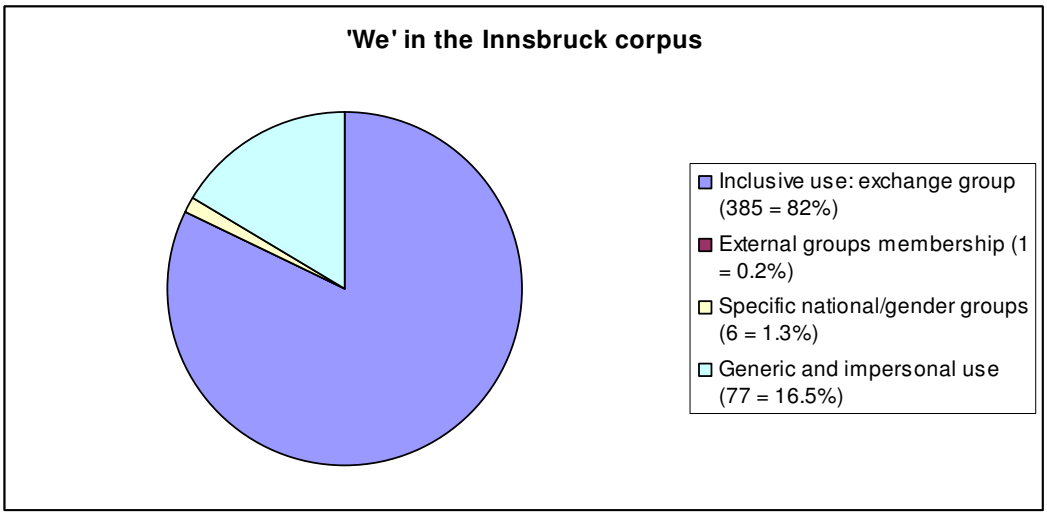


Figure 52. Distribution of the various uses of 'we' in the Innsbruck corpus

The various meanings taken on by the pronoun *we* in the Innsbruck corpus are better illustrated in Table 13, which provides both their number of occurrences and some

representative examples as they appear across the three subcorpora. As in Table 12, the findings for third space can be found in the first column on the left, the headings of which are written in white:

	Inclusive use: exchange group/partners	**External groups (e.g. friends..)**	**Specific national or gender groups**	**Generic and impersonal use**
Diaries	381 occurr. "I think we were able to make a lot of progress this time"	1 occurr. "I had to go to the station and my hostmother wanted to bring me there by car. As we headed to the car I went to the right side of the car and she asked me if I want to drive"	3 occurr. "We also talked about family relationships and Italy and Austria and found out that the Italians are more likely to 'show' their feelings, than we are"	16 occurr. "Yet our education, our relationship with family, friends and society influence the way we are and behave"
Facebook posts	2 "Culture is one of the most difficult words to describe in the world, because it has many different meanings. We have already discussed it in class"	0	0	23 "Are we multicultured because today we are influenced by so many things on a global basis or are we limited by culture?"
Wiki posts	2 "As we already posted at the wall wisher it would be useful to be more open-minded and what is more, to show interest for the other culture"	0	3 "I am Kurdish, but as we have no state, we are considered to be Turks"	38 "In our daily routine we play a thousands of roles"

Tot.	**385 (82%)**	**1 (0.2%)**	**6 (1.3)**	**77 (16.5%)**

Table 13. Occurrences of the pronoun 'we' in the Innsbruck corpus and their contextual meanings

The investigation of the contexts in which the pronoun *we* appears in the Padova and Innsbruck corpora can be commented on from two standpoints: on the one hand, they suggest that the exchange participants activated and manifested a complex variety of subject positions, identifying themselves as members of different groups - both related and unrelated to the telecollaboration project -, as well as of national, ethnical and gender communities. This is clearly illustrated in Figure 53 below, in which the sum of the occurrences of *we* for the two corpora under investigation is graphically visualized together with the various meanings taken on by the pronoun:

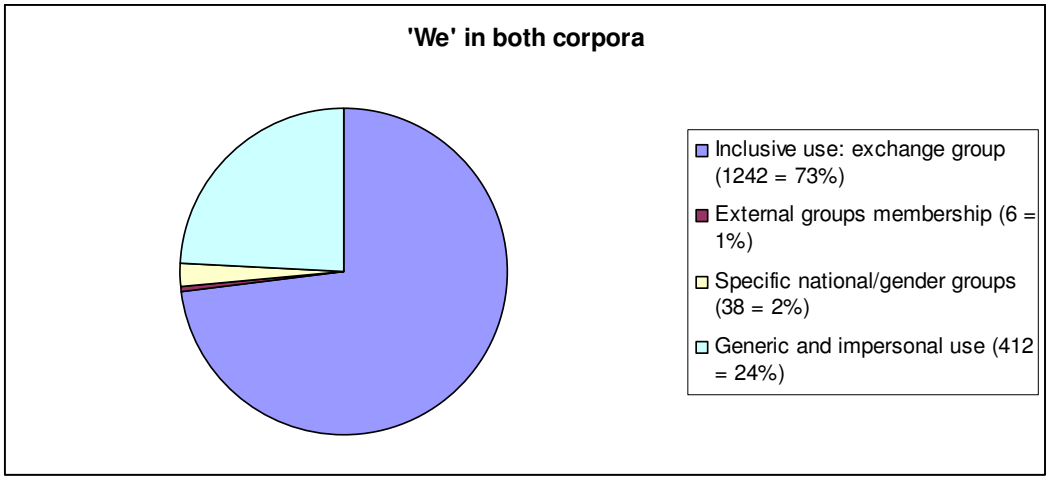


Figure 53. Distribution of the various uses of 'we' in the two corpora under investigation

Within this wide range of subject realities, however, what significantly prevails in both collections of texts is the students' feeling of belonging to a "common corps" (Clarke 2009: 2343), something that is conveyed by the predominant number of occurrences of the inclusive pronoun *we* (see Figure 53 above). Overall, therefore, the findings for this brief analysis appear to indicate the existence of a third space among the participants, one which promoted the construction of transnational membership identities, while at the same time still encouraging the expression of personal national, gender and ethnic subject positions. Drawing on Bretag (2006), the

third space that arose from the participation in the exchange can be interpreted as the opportunity to re-imagine cultural identities, challenge traditional binary distinctions, and allow for both/and relationships within a constant process of negotiation.

The idea of third space that emerges from this investigation also appears to be linked to that of Community of Practice. As Riodan and Murray suggest (2012), the personal pronoun *we* represents a powerful indicator of the negotiation of a common identity within a group, and therefore plays a key role in shedding some light on its members' engagement in a joint enterprise. In the corpora under investigation, the idea of a joint enterprise was conveyed by the contexts in which the inclusive pronoun *we* was used to describe the tasks that the students had carried out together and the experiences that they had shared, as in "we tried to understand what is an identity for us" (PD_diaries subcorpus). In addition to this, the idea of a Community of Practice was also reinforced by the uses of *we* which signalled the students' negotiation of a shared repertoire of rules to guide the collaborative processes within the discussion groups. This is exemplified by the following extract, in which the pronoun *we* clearly indicates the mutual engagement in the joint enterprise of an online Community of Practice: "I think we have successfully applied the rules of intercultural conversation, we listened to another, were open-minded and curious, gave appropriate constructive criticism etc." (IBK_diaries subcorpus). In this post, reference to a shared repertoire of norms for successful intercultural communication (e.g. curiosity, openness and critical attitudes) emphasizes the students' commitment to common "ways of doing" (Dooly 2011: 334), and signals the emergence of a third, negotiated (trans)culture with a life (norms) of its own.

7.2.2 'You'

The use of the personal pronoun *you* can also be interpreted as an indicator of third space, since addressing someone directly in a text means including them in one's own discourse, thus concurring to shape a shared space. In the two corpora under investigation, all the occurrences of *you* were thoroughly analyzed so as to map out the meanings that they conveyed. In the Padova collection of texts, *you* ranked 30th in the frequency list with 221 total occurrences. Two different meanings were identified: while in the vast majority of cases *you* had a generic and impersonal meaning (78%), in a smaller number of occurrences (22%) the pronoun was found to directly address the group of exchange participants and/or its single members, as in "I will tell you what happened to me a few years ago when I met two Moroccan people" (PD_Facebook subcorpus). The following graph illustrates the two meanings taken on by the pronoun *you* in the Padova corpus:

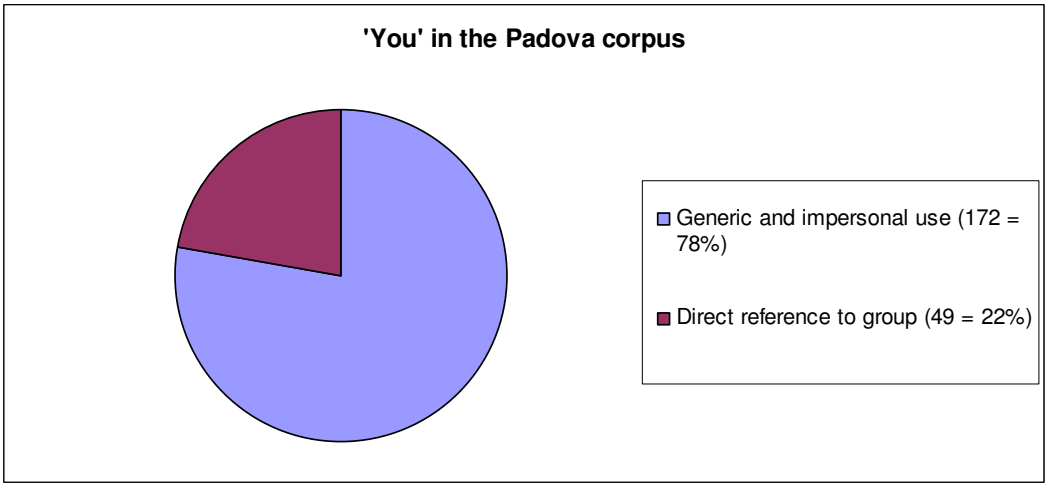


Figure 54. Distribution of the various uses of 'you' in the Padova corpus

Although it occurred only in a minor number of cases (49 instances out of 221), the use of *you* to address other exchange participants directly is certainly an interesting indicator of third space. Its adoption in greetings formulae, as in "I'm again here in order to say hello to you and to write my final diary" (PD_diaries subcorpus), for

instance, as well as its use in combination with the other participants' proper names, as in "I agree with you both Hilde and Vanessa" (PD_Facebook subcorpus), can be interpreted as a marker of familiarity and proximity, and thus indicates that a shared space has been constructed between the writer of the text and its reader/s. This is of particular significance if one looks at the occurrences of *you* in the diaries subcorpus, in which direct reference to other group members was identified 39 times out of its 49 total instances (see Table 14 below), as in "See you soon guys". The fact that, despite their reflective and introspective nature, the weekly diaries were used to communicate with the other members of the group, appears to suggest that the students were aware that they were writing on a common space, namely the project wiki, and therefore felt that their personal journals – like their posts to the forums and activities of the wikipages - would be read by their peers. Besides revealing the emergence of a shared space among the exchange participants, therefore, the results of this investigation appear to be useful so as to gain deeper understanding of the essence of online diary writing: as will be seen later on in this Chapter, this interesting finding is also confirmed by the number of greetings, apologies and other proxemic markers that were found in the two corpora under investigation, and that emphasize the communicative potential of digital personal journals.

Table 14 below summarizes the findings for the investigation of the Padova students' texts, and provides examples for each subcorpus: with its white headings, the last column on the right exemplifies all the instances in which *you* made direct reference to the group, and therefore indicated the existence of a third space.

	Generic and impersonal use	**Direct reference to group**
Diaries	53 "You should be appreciated for what you really can do and not for the place you come from"	39 "See you soon"
Facebook posts	31	6

	"identity is what you are, culture represents what you are, so, also your identity"	"I agree with you both"
Wiki posts	87 "with tradition and culture you become a part of a territory which is yours and in which you live and grow"	5 "Do you agree?"
Tot.	**172 (78%)**	**49 (22%)**

Table 14. Occurrences of the pronoun 'you' in the Padova corpus and their contextual meanings

The investigation of the Innsbruck corpus revealed very similar findings: in this case, too, the analysis of the 128 concordance lines in which *you* occurred revealed that the pronoun was mostly used with an impersonal meaning (88%) and, to a minor extent (12%), to address the other exchange participants directly, thus indicating proximity and inclusiveness within a shared community:

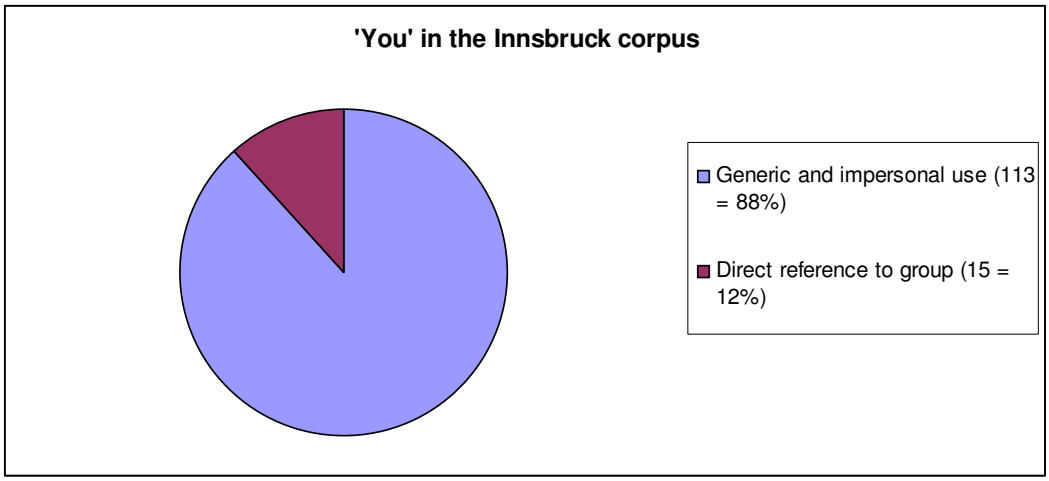


Figure 55. Distribution of the various uses of 'you' in the Innsbruck corpus

As was the case in the Padova collection of texts, direct reference to other group members was found in particular in the diaries subcorpus (9 occurrences out of 15), something which seems to confirm the communicative potential of personal journals. Despite this common feature, the diaries that make up the two corpora also present a significant difference: compared to the journal entries composed by the Padova

students, where in-group reference occurred 39 times, the Innsbruck diaries contain fewer instances of the same use of the pronoun *you* that explicitly allude to the other exchange participants. If seen in this light, the findings obtained from the analysis would seem to suggest that, overall, the Austrian students considered the personal journals as mostly belonging to a private sphere, and therefore approached diary writing as a predominantly reflective activity.

Examples of both uses of the pronoun *you* in the Innsbruck corpus are provided in Table 15 below: as can be noticed, direct reference to group peers can be found in the third column on the right, and constitutes an interesting indicator of third space.

	Generic and impersonal use	**Direct reference to group**
Diaries	50 "Through putting yourself in someone else's shoes you come to see or appreciate their point of view"	9 "See you soon for the last Skype sesson"
Facebook posts	11 "there IS a grain of truth in most of the stereotypes but you MUSTN'T generalize!!!"	4 "I'd like to share with you a quote from the movie"
Wiki posts	52 "When you have communication between people of different cultures, even if thery share a commin language, things can go wrong. In particular, knowledge of a language does not automatically give you the background knowledge that native speakers assume you share"	2 "I personally did not understand what the title suggests, so maybe one of you can explain it to me?"
Tot.	**113 (88%)**	**49 (12%)**

Table 15. Occurrences of the pronoun 'you' in the Innsbruck corpus and their contextual meanings

Overall, the qualitative and quantitative investigation of *you* in the Innsbruck and Padova corpora indicated that, of all its occurrences, the second person pronoun was also used to address the other exchange participants directly. This is visualized in the following graph, which shows the sum of the two meanings taken on by *you* in the two corpora under investigation:

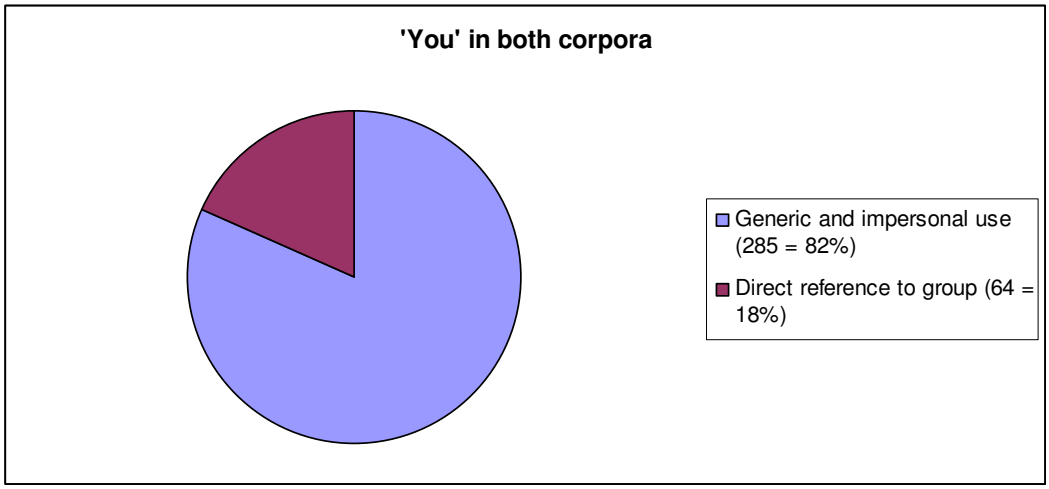


Figure 56. Distribution of the various uses of 'you' in both corpora under investigation

As the analysis has revealed, the adoption of *you* with direct reference to other group members – despite its smaller number of occurrences (18% of all its instances for both corpora) - can be seen as a useful means to gain deeper understanding of the shared space that were constructed over the course of the telecollaboration project.

7.2.3 'They'

The analysis of the occurrences of *they* signalled the emergence of a complex variety of subject positions: as this section will exemplify, the pronoun was used with both internal reference – to indicate other exchange participants – and external reference, that is to describe people, objects or abstract concepts that were not involved in the project. In both cases, the use of *they* shed some light on the way the students positioned themselves in relation to their peers and/or to people outside their group,

and confirmed the variety of identities that were activated and conveyed in the written texts.

In the Padova corpus, *they* was identified 221 times. Of these, the pronoun was used in 80% of cases (177 occurrences) with external reference, that is to indicate people or concepts that did not belong to the exchange group: these included abstract entities such as the family, women, religion, languages and cultures. An example of this is provided by the following extract: "Women can be as prepared as men, as smart as them, as good at work as they are" (PD_wiki subcorpus). Among these occurrences, the pronoun was also found to refer explicitly to the Austrian and the Italian population (6 and 1 occurrence respectively), as in the following example (emphasis added):

> "I realized that in Austria *they're* probably more open minded than *we* are, because when we talked about stereotypes and prejudices unfortunately I realized that here in Italy people are more scared of the 'unknown' (…) in Italy it's utopian to think that people trust the 'other' as *they* trust Italian people, just think at the difference between north and south and everything is clearer. Unfortunately it's like that and speaking with Hans made me aware of this problem" (PD_diaries subcorpus).

As this extract suggests, the use of *they* to indicate Austrian people signals that the Padova student positioned himself as external to their national and cultural group; this appears to be confirmed by the juxtaposition of the pronoun *we* in the same sentence, which clearly gives a sense of difference and separation. Yet, in the same post, the writer also seems to have gradually distanced himself from his own fellow countrymen: by adopting the pronoun *they*, in fact, the student re-imagined himself as different from the large share of the Italian population that, in his view, was still unwilling to accept cultural differences. In this sense, the author of this diary

gradually re-positioned himself as being different from both the Austrian population – not being of the same nationality – and Italian society – the mentality of which he did not share. If seen in this light, this post may signal that the writer felt he was occupying a third, transnational and transcultural space between the two countries and cultures: this seems to be confirmed by that fact that, as he himself wrote in the diary, his awareness of such cultural differences had been stimulated by his discussion with Hans, his Austrian peer.

In a much more limited number of occurrences (44 out of 221, that is 20%), the pronoun *they* was used by the Padova students with internal reference, in other words to refer to the other exchange participants. Of these, in 16 occurrences the writers positioned themselves as single individuals, that is by looking at their Austrian and Italian peers as 'the group' yet without including themselves in it, as in "I told them my sacrifices to arrive and about competitions and auditions, they were so excited about that" (PD_diaries subcorpus). Interestingly, in 28 cases the Padova students identified themselves specifically as the 'Italian participants', and therefore marked a difference between them and their Austrian partners. This was particularly evident when the writers wanted to emphasize differences in the lifestyle of the two groups, as in "I asked them how the universities in Austria are structured, they told me that is quite different from the Italian sistem because they're studying only two subjects which they had chosen!" (PD_diaries subcorpus), or when they reported on what they had learnt about their partners' culture, as in "in the grid Maria and I read a strange word: Tracht ; we asked to our Austrian peers what it was. They explained us that it is a typical dress which is worn during a special Austrian events" (PD_diaries subcorpus). Interestingly, the perceived level of language proficiency in English was also a key factor in determining the writers' identity: feeling less competent than their Austrian peers, some Padova students positioned themselves as

different and distinct, as in "me and Elisa talked with an Italian accent and they were on the contrary so so good"; PD_ diaries subcorpus). This finding seems to be in line with Morita's study on the negotiation of identities in second language academic communities, which highlighted that identities are often constructed on the basis of students' "changing sense of competence as a member of a given classroom community" (2004: 583).

The findings obtained from this investigation are summarized in Figure 57 below, which visualizes the distribution of the two main meanings taken on by the pronoun *they* in the Padova corpus:

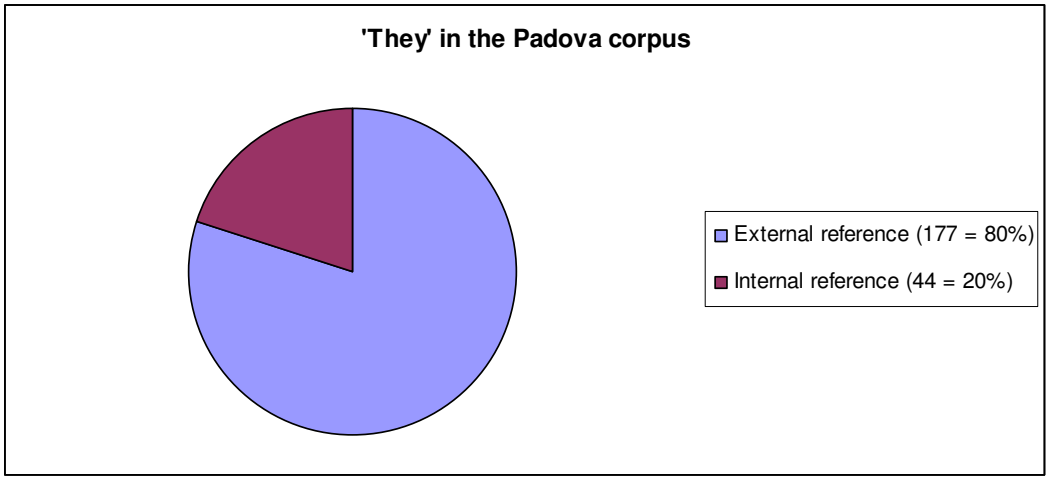


Figure 57. Distribution of the various uses of 'they' in the Padova corpus

Compared to the findings obtained from the inspection of the uses of the pronoun *we*, the investigation of the meanings taken on by the pronoun *they* in the Padova corpus provides unusual insights into the nature of third space. In the case of *we*, in fact, third space was identified in the predominance of occurrences in which the pronoun was used inclusively to indicate other group members. In the analysis of *they*, on the contrary, it is the limited amount of instances in which the pronoun appears denoting internal reference that highlights the emergence of a common space among the exchange participants. The students' limited use of *they* when talking about their peers, therefore, can be interpreted as an indicator of their feeling of membership and

proxemity, something that is reinforced by the extensive use of the pronouns *we* (and, although to a lesser extent, *you*) in the corpus. If seen in this light, the results for the analysis of *they* in the Padova corpus appear to shed light on the phenomenon under investigation from an almost opposite perspective which, however, complements and strengthens the findings obtained from the inspection of the pronoun *we*.

In addition to these observations, the investigation of the concordance lines for *they* can also be interpreted as a powerful indicator of the rich variety of identities that were taken on by the Italian students in their writing: the findings discussed above show that, besides feeling part of a common transnational group, some writers also at times identified themselves as members of a specific partner class, namely that from their own university, and distanced themselves from certain national and cultural groups (Austrians or Italians, or both). The variety of fluid and often intertwining subject positions that were activated across the Padova subcorpora are summarized and exemplified in Table 16: as usual, the columns with headings written in white show the potential indicators of third space.

	Internal reference		**External reference**		
	Padova + Innsbruck peers	Innsbruck peers	Generic people and concepts	Austrians	Italians
Diaries	16 "I understood that they felt excactly like me"	28 "we could notice they live in the middle of the nature unlike us"	64 "multiple identities exist and they depend on what people do,where they are,who they are with etc."	6 "I asked Sanja about the situation of women in Austria and she anwered that they are more evolved in this	1 "in Italy it's utopian to think that people trust the 'other' as they trust Italian people"

				sense,they consider the women more”	
Facebook posts	0	0	29 “Unfortunately many people still base their opinions on stereotypes (bad AND good) and they often behave consequently”	0	0
Wiki posts	0	0	77 “In fact a lot of people are labelled according to their behavior, to their way of dressing or to the way they behave in front of a situation, person or object”	0	0
Tot.	**16**	**28**	**170**	**6**	**1**
Overall tot.	**44 (22%)**		**177 (80%)**		

Table 16. Occurrences of the pronoun ‘they’ in the Padova corpus and their contextual meanings

The findings for the Padova corpus were confirmed by the inspection of the Austrian students’ texts. Overall, the pronoun *they* occurred 97 times in the Innsbruck corpus, and was mostly used with external reference to indicate people or concepts that did not belong to the groups involved in the exchange (83.5% of total occurrences). This is exemplified, for instance, by the following excerpt: “Matteo, Melinda and I immediately agreed that you should keep your tradition and values when you move to a different country, since they are an integral part of your identity” (IBK_diaries subcorpus). Interestingly, among the 97 instances in which

they conveyed external reference, the pronoun was used four times by the writer – a student of South-tyrolean origins – to draw an explicit distinction between Austrian and Italian people's behaviours and values (emphasis added):

> "Italian families might show more their 'love' for their children 'in public' than Austrian families do, but this does not imply that *they* love them less. We noticed that for Italian parents it is much harder to let go off their children when *they* go to university in another town. Probably, and this is what I actually think, Austrian parents are not less loving and caring, but instead, by letting go of their children *they* are showing how much *they* love them. This is just another way of expressing it" (IBK_diaries subcorpus).

Given the fact that the writer had been raised among two cultures in the German-speaking part of Northern Italy, this use of the pronoun *they* seems to suggest the emergence of a third, detached perspective, as well as a sense of non-belonging to either national and cultural groups. In addition, the use of the pronoun *we* within the same context appears to emphasize the processes of negotiation and co-construction of knowledge that occurred between the members of the discussion group, and suggests the construction of a third, transnational and transcultural standpoint from which to look at reality.

In 16 instances, that is 16.5% of total occurrences, *they* was also found to refer to the other project participants, and to therefore convey internal reference: in particular, the pronoun was used 10 times in a way that signalled the writer's identification as 'member of the Innsbruck group', and therefore as distinct from the Italian class. This appears to emerge especially in the diaries for week 4, in which the students commented on the pictures and descriptions that they had shared about their respective cities, and emphasized the information they had received from the Padova peers, as in "The fourth session was the most rewarding and interesting Skype

session so far, I was able to learn a lot from my [Italian] peers and the place where they live in" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). In the remaining 6 occurrences, internal reference was conveyed by the students' positioning as single individuals, in other words by their attempt to consider their Austrian and Italian peers as 'the group', yet without including themselves in it, as for instance in "All of my peers shared the same feelings when they imagine such a situation" (IBK_diaries subcorpus).

The findings from the investigation of the Innsbruck corpus are summarized in Figure 58, which visualizes the distribution of the two main meanings taken on by the pronoun *they* (external and internal reference):

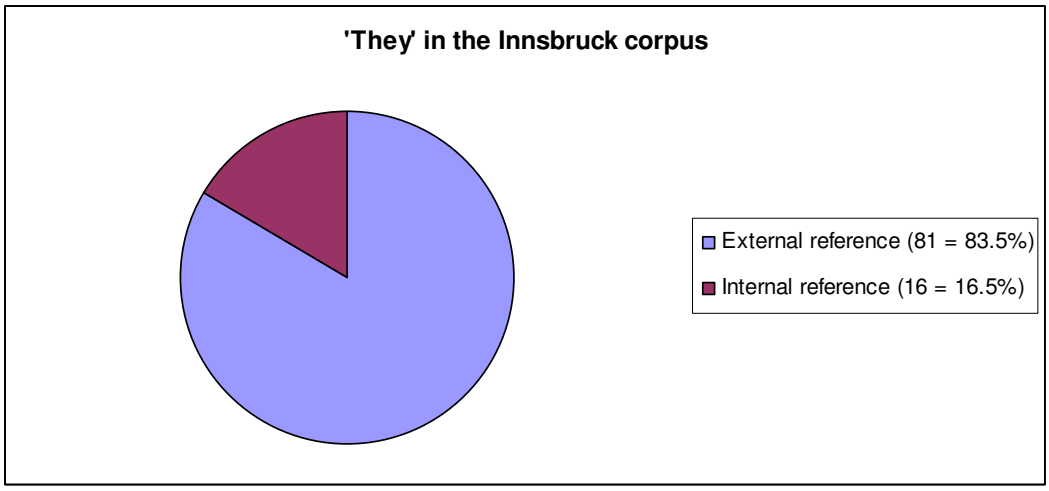


Figure 58. Distribution of the various uses of 'they' in the Innsbruck corpus

As in the Padova corpus, the limited number of occurrences of *they* which convey internal reference can be interpreted as an indicator of third space: if seen in the light of the results obtained from the analysis of *we*, whose most recurrent meaning was associated to in-group membership, this finding emphasizes the sense of proximity and closeness that characterized the students' written output throughout the project. Internal reference as expressed by the use of *they* in the Innsbruck corpus is better illustrated in the following Table, which also provides examples of the fluid subject positions that were activated by the Austrian students in their writing:

	Internal reference		External reference		
	Innsbruck + Padova peers	Padova peers	Generic people and concepts	Austrians	Italians
Diaries	6 "I think I learned a lot in that first session and am really looking forward to speaking with my peers the next time and to seeing what they have been up to"	10 "Vania and Sofia told me that they would take me to see the most important squares in Padua, which are very beautiful!"	34 "It is very hard to think about what women can do to improve their condition: of course, they need to continue fighting all together for more rights"	3 "Austrian parents are not less loving and caring, but instead, by letting go of their children they are showing how much they love them"	1 "We noticed that for Italian parents it is much harder to let go off their children when they go to university in another town"
Facebook posts	0	0	12 "I agree with what she said at the end about stereotypes: they are incomplete, they tell us one story"	0	0
Wiki posts	0	0	31 "Some say I am Austrian, because I have the Austrian citizenship, but others regard me as Turkish, because they do not know the difference between Turks and Kurds"	0	0
Tot.	**6**	**10**	**77**	**3**	**1**

Overall tot.	**16 (16.5%)**	**81 (83.5%)**

Table 17. Occurrences of the pronoun 'they' in the Innsbruck corpus and their contextual meanings

Besides illustrating the various meanings and subject positions that were activated by the two groups of students through the use of *they*, Tables 16 and 17 also clearly show that all the occurrences of the third person pronoun that convey in-group reference only appear in the diaries, and not in the forum and wiki posts. If seen in the light of the observations shared for the pronoun *you* (see above), this finding reveals the variegated nature of learner diaries: containing instances of both pronouns *you* and *they*, diary writing appears to have been seen as a repository for personal reflections touching upon various facets of the Skype sessions, including the other group members, as well as a place for direct communication with the other participants.

To sum up, the investigation of the contexts in which *they* appears in the Padova and Innsbruck corpora provided interesting and unusual insights into the nature of third space: in both collections of texts, evidence for third space was found in the limited amount of instances in which the pronoun occurs with internal reference, something which can be interpreted as signalling the existence of a predominant feeling of proximity and in-group membership. This is better exemplified in the following graph, which visualizes the occurrences of *they* in the two corpora: as can be seen, the total instances in which the pronoun took on internal reference is limited to 19%. External reference, on the contrary, appears in a significantly larger amount of cases, and accounts for 81% of all the instances of *they*.

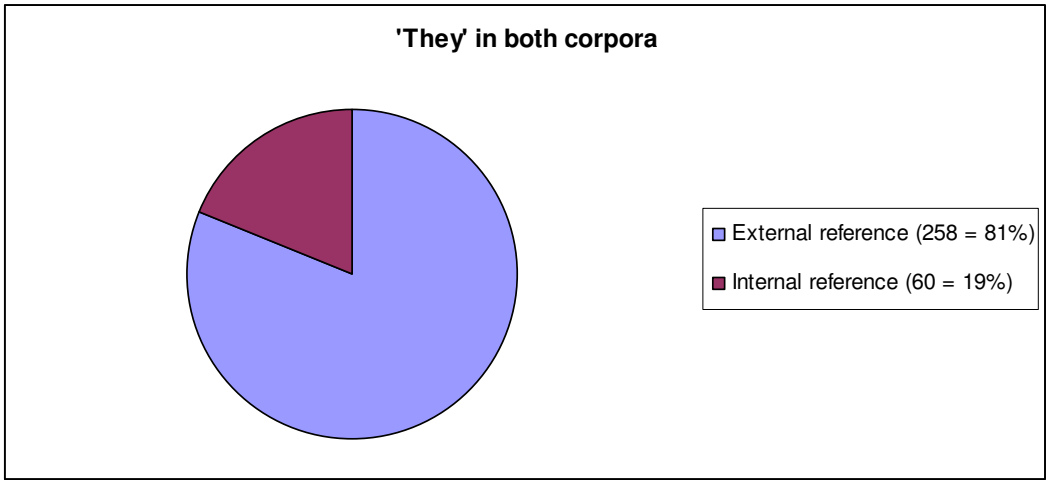


Figure 59. Distribution of the various uses of 'they' in the two corpora under investigation

The analysis of in-group identity markers that has been presented above attempted to shed some light on the way the students' linguistic choices can help understand the emergence of a third space and the continuous construction of fluid identities within an online Community of Practice. With the same aim in mind, the following section will focus on the pragmatic strategies of agreement/disagreement, and will try to gain better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

7.3 Agreement/disagreement expressions

A further focus of corpus investigation was on the expressions of agreement/disagreement that were used by the two groups of students in their writing. The use of agreement strategies belongs to the domain of pragmatic competence, intended as "the ability to use language according to the cultural norms of the target language society" in order to fulfil certain functions (Kreutel 2007: 1). As Austin suggests (1962: 1), language is not only used to "describe some state of affairs or to state some fact", but also to do something with words: thus, for instance, sentences like 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' or 'I do take this woman to be my lawful wife' do not simply describe what the speaker is doing but state that he/she is actually doing it. According to Austin, sentences or utterances of this type

can be defined as *performatives*: their name, derived from the verb 'to perform', clearly indicates that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (1962: 6) and is therefore not thought of as just saying or stating something. In performative utterances, words and patterns are used to fulfil the language user's communicative aims: thus, for instance, utterances can express apologies, invitations, commands, or requests according to the intentions of the speaker/writer (Searle 1969). All the communicative functions associated with a particular utterance are called *speech acts* by linguists since they allow writers/speakers to perform actions while using language (Biber, Conrad and Leech 2002: 460): the sentence 'Can you tell me what to do with this one?', for instance, is used to prompt a response and obtain the required information, and performs therefore an eliciting speech-act function (ibid.: 249).

The analysis described in this section tries to investigate the speech acts of agreement and disagreement, which can be seen as the strategies we adopt while interacting with other people to express our opinions and attitudes to their contributions (Kreutel 2007: 2). As Bretag suggests (2006: np), seeking agreement is one of the pragmatic strategies that language users adopt to claim common ground, and can therefore be interpreted as a potential indicator of the emergence of a shared space within a group of interactants. According to Leech and Svartvik (1994: 13), one of the most common ways to convey agreement is through the use of the verb *to agree*. On the basis of this, all the occurrences of *agree* and *agreed* were searched for and inspected in the two corpora under investigation together with those of the noun *agreement*, in an attempt to identify the contexts in which agreement expressions were used to convey common ground and shared membership.

Observation of the wordlists for the search word *agree* showed that the verb occurred 60 times in the Padova corpus. In order to verify its contextual meanings,

concordance lines were created and analysed: these revealed that *agree* had been used 48 times together with the first person pronoun *I*. Of these, 23 instances (38% of the total occurrences of *agree*) specifically conveyed the writer's agreement with his/her group peers and their opinions, as in "I agree with Chiara when she says that mass media have a powerful control on us" (PD_Facebook subcorpus). In line with Bretag's (2006) and Clarke's (2009) studies (see Chapter 5), this finding was interpreted as an indicator of third space, since it signalled the students' wish to adopt and maintain a common position and, therefore, build a shared supportive space. Interestingly, the fact that the highest number of occurrences of this pattern were found in the posts to the Facebook forums (11) and the wiki activities (10) seems to confirm the interactive nature of these text types, which apparently promoted student interaction and negotiation of ideas. This is also reinforced by the presence, in the comments posted in the wiki, of the direct question "Do you agree?", in which the use of the second person pronoun aimed to stimulate further reflections and reactions on the part of the other participants.

Besides indicating in-group agreement, the pattern *I agree* was also found to signal the writer's conformity (or, as illustrated below, lack of) with external ideas, claims, and theories that extended beyond those of their peers, as in "I agree with Professor Fang's thought that culture is not static and also with his metaphor of the ocean" (PD_Facebook subcorpus). Occurring 19 times in the Facebook and wiki subcorpora, and constituting therefore 32% of the total occurrences of *agree*, this pattern was not considered to be one signalling the construction of a third space, since its instances did not convey the writer's effort to seek agreement with his/her peers. Yet, this analysis offered interesting insights into the students' language choices, as it made it possible to pinpoint the only two examples of overt disagreement that were present in the Italian corpus. In two cases, in fact, the pattern

I agree was found in the negative form to signal the writer's disagreement with external concepts. The first occurrence was found in a comment that Renata, a Romanian-born student from Padova, posted on Facebook as a response to a picture caricaturing common Italian stereotypes towards other European countries: "definitely I don't agree... according to Italy in this picture Romania is a country of thieves" (PD_Facebook subcorpus). The second example was identified in a comment posted in the wiki, in which a Padova student rejected the claim that individuals have multiple identities, and provided detailed reasons to prove her view. Her post concluded with the following, resolute assertion: "To sum up, I have to say that I don't agree with the claim".

Of the 60 total occurrences of *agree*, the investigation showed that the verb was also used 15 times together with the pronoun *we* or with other forms of inclusive subject, as in "Everyone of us agree with the fact we are all 'made up' of different identities which define our personality" (PD_diaries subcorpus). Constituting 25% of all the occurrences of *agree*, the instances of this pattern were interpreted as having a descriptive nature, in that they reported on the processes of negotiation and co-construction of knowledge that characterized the students' online interaction and that were later translated in their personal journals (where most of the occurrences were found) and posts. Although not directly embodying the speech act of agreement, the occurrences of this pattern can be still considered as indicators of the groups' engagement in a joint enterprise - that of establishing a common understanding of the issues under discussion -, something which, in turn, reveals the existence of a co-constructed space within an online Community of Practice. From the same perspective, reported in-group agreement is also what emerged from the analysis of the 30 concordance lines in which the verb *to agree* occurs in the past form, as in "We all agreed with the idea that labeling and excluding someone was stronger when

we were younger" (PD_diaries subcorpus). All stemming from the weekly diaries, the instances of this agreement form (100%) were interpreted as a further indicator of the negotiation processes that occurred within the online Community of Practice.

The following Table summarizes the various uses of the verb *to agree* (including its past form) in the Padova corpus: those which can be considered as indicators of third space can be found in the columns whose headings are written in white.

	AGREE				**AGREED**
	I agree (in-group agreement)	**I agree (external claims)**	**We agree**	**Other subject**	**We agreed**
Diaries	2 "…we wondered if we were dealing with multiple identities or simply facets of ourselves. I was very confused because I was agree on the multiple identity concept at once.."	0	14 "We agree that the etnicity influences a lot our identity"	1 "not all parents agree with what their children say or think"	30 "we started with the game of our rank of values in life. We all agreed with the fact that family and friends are the most important and influential components "
Facebook Posts	11 "I agree with Vanessa and Maria"	9 "…so I think culture evolves every day. This is why I agree with Professor Fang in that culture is not static" "definitely I don't agree...	1 "I think we all agree in the fact that it's impossible to give a clear definition of culture"	1 "the fact that Italians stood that situation made those people think that we were ALL agree with it and	0

		according to Italy in this picture Romania is a country of thieves"		implicitly with BUNGA BUNGA, corruption and so on"	
Wiki posts	10 "I agree with the opinions of everyone"	10 "There's no fix definition of identity. I agree with this claim.." "To sum up, I have to say that I don't agree with the claim"	0	1 "Do you agree?"	0
Tot.	**23 (38%)**	**19 (32%)**	**15 (25%)**	**3 (5%)**	**30 (100%)**
Overall tot.	**60**				**30**

Table 18. Occurrences of the verb 'to agree' in the Padova corpus and their contextual meanings

As Table 18 illustrates, a large number of occurrences of the verb *to agree* indicate the students' engagement in a joint enterprise within an online Community of Practice, and reveal therefore the emergence of a negotiated third space. Considering that, in both its present and past form, the verb *to agree* appears a total of 90 times in the Padova corpus, the agreement expressions that can be considered as indicators of third space – namely those introduced by the patterns *I agree*, *we agree* and *we agreed* - constitute 75% of all total occurrences of the verb, while those which carry other meanings only account for 25% (Figure 60): in this sense, therefore, the analysis of the concordance lines described in this section reveals the predominance of third space indicators among all the instances of *agree* and *agreed*.

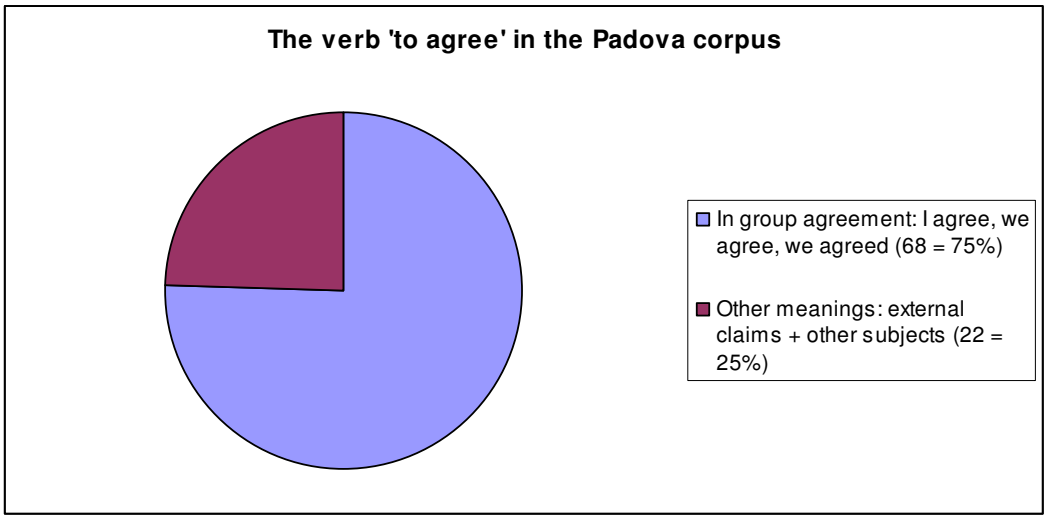


Figure 60. Distribution of the meanings of the verb 'to agree' in the Padova corpus

In addition to investigating the occurrences of the verb *to agree*, the nouns *agreement* and *disagreement* were searched for in the Padova corpus: while the former was found to occur twice, no instances of the word *disagreement* could be retrieved across the three subcorpora. Interestingly, *agreement* occurred in two sentences that conveyed opposite meanings, namely

> "…we analyzed haw differences in identity could make labels. Everyone gives an idea and more or less we had the same opinion about this topic. It was interesting notice this thing because even if we came from different countries we were able to find an agreement" (PD_diaries subcorpus), and

> "A talk about identity is quite philosophic and I've never understood philosophy :P the main problem was that everyone had a different idea of what is identity so we couldn't find an agreement" (PD_diaries subcorpus).

While the author of the first example commented on the negotiation processes that characterized his group's discussion on the nature of identity and that led to the attainment of internal agreement, thus clearly signalling the presence of a co-constructed third space, the second extract reveals a more complex picture of the

processes at stake within the community. The post, in fact, suggests that the students' online meetings involved the exchange and negotiation of differing opinions, which at times made it difficult – or even impossible – to reach full consent. In this light, the excerpt reported above appears to signal that the students also encountered some challenges in the construction of a shared space. Yet, the fact that comments of this kind only occur in the corpus to a marginal extent would seem to confirm that, on the whole, disagreement episodes were not felt as the norm, and that they apparently did not hinder the negotiation and collaborative creation of a third space. This is also what emerges from the following comment, in which disagreement is not seen as totally counterproductive and negative, but as a natural outcome of the students' intercultural encounters (a finding that is in line with the results obtained from Guarda, Guth and Helm's 2011 study). The post was identified through the qualitative inspection of the word "divergens", a term that had attracted my attention in the frequency list as it clearly represented a transfer from the Italian 'divergenze':

> "As I thought, some divergens [disagreement] emerged during the discussion.. In my opinion there is nothing to worry about it as different points of view are widely common among people coming from various backgrounds" (PD_diaries subcorpus).

In the investigation of the Innsbruck corpus, 20 occurrences of the word *agree* were identified. Of these, the verb appeared 17 times as part of the pattern *I agree*, and three times together with the first person pronoun plural *we*. As for the former, eight occurrences referred explicitly to the writer's agreement with his/her peers (40% of all the occurrences of *agree*), and were therefore interpreted as indicators of third space and community building. An example of this is provided by the following extract: "I mainly agree with you all - that stereotypes are a generalization of a weak spot, becoming common belief over the course of time"

(IBK_Facebook subcorpus). In the remaining instances (9, that is 45% of all the occurrences of *agree*), the pattern *I agree* was found to express the writer's agreement with external claims and ideas, as in "I like Tony Fang´s model, I agree with his ocean metaphor" (IBK_Facebook subcorpus). As suggested above, these occurrences were not considered as indicators of third space, since they did not concur to shed light on the dynamics and processes at stake among the exchange participants.

Of the three occurrences in which the verb *to agree* was found to appear with the pronoun *we,* and which constituted 15% of all the occurrences of *agree* in the Innsbruck corpus, one was accompanied by the modal *could* and indicated a specific episode in the Skype sessions in which, as the writer pointed out, all the participants in the group session shared similar opinions on the issues under discussion ("We could all understand and agree each other's ideas"; IBK_diaries subcorpus). Interestingly, in the two remaining occurrences *agree* appeared in the negative form, and therefore indicated disagreement within the group, as exemplified by the following extracts: "The main difference we couldn't really agree on was basically whether multiple identities are possible or other identities are just 'learnt behaviour'" (IBK_diaries subcorpus); "Here we were unable to agree on multiple identities/sole behavorial patterns again" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). As suggested in the analysis of the Padova corpus, this finding provides interesting insights into the negotiation processes that were activated during the Skype sessions, and the challenges that the students faced in the collaborative construction of knowledge within their community.

Besides inspecting the concordances for agree, the past form *agreed* was also investigated in the Innsbruck corpus: of its 33 occurrences, only in one instance (3%) did *agreed* refer to people outside the group of exchange participants, namely

the protagonists of one of the stories on intercultural misunderstanding ("I think that they should have decided together how their presentation could have been, in order to find a compromise they both agreed on"). In the remaining occurrences (32, in other words 97%), *agreed* appeared together with the first person pronoun *we*, and was used to describe the tasks and negotiation processes in which the exchange participants had been involved. The idea of joint enterprise and shared spaces that emerges from this specific use of the pattern can be found, for instance, in the following extract:

> "We also agreed on the fact that, when a person goes to live in a country with a different culture, he or she should not forget his or her traditions and values because it's part of his or her 'identity', but he or she should also have respect for other people's beliefs and not offend them in any way" (IBK_diaries subcorpus).

In the Innsbruck corpus, no instances of the nouns *agreement* and *disagreement* could be found. Overall, therefore, the analysis revealed that agreement expressions occurred in the form of the patterns *I agree* (8), *we could agree* (1) and *we agreed* (32). These conveyed a clear sense of engagement in a joint enterprise (that of negotiating meanings and experiences), community maintenance and movement towards a third space. The following Table sums up the various contexts in which the verb *to agree*, including its past form, was used in the Innsbruck corpus: as in the previous Tables, the columns with headings written in white identify the potential indicators of third space.

	AGREE			**AGREED**	
	I agree (in-group agreement)	**I agree (external claims)**	**We agree**	**We agreed**	**Other subject**
Diaries	0	0	3 "Here we	32 "We all	0

			were unable to agree on multiple identities / sole behavorial patterns again” “We could all understand and agree each other’s ideas”	agreed with Sanja that how you were raised determines your view of the world”	
Facebook posts	3 “Daniela I totally agree!”	3 “I agree with what prof. Lehtonen says”	0	0	0
Wiki posts	5 “I agree with Matteo, Renata and Stefan”	6 “This is why I totally agree with this claim. It IS possible to have ‘multiple-identities’”	0	0	1 “I think that they should have decided together how their presentation could have been, in order to find a compromise they both agreed on”
Tot.	**8 (40%)**	**9 (45%)**	**3 (15%)**	**32 (97%)**	**1 (3%)**
Overall tot.	**20**			**33**	

Table 19. Occurrences of the verb ‘to agree’ in the Innsbruck corpus and their contextual meanings

Considering that, in both its present and past forms, the verb *to agree* appears 55 times in the Innsbruck corpus, the quantitative data presented in Table 19 demonstrate that the use of the agreement expressions conveying third space

constitute 81% of the total occurrences of the verb, and therefore largely outnumber those with more general meaning, whose impact on the whole corpus is limited to 19% of the overall occurrences (Figure 61):

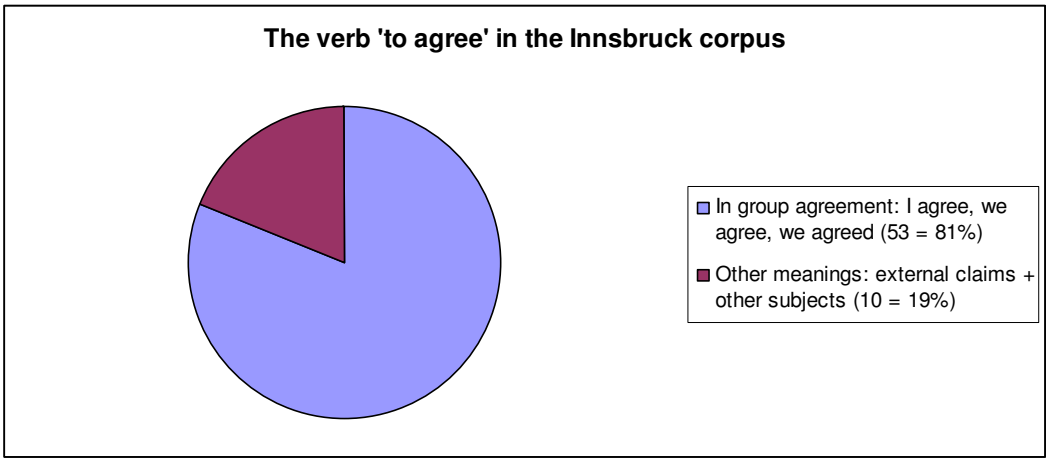


Figure 61. Distribution of the meanings of the verb 'to agree' in the Innsbruck corpus

To sum up, the investigation of agreement/disagreement expressions in the two corpora highlighted that, overall, agreement was conveyed through a variety of patterns (*I agree*, *we agree*, *we agreed*, *we could agree*, *do you agree?*) to indicate the writer's conformity with his/her peers' views, as well as to unveil and describe the negotiation processes that occurred within his/her group over the course of the exchange. In this sense, agreement expressions of this kind can be interpreted as defining the contours of a Community or Practice since, as noted by Clarke (2009: 2336), they "exemplify a form of bolstering and support the students offered each other as the community of practice collaboratively constructed its joint enterprise and defined its shared discourse repertoire".

Among all the instances of the verb *to agree* that could be retrieved in the corpora, manifestations of conformity with external claims and theories could also be found in the pattern *I agree* (19 and 9 occurrences in the Padova and Innsbruck texts respectively): yet, these were not considered as indicators of third space, since they

did not convey the writer's effort to seek agreement and offer support to his/her peers.

The following graph shows the two main meanings taken on by the verb *to agree* in the Padova and Innsbruck corpora: as can be seen, in-group agreement accounts for 78% of total occurrences, while conformity with external claims make up 22% of all the instances of the verb under investigation.

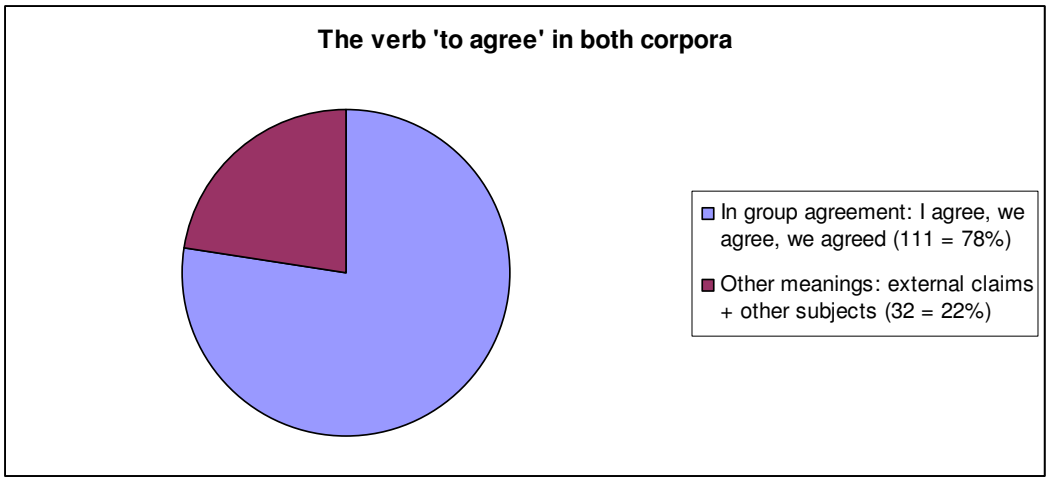


Figure 62. Distribution of the meanings of the verb 'to agree' in the two corpora

Besides revealing instances of agreement, the analysis conducted so far also indicated a few episodes of disagreement which – far from being seen as hindering the construction of a third space among the participants - were useful to gain better understanding of the complex and sometimes challenging processes that characterized the Skype sessions.

7.4 Other indicators of third space

After searching for evidence of third space in the use of personal pronouns and agreement/disagreement expressions, the corpus-based investigation described in this Chapter also identified a further series of linguistic formulae that might indicate a movement towards a shared space. On the basis of the findings provided by the frequency lists for both corpora, the investigation focused on apologies, greetings

formulae and thanking expressions, intended as pragmatic strategies of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) that are adopted to claim common ground, convey cooperation, and emphasize proximity between the writer and his/her readers (Bretag 2006).

In the Padova corpus, pragmatic expressions of gratitude were conveyed through the use of the formula 'thanks' (3 occurrences), as in following example: "I'm really enjoying this exchange :) I met so nice people and I'm very happy about that! Thanks :)" (PD_diaries subcorpus). In Bretag's words (2006: np), thanking the other person is a way to assert reciprocity and convey cooperation. In line with this, thanking expressions were interpreted as indicators of third space, in that they signalled the writer's gratitude towards their peers and indicated a movement towards a shared place. In addition, thanking formulae were also seen as providing further evidence of the students' commitment to a Community of Practice, in which gratitude may serve to cement the members' feeling of engagement in their joint enterprise.

Similar observations were drawn in the investigation of greetings expressions. Greetings are commonly considered speech acts that count as "courteous indication of recognition of the hearer" (Searle 1969: 64-65). From the perspective of this research, greetings were seen as not only expressing politeness, but also as conveying the writer's feeling of membership to a community, thus revealing the emergence of a third space. In the Padova corpus, greetings were found to occur in the form of both openers – as in "Hi all" - and closing formulae - as in "See you next Friday". While the former kind appeared 17 times in the collection of texts, the latter was identified 20 times, and also included the very colloquial expression "See ya" (2). Both forms of greetings expressions were interpreted as conveying a sense of proximity and belonging to a shared group. In addition, the fact

that these expressions – like the thanking formula cited above - were only found in the diaries subcorpus was seen as signalling the writer's awareness that his/her posts may be read by the other participants in the exchange, and therefore confirmed the communicative potential of diary writing (see § 7.2.2). In this light, it may be suggested that personal journals of the kind promoted by the exchange were not only a repository for the writers' feelings and experiences, but also enabled the participants to engage in dialogue with their peers and readers.

In the Padova corpus, third space was also conveyed through the use of performative expressions such as apologies. According to Bretag (2006), apologies are pragmatic strategies that language users adopt to avoid disagreement and claim common ground, thus signalling a movement towards third space. In the texts produced by the Padova students, apologies were identified in the pragmatic use of the word *sorry*. Emerging seven times across the three subcorpora (four in the diaries, two in the Facebook forums and once in the wiki subcorpus), apology formulae included the following example: "I'm sorry girls for our last Skype session but I was too nervous for speaking and the funny thing is that I don't know why it happened! SORRY again!" (PD_diaries subcorpus). Closer investigation of all the contexts in which apology expressions occurred showed that the pragmatic use of *sorry* in the Padova corpus did so aim so much at avoiding disagreement but, rather, at expressing the writer's deep desire not to deceive his/her peers, as well as his/her willingness to participate in the group's joint enterprise as effectively as possible. In this light, therefore, the use of apology expressions was interpreted as signalling both the students' engagement in a Community of Practice and a movement towards a shared space.

In addition to the findings presented above, the investigation of the frequency list for the Padova corpus also revealed that the Italian students used

further “proximity markers” (Dooly 2011: 332), namely exclamations and special graphic symbols such as emoticons, which signal the emergence of a third space. In Crystal’s words (2006: 39), emoticons are “combinations of keyboard characters designed to show an emotional facial expressions”. In this sense, emoticons have been called “the paralanguage of the Internet” (Dery 1993, in Crystal 2006: 37) which are added to a text to illustrate the writer’s feelings. In the Padova corpus, emoticons were found to occur 43 times: of these, 38 took the basic form of a smiley face [:)], one showed a laughing face [:D], and four stood for a ‘laughing out loud’ face [xD or XD]. Their occurrence in the corpus, and in particular in the students’ diary entries (see Table 20 below), conveys a sense of familiarity and closeness, and reinforces therefore the idea of a third space among the participants in the exchange. The same can be said about the presence, in the Padova corpus, of exclamations such as *eheh* (one occurrence), *wow* (1), and *yeah* (2), whose playfulness conveys the idea that “a common perspective between communicators” (Bretag 2006: np) has been established, and give further evidence of the shared space emerging from the students’ engagement in the project.

The findings obtained from the investigation of the Padova corpus are exemplified in Table 20 below: unlike in the previous Tables, in which the items related to third space and subject positions were highlighted in white, all the pragmatic expressions and proximity markers illustrated in the following Table can be considered as providing insights into third space. This explains why no statistical information is provided in this subsection:

	Thanking formulae	**Greeting formulae**	**Apologetic expressions**	**Emoticons**	**Exclamations**
Diaries	3 “Thanks to everyone!”	17 (opening) + 20 (closing formulae)	4 “Sorry, I don't know if this is the	29 “:) Can't wait for next	3 “Or maybe I'm only

		"Hi guys, it's time to write our second diary…" "Bye bye"	right name in English"	session!"	a romantic girl eheh"
Facebook posts	0	0	2 "sorry the first time I mentioned culture in the first post I meant identity.."	14 "Everything's so true XD above all the one about bureaucracy ..unfortunately!"	1 "yeah very funny"
Wiki posts	0	0	1 "I don't know if I have been able to make clear my personal idea..I'm sorry. I tried to explain it as better as I could"	0	0
Tot.	**3**	**37**	**7**	**43**	**4**

Table 20. Other indicators of third space in the Padova corpus

Although to a lesser extent, other indicators of third space also occurred in the texts produced by the Innsbruck students: these included greetings (2), thanking formulae (2), apology expressions (2), emoticons (12) and exclamations (5). Their presence, although limited, still provides evidence of the emergence of a third space among the exchange participants. In addition, the use of gratitude and apology expressions appears to confirm the students' commitment to the aims and activities of their Community of Practice.

As in the Padova corpus, pragmatic expressions of gratitude and greetings only occurred in the diaries subcorpus, and were therefore interpreted as unveiling

the communicative potential of diary writing. Compared to the findings obtained for the Italian students' personal journals (see above), however, the presence of such pragmatic expressions in the Austrian corpus is scarce: thanking formulae, in fact, only occur twice across the students' diaries, and the same is true for greetings, which were only found to occur in the form of closing formulae. In line with the findings presented in § 7.2.2, these observations seem to suggest that the Innsbruck participants considered diary writing as primarily a reflective activity.

As for the emoticons used in the Innsbruck corpus, it is worth noting that the students used the basic graphic symbol for the smiley face [:)] nine times. In addition, the 'laughing out loud' face [xD] was found twice, while the sceptical symbol [=/] was used once. Exclamations, for their part, were retrieved five times in the corpus, and consisted in the word *wow* (four occurrences) and its variant *woooow* (one occurrence). Examples of each searched item can be found in Table 21 below:

	Thanking formulae	**Greeting formulae**	**Apologetic expressions**	**Emoticons**	**Exclamations**
Diaries	2 "Thank you very much for all these engaging conversations"	2 (only closing) "See you soon for the last Skype sesson"	0	9 "I hope that I was able to deliver a credible, lucid picture of Austria xD"	3 "My conclusion: WOW, it's amazing which profound topics and aspects get approached!"
Facebook posts	0	0	0	2 ":) I'd prefer pasta and pizza to godfathers! =/"	

Wiki posts	0	0	2 "Sorry I had to divide my comment into 2 posts.."	1 "At university, I prefer to speak standard German (and obviously English xD)"	2 "Woooo w what could I say after these touching and thought-provokin g words fo Chimam anda???"
Tot.	**2**	**2**	**2**	**12**	**5**

Table 21. Other indicators of third space in the Innsbruck corpus

To sum up, the findings presented in this subsection appear to provide further evidence of the presence of a third space among the participants in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange, as well as of their deep commitment to the purposes of their online Community of Practice. This is not only conveyed by the use of gratitude and apologetic expressions and greeting formulae, but also by the presence of exclamations and emoticons, which helped unveil the students' sense of proximity and commonality.

7.5 Adjectives

As a final goal of this study, an investigation of all the adjectives of the two corpora was undertaken to identify how the Italian and Austrian students evaluated the telecollaboration project and/or expressed their feelings towards it. From this perspective, the exploration of adjectives was perceived as a means to gain a better understanding of the features of the third space arising from the students' experience in the project. In this sense, this final step of the inquiry did not aim so much at identifying the emergence of a third space – something that the analysis presented

above already demonstrated – but at pinpointing some of the characteristics of such a shared place as well as the writers' stance towards it.

The analysis was carried out on the basis of the information provided by the frequency lists of both corpora: for each adjective identified in the frequency lists, concordance lines were created and carefully analyzed so as to identify its contextual use. In this way, it was possible to distinguish the instances in which the search item was used in relation to the telecollaboration exchange and/or the writer's feelings towards it – as in "The discussion was really *good*, everyone participated with much enthusiasm" (IBK_diaries subcorpus) - from the contexts in which the same search word was used with a generic and external meaning, as in "out of necessity, we would be able to create an opposite identity. However, I don't think that is a *good* thing and only happens in extreme situation" (IBK_wiki subcorpus). For the sake of clarity, it is worth specifying that the latter kind of instances will not be taken into account in the discussion that follows, since they do not refer to the telecollaboration exchange and do not offer any insights into the phenomenon of interest.

In the Padova corpus, adjectives specifically used to describe the Skype sessions, their activities and group dynamics, and/or the writer's feelings towards them, occurred a total number of 319 times: interestingly, the vast majority of them (245, in other words 77%) carried a positive connotation, while a minority of them (74, that is 23%) invoked negative feelings. The relationship between the two sets of adjectives (positive and negative) is visualized by the following graph:

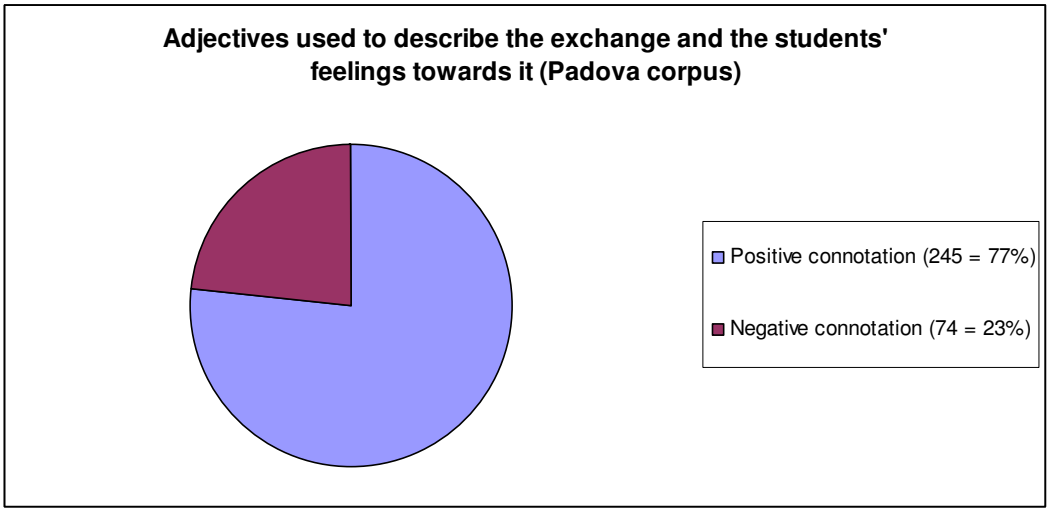


Figure 63. Adjectives used in the Padova corpus to describe the exchange and the students' feelings towards it

As regards the adjectives conveying positive connotation, the exchange, its activities, and its group dynamics were mostly described as *interesting* (78 occurrences), *good* (41), *great* (31), *different* (25), *funny* (24), *amazing* (8), *successful* (2), *enjoyable* (2), *wonderful* (2), *strong* (1), and *lovely* (1). The writer's feelings towards the experience were also mostly positive, and included the adjectives *happy* (10 occurrences), *excited* (10), *confident* (5), *proud* (3) and *fascinated* (2). As can be noticed, most of the adjectives cited above are emphatic words (e.g. wonderful, great): Brown and Levinson (1987) define emphatic words as a feature of linguistic exaggeration which conveys positive politeness, in other words solidarity to one's interlocutor. According to Bretag (2006), politeness strategies of this kind are adopted to claim common ground, and can therefore be considered as indicators of third space. In this specific case, the students' use of emphatic words cannot be considered as a pragmatic strategy: since most of the occurrences for these adjectives were found in the diaries, there is reason to suppose that the use of words such as *great* and *amazing* had more of a descriptive function, and expressed the writers' enthusiastic impression about the exchange (see Table 22 below for examples). As such, adjectives of this kind still convey the idea of a third space, in

other words a collaborative and meeting place which obtained passionate consensus. In this light, the use of adjectives such as *wonderful* and *lovely*, as well as of less emphatic words such as *interesting* and *good*, provides interesting insights into the features of the shared space constructed within the group of exchange participants. This seems to be further reinforced by the use of adjectives such as *happy* and *proud*, which describe the students' positive predisposition towards the experience: in line with Bretag (2006), I see the use of these words as a means to express optimism, willingness to cooperate and openness, something which indicates the writer's movement towards a third space.

All the adjectives of the Padova corpus that were used to positively denote the exchange or to convey positive feelings about it can be found in Table 22 below. As can be noticed, the Table is divided into two parts: the first one illustrates all the adjectives that describe the project, while the second part includes all the adjectives that are specifically related to the writer's feelings towards it. For each adjective, an example from the students' texts is provided so as to better illustrate its contextual use. Like in Tables 20 and 21 above (see § 7.4), all the adjectives included in the following Table can be considered as offering insights into the phenomenon of interest.

PADOVA: POSITIVE CONNOTATION		
Adjectives describing Skype sessions, peers, activities and topics		
Adjective	**Occurrences**	**Example**
INTERESTING	78	"I think that it was very interesting and useful for my language abilities" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
GOOD	41	"Last week we did our second skype section and it was very good" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
GREAT	31	"At the end we did a great job all

		together" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
DIFFERENT	25	"the part of the discussion that I preferred it was the one about cultural differences and stereotypes because I could understand which opinions of mine about Austria are true and which are wrong and also I could try to watch Italy from a different point of view" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
FUNNY	24	"First of all I would like to point out that was very funny but equally instructive" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
AMAZING	8	"this exchange gave me many opportunities to explore cultures.. it's so amazing to learn and reflects about different types of cultures!:)" (PD_Facebook subcorpus)
SUCCESSFUL	2	"first of all the interaction was successful" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
ENJOYABLE	2	"I hope that next time will be as enjoyable as the last one!" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
WONDERFUL	2	"The topic was amazing and the conversation was wonderful" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
STRONG	1	"we immediately create a strong collaboration and this certainly appears in our works" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
LOVELY	1	"Margret is a really lovely girl" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
Adjectives expressing the writer's feelings towards the experience		
HAPPY	10	"As I never had this kind of experience, I'm happy that yesteraday I had the chance to try it and to note that if there's the willing to listen carefully to others opinion, the communication can be really successfull, plesant, nice and fun!" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
EXCITED	10	"I felt really excited and I wasn't scared, my personality is very openminded and I like very much when I can do experiences like this exchange!" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
CONFIDENT	5	"I noticed that thanks to this experience I′m feeling more confident

		with my English" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
PROUD	3	"I'm quite proud of this second skype session" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
FASCINATED	2	"I was fascinated in understanding how many aspects concerning Austria are closer to the Italian ones, giving a prospective of the real differences" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
TOT. POSITIVE CONNOTATION: 245 (77%)		

Table 22. Adjectives used in the Padova corpus to positively comment on the exchange

Of all the contexts in which positive adjectives were found, some of them appear to be particularly interesting for the purposes of this research. The adjective *different*, for instance, was used in contexts which aimed at positively commenting on the variety of cultures and perspectives at stake in the telecollaboration project, as in "the more you know about the others the more you get into different cultures and in my opinion that's the main point of this exchange!" (PD_Facebook subcorpus). This use of *different* appears to suggest that the presence of a variety of cultures and standpoints was seen as an added value of the project. This is further reinforced by the adoption of the same adjective in sentences which reveal the writer's ability to 'decentre' (Byram 1997) and look at things from a different perspective, as in: "What have I learnt from this? Well,I certainly start to look to the world in a different way,concerning religious and cultural problems" (PD_diaries subcorpus). On the basis of these observations, it may be suggested that the adjective *different* was used with a positive connotation, namely to define the rich variety of cultures involved in the interaction and to report on the effects of the intercultural encounters promoted by the exchange on the writer's ICC.

Another adjective that is worth commenting on is *strong*. Although it only appears once in the whole corpus, its specific context offers interesting insights into third space. The context surrounding it is as follows: "Personally,I didn't encounter

any problems with Austrian peers...instead we immediately create a strong collaboration and this certainly appears in our works" (PD_diaries subcorpus). The fact that the writer of this diary described her group's collaboration as *strong* is, in my view, a key indicator of the strength and depth of the engagement in a joint enterprise, namely that of working together on a joint assignment and developing a final product (what the student called "works"). In this sense, the use of *strong* in this specific context seems to signal the presence of a Community of Practice, the quality of which – in the writer's view – is also evident in the outcomes of their joint work. In addition, the fact that the student mentioned her Austrian peers as part of such a successful group appears to emphasize the presence of a third space which extends beyond national and cultural borders.

All the adjectives reported in Table 22 can be considered as indicators of third space, in that their use denotes the writer's positive attitudes towards the experience, and his/her enthusiasm about being part of it. As suggested above, this appears to be particularly evident in the instances of emphatic words such as *great* and *lovely*, or adjectives such as *happy* and *proud*. What has been described up to this point, however, only represents part of the findings of the analysis conducted so far: beside expressing admiration, pleasure and satisfaction, in fact, the texts written by the Padova students also include adjectives that commonly have a negative connotation. As illustrated in Figure 63, these make up 23% of the 319 occurrences of adjectives used to describe the exchange, and include the following: *difficult* (30 occurrences), *nervous* (15), *angry* (6), *sorry* (12), *hard* (4), *confused* (2), *bad* (2), *wrong* (1), *upset* (1), *embarrassing* (1). As their use may imply that the students faced some challenges in the construction of a third space, concordance lines for each of these adjectives were created and carefully analysed. This qualitative investigation provided very interesting insights into the dynamics that characterized

group collaboration. The following Table illustrates and provides examples for each of the adjectives that were found in the Padova corpus conveying negative connotation.

PADOVA: NEGATIVE CONNOTATION		
Adjectives describing Skype sessions, peers, activities and topics		
Adjective	**Occurrences**	**Example**
DIFFICULT	30 (of which 17 related to complexity of topics, and 5 to technical problems)	"At the beginning it was a little bit difficult to get the attention of everyone, but eventually, who more who less, everyone collaborated to the project" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
HARD	4 (related to complexity of topics)	"It's really hard to define culture" (PD_Facebook subcorpus)
BAD	2 (all related to technical problems)	"we heard bad" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
WRONG	1 (related to technical problems)	"Nothing went wrong,apart from the frequent overlappings of voices" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
Adjectives expressing the writer's feelings towards the experience		
NERVOUS	15	"I was too nervous for speaking and the funny thing is that I don't know why it happened!" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
SORRY	12	"I had some problem in talking a lot because my head was pounding and sometimes I had nothing to say and I'm so sorry about that, but I hope next time I will talk a bit more" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
ANGRY	6	"I'm angry with the computer and

	(of which 5 related to technical problems)	technology in general" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
CONFUSED	2	"I had some difficulties to say something at the beginning because I was a little bit confused" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
UPSET	1	"Then Hans said that he liked the ending I was really upset and a little bit angry with him, how can you like the ending?????" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
EMBARASSING	1 (related to perceived language proficiency)	"And I'm embarassing for my mistakes and my pronunciation" (PD_diaries subcorpus)
TOT. NEGATIVE CONNOTATION: 74 (23%)		

Table 23. Adjectives used in the Padova corpus that convey negative connotation

A closer look at the concordance lines revealed that technical problems were felt as providing challenges to the group discussions. In a total of 13 instances, the students described their difficulties in having to cope with audio problems on Skype: in doing so, they used the words *difficult* (5 occurrences), *bad* (2) and *wrong* (1) to give vent to their impressions, as well as the adjective *angry* (5) to define their sense of frustration in relation to the use of technology. Something that also made the exchange a challenging experience was the complexity of the topics chosen to prompt discussion: in a total of 21 instances, the students used the adjectives *difficult* (17) and *hard* (4) to describe their Skype sessions and, in particular, emphasize the sometimes intricate nature of the issues under discussion. In one case, negative feelings also arose as a consequence of the writer's little confidence in his/her language skills: this is evident in the use of the word *embarrassing*, whose negative connotation denotes the role of the foreign language in affecting the student's

impression on the experience. What these findings indicate is that the students also encountered difficulties over the course of the project, and therefore faced some challenges in the construction of a third space, mostly because of technical issues and the complexity of the topics chosen to guide the interaction.

Alongside the above-mentioned adjectives that explicitly relate to technical aspects of the exchange, the complexity of its topics and the impact of one's own perceived language abilities, other adjectives with a negative connotation emerged from the inspection of concordance lines in the Padova corpus. As can be seen in Table 23, these adjectives mirror the students' feelings and emotions as they arose in the Skype sessions, and include *upset (1)*, *nervous (15)*, *sorry (12)*, and *confused (2).* Interestingly, what these words reveal is the writer's deep desire to participate effectively in the discussion groups: although carrying a negative connotation, such adjectives in effect convey a profound sense of belonging and commitment to a shared group, and can be therefore interpreted as indicators of a sense of belonging to a Community of Practice and of a movement towards third space. In this sense, the presence of words like *sorry* and *nervous* in the Padova corpus appears to counterbalance the use of adjectives such as *difficult* and *hard* (see above), and suggests that – despite the challenges posed by technical problems and the complexity of topics – the students were still able to show their commitment to their joint enterprise and manifest the emergence of a shared space. This is exemplified, for instance, in the following extract, in which the writer acknowledges that she may have failed to express her thoughts in a clear way, thus potentially preventing her peers from fully understanding her message: "I don't know if I have been able to make clear my personal idea..I'm sorry. I tried to explain it as better as I could" (PD_diaries subcorpus). As has been seen above, the use of the adjective *sorry* in apology formulae is a clear, further indicator of the emergence of a third space.

In the exploration of concordance lines, two of the adjectives cited above attracted my attention in particular: occurring together in the same sentence, the words *upset* and *angry* provided me with further, illuminating insights into the nature of third space, online Communities of Practice and ICC. In order to explore the use of the two adjectives in more depth, the investigation of their concordance line was integrated by the careful examination of the whole text the sentence belonged to. The text was the account of the 'whole group Skype session' that took place towards the end of the project: on that occasion, the students had to watch three films and prepare a PowerPoint presentation to describe their most salient messages and features to the rest of the class (see Chapter 4). One of the Italian students who had watched the film 'Brick Lane' later wrote in her diary:

> "when Hans [a student from Innsbruck] said that he liked the ending I was really upset and a little bit angry with him, how can you like the ending?????Or maybe I'm only a romantic girl eheh".

As this brief extract suggests, it appears that the writer's uncomfortable feelings arose when someone from the group broke what she thought were the internal rules of the virtual community and challenged its sense of cohesive identity by expressing direct and overt disagreement. Interestingly, the extract also reveals the student's inability to embrace other points of view and to understand the reasons for her peer's dissent, something that seems to unveil her difficulty in activating and manifesting intercultural communicative competence. It is worth noting, however, that the student's negative feelings were immediately smoothed by the use of hedges. As Brown and Levinson suggest (1987: 145), hedges are particles, words or phrases such as *maybe* or *just* which modify the "degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set" and therefore soften the force of an utterance. In the excerpt above, the final sentence "Or maybe I'm only a romantic girl eheh" contains a few

hedges (*maybe*, *or*, *only*, *eheh*) which, by placing the whole episode in a somewhat playful light, minimize the impact of the whole comment and appear to smooth the Italian student's inability to show understanding and critical awareness. Yet, what makes the Padova participant's comment even more interesting is its link with the private Facebook message that the same student sent to me a few of days after she had posted her diary entry:

> "Marta you know what? ahaha yesterday evening I was watching tv and I was thinking about my life when my mobile phone rang ahah I looked at the screen and I saw "Eike". I gave her my mobile phone's number because we will go together in Vienna, you read it in my diary I think. any way I answered and it wasn't Eike but HANS ahahahahahahahahah he wanted to apologise because he said his comment during the presentation about the ending of Brick Lane and he read my diary and he saw that I was angry. ahaha I was schocked, this is what we call: intercultural exchange, no?"

Although this message does not clearly reveal whether the episode was conducive to real intercultural learning, the Italian student's words still show that she was positively impressed by her peer's effort of reconciliation, something which appears to have triggered renewed understanding and cooperation. The two extracts reported above can be interpreted in two complementary ways: on the one hand, they appear to indicate that uncomfortable moments were not due to the national, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds of the students involved in the project, but to the feeling that some of the members' online behaviour had broken the agreed rules for communication, thus affecting the unity of the online Community of Practice. This appears to be in line with some of the observations that Dooly drew from her study of online communication within a heterogeneous group of student-teachers (2011), in which she noticed that misunderstanding was primarily due to personal (or group)

expectations. On the other hand, the episode described above seems to confirm that uncomfortable moments can still provide opportunities to activate ICC (Hinnenkamp 1999): by giving vent to one's true feelings in a direct yet playful way – as the Padova student did by mitigating her statement – and responding to them in a proactive and positive way – as Hans did by apologizing for his directness – the extracts above appear to show that both students were able to negotiate and cooperatively re-build a space for intercultural dialogue, one in which conflict and disappointment were seen as starting points for enhanced communication and understanding within an online Community of Practice.

In sum, the exploration of the concordance lines of the adjectives used by the Italian students to comment on the exchange and report on their feelings revealed some of the features of the third space that was created within the online Community of Practice. This became evident not only in the use of adjectives with a positive connotation (e.g. *great*, *amazing*, *happy*, *proud*), but also in the presence of adjectives such as *nervous*, *upset* and *sorry* which, although normally conveying a negative connotation, actually express the writer's deep commitment to the activities and aims of the group, despite the challenges caused by technical problems and the complexity of the topics under discussion.

The investigation of the Innsbruck corpus led to similar observations: here, adjectives explicitly referring to the telecollaboration exchange and the writer's feelings towards it were found to occur 150 times. Of these, adjectives with positive connotation represented 80% (120 occurrences), while adjectives commonly associated with negative feelings were found 30 times, thus making up 20% of the whole group. The following Figure illustrates the percentage relationship between the two sets of adjectives in the Innsbruck corpus:

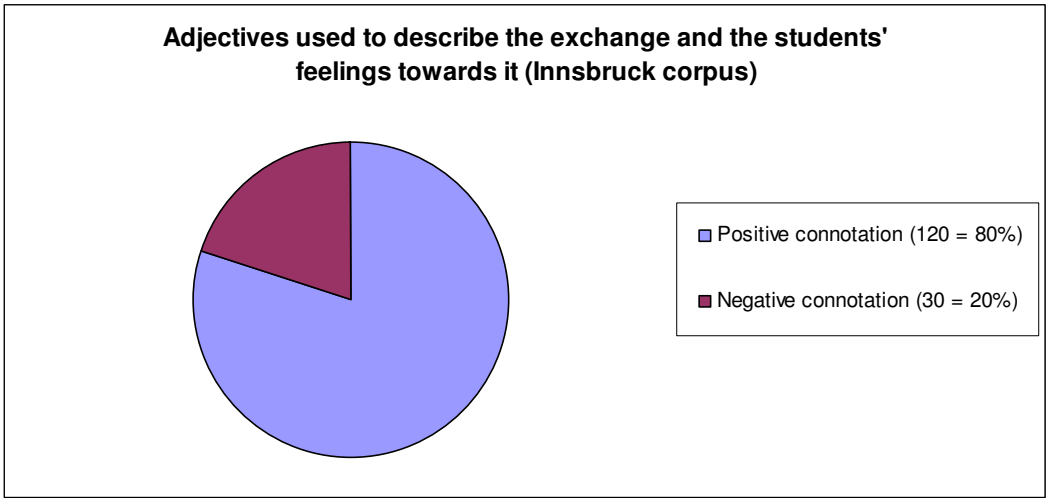


Figure 64. Adjectives used in the Innsbruck corpus to describe the exchange and the students' feelings towards it

In their texts, the students from Innsbruck mostly described their experience by using adjectives with positive connotation: in this sense, the exchange, its activities and its general atmosphere were defined *interesting* (40 occurrences, including its misspelled form *interessting*), *great* (13), *funny* (12), *good* (10), *different* (10), *exciting* (6), *positive* (4), *amazing* (3), *thought-provoking* (3), *rewarding* (2), *helpful* (2), *important* (1), *fast* (1), *enriching* (1), *engaging* (1), *open* (1), *unbiased* (1), *constructive* (1), and *genial* (1). The adjectives that were utilized to express the students' positive feelings, in turn, included *happy* (5), *excited* (4), *surprised* (3), *curious* (3), *relaxed* (2) and *glad* (2). All the adjectives conveying positive connotation are exemplified in Table 24 below:

INNSBRUCK: POSITIVE CONNOTATION		
Adjectives describing Skype sessions, peers, activities and topics		
Adjective	**Occurrences**	**Example**
INTERESTING / INTERESSTING	37 / 3	"Zara told us about herself and her multiple identities. It was very interesting to experience such a topic via an actual member of our group" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
GREAT	13	"I really enjoy this Skype sessions every Friday afternoon, because it's a

		great opportunity to actually speak English" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
FUNNY	12	"After that, we discussed the comic-strip story, which was very funny but also made us reflect…" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
GOOD	10	"We had a really good conversation" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
DIFFERENT	10	"Speaking and reflecting about my homecountry - Austria - in a different way, from a different point of view, made me also discover new aspects within my own perspective" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
EXCITING	6	"At first we introduced ourselves to each other. It wasn't hard to keep the conversation going, because it was very exciting to experience such a exchange project." (IBK_Facebook subcorpus)
POSITIVE	4	"All in all I absolutely liked this first session. There were a lot of points which were really positive…" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
AMAZING	2	"I found this video simply amazing" (IBK_Facebook subcorpus)
THOUGHT-PROVOKING	3	"Woooow what could I say after these touching and thought-provoking words fo Chimamanda???? I´m fascinated." (IBK_Facebook subcorpus)
HELPFUL	2	"I have to say that we worked very well together for our presentation and my colleagues were really helpful" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
IMPORTANT	1	"Talking to two people from Italy and comparing their attitudes and traditions to mine, I discovered that, even if we come from the same country, there are some interesting differences between us. Also individual insights are important in this kind of communication since each person is different from the other and has therefore a different perception of the world" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)

FAST	1	“Time sure has gone by fast since we’ve started our exchange project back in October” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
ENRICHING	1	“Despite technical problems which we had at the beginning this cultural exchange was enriching” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
ENGAGING	1	“Thank you very much for all these engaging conversations” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
OPEN	1	“During the course of this project, I was able to witness a positive, open, constructive, genial and unbiased atmosphere” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
CONSTRUCTIVE	1	Ibid.
GENIAL	1	Ibid.
UNBIASED	1	Ibid.
Adjectives expressing the writer’s feelings towards the experience		
HAPPY	4	“Sara and Madalena are nice girls and I was so happy to get to know them” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
EXCITED	4	“Before the session, I was very excited, because I have never made anything like that before and I had fears, that I had nothing to talk about with the other persons which I get to know. However all my fears where without any reason” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
SURPRISED	3	“Our first Skype Session was really great and I was absolutely surprised by how well things went- surprised in a positive way, of course!!” (PD_diaries subcorpus)
CURIOUS	3	“I think we have successfully applied the rules of intercultural conversation, we listened to another, were open-minded and curious, gave appropriate constructive criticism etc” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
RELAXED	2	“at the beginning I was nervous because I was "alone" talking to two Italian girls, but the longer we were talking the more I relaxed!” (IBK_diaries subcorpus)

GLAD	2	"All in all I can say that I am really glad that I've been given the chance to partake in such a project" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
TOT. POSITIVE CONNOTATION: 120 (80%)		

Table 24. Adjectives used in the Innsbruck corpus that convey positive connotation

Among the most recurrent adjectives listed above, *funny* provided particularly interesting insights into the nature of the third space originating from the students' intercultural encounters. With its 12 occurrences in the weekly diaries, *funny* was used to define the activities and prompts chosen to stimulate discussion within the groups. More specifically, the adjective occurred six times to describe the discussions talking place during the Skype sessions, as in "At the beginning of the session we introduced ourselves, which was very funny and interesting" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). In two cases, the same adjective specifically related to a video that one of the Innsbruck students had shared to prompt her peers' reaction on the topics dealt with in the project ("Sanja posted a funny youtube clip"; IBK_diaries subcorpus). In four cases, *funny* was used to define the games that were proposed at the beginning of each Skype session to break the ice among the participants (see Chapter 4): "The game was really funny and most of us actually managed to guess the wrong sentence" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). Of all the above-mentioned instances of *funny*, it is worth noting that three sentences also contained the adjective *interesting*, for instance: "It was also funny and interesting to talk about the stereotypes of each country, and whether the people living there, think they contain a grain of truth or not" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). The juxtaposition of these two adjectives appears to suggest that the Skype sessions were regarded both as pleasant and enjoyable meetings, and as an opportunity for learning and critical thinking. In this sense, therefore, the third space originating from the students' engagement in

their joint activities seems to have had a multifaceted nature, which combined both the playfulness that is typical of friendly encounters and the reflectiveness that is required in any learning environment. This is also evident in the following extract, in which the author comments on a comic-strip used during the fourth Skype session to stimulate discussion on discrimination: "After that, we discussed the comic-strip story, which was very funny but also made us reflect" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). Although not containing the word *interesting*, this concordance line appears to confirm the variegated nature of the activities and intercultural encounters promoted by the project.

A further adjective that provides fascinating insights into third space is *different*: as in the Padova corpus, the adjective was used to denote the variety of cultures, standpoints and experiences at stake in the interaction, as in "Mostly we agreed with each other. All the different viewpoints on the same subject really broadened our attitude towards the subject though. At least it did that for me" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). In addition, in some instances the adjective was also used to convey the ability to 'decentre' (see above) and reflect on the issues under discussion from a different, in other words renewed and more comprehensive, perspective. An example of this is the following extract, which emphasizes the shift towards a new way to look at things: "Speaking and reflecting about my homecountry - Austria - in a different way, from a different point of view, made me also discover new aspects within my own perspective" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). From this use of *different*, both in the Padova and Innsbruck corpora, it can be suggested that the third space emerging from the intercultural encounters promoted by the exchange encouraged the participants to take on a different, in other words a 'third standpoint' from which to look at the world.

To conclude this brief overview of the adjectives used by the Innsbruck students with a positive connotation, a final comment should be made on the following extract: “During the course of this project, I was able to witness a positive, open, constructive, genial and unbiased atmosphere” (IBK_diaries subcorpus). Containing five adjectives within the same sentence, this short extract appears to embed and sum up the qualities of third space as they were perceived by the writer of the diary. As can be inferred from these words, the third space emerging from this telecollaboration exchange was a welcoming and pleasant place which promoted open and constructive dialogue. This image of third space appears to confirm that the construction of a shared place extending beyond the national and cultural borders of interactants can stimulate the emergence of a third, critical perspective.

Although to a lesser extent (20% of total occurrences), adjectives with negative connotation were also found in the Innsbruck corpus. These included *difficult* (10), *confusing* (4), *not easy* (4), and *annoying* (2 occurrences, including the misspelled form *annoing*). Of these, *difficult* was mostly used to comment on the complexity of the topics dealt with in the project, or of the tasks that the students were asked to complete, as in “It was really difficult for me to do a presentation and not seeing half of the people listening to me” (IBK_diaries subcorpus). A similar meaning was conveyed by the use of the negative form of the adjective *easy*: occurring four times in the corpus, it stressed the difficulties encountered by the students in dealing with complex topics such as identity (as in “It's not easy to discuss about this questions, because there isn't any fixed definition about what an identity is”; IBK_wiki subcorpus) or with challenging tasks (as in “The next thing we did was to work out ways of effective intercultural communication, which soon turned out to be not such an easy task, since many ideas had the same body and we wanted to ensure a certain degree of diversity”; IBK_diaries subcorpus).

With its four occurrences, the adjective *confusing* was used by the Innsbruck students to describe the disadvantages of belonging to large discussion groups in an online environment in which no video clues were provided. This is exemplified, for instance, by the following concordance line: "Sometimes it was a little bit confusing with four people, especially when everybody wanted to say something at the same time" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). Interestingly, it is worth noting that the experience of working in large groups was not perceived as entirely negative by the Innsbruck students. As the following extract exemplifies, being part of a large group also provided the chance to approach a wider variety of standpoints, and therefore made the experience particularly enriching: "The extra-large group wasn't all negative, sure it was a bit confusing at times, but it also was very interesting to hear all the different opinions and views of the others" (IBK_diaries subcorpus).

Besides finding it challenging to approach certain topics and tasks, or work in large groups, some Austrian students also lamented problems related to the technologies adopted in the project. As can be noticed in Table 25 below, the use of the adjective *annoying* and of its misspelled form *annoing* clearly conveys a sense of frustration in having to cope with technical issues. Yet, it is interesting to note that the students were also able to overcome their negative feelings and appreciate the moments shared together with their peers, despite the challenges offered by the use of computers. This is clearly conveyed by the following extract: "It was a bit annoying that Vanessa and Chiara couldn't understand everything because of the background nois in their class, but this did not stop us from communicating" (IBK_diaries subcorpus).

Table 25 below exemplifies the adjectives found in the Innsbruck corpus and conveying a negative connation. As can be seen, the first part of the Table

includes the adjectives used to comment on the exchange, while the second part illustrates the adjectives that express the writers' feelings towards the experience:

INNSBRUCK: NEGATIVE CONNOTATION		
Adjectives describing Skype sessions, peers, activities and topics		
Adjective	**Occurrences**	**Example**
DIFFICULT	10 (of which 9 related to complexity of topics or tasks)	"Culture is one of the most difficult words to describe in the world, because it has many different meanings." (IBK_Facebook subcorpus)
CONFUSING	4 (related to drawbacks in having large discussion groups)	"What was a little bit confusing that time was that we were 5 people in our group, so when five people all want to say something at the same time it gets really confusing" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
NOT EASY	4	"The next thing we did was to work out ways of effective intercultural communication, which soon turned out to be not such an easy task" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
ANNOYING / ANNOING	1 / 1 (all related to technical problems)	"Well I have to say that the tecnical problems were really annoing and we could see the Padova peers only very briefly but it was still interesting because this time we were all together sharing the same experience" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
Adjectives expressing the writer's feelings towards the experience		
NERVOUS	5	"At first I was really nervous because I wasn't sure about if I would be able to speak about this topics, but with the time I relaxed and just talked and it was a nice conversation" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
SORRY	4	"I felt quite sorry for Ester because she was so nervous and there was nothing I could have done to help her" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)

AFRAID	1	"I had to create the PowerPoint presentation and I admit I was a little afraid to do something wrong. But fortunately we did a very great job!" (IBK_diaries subcorpus)
TOT. NEGATIVE CONNOTATION: 30 (20%)		

Table 25. Adjectives used in the Innsbruck corpus that convey negative connotation

As can be inferred from the Table above, the Innsbruck students used the adjectives *nervous* (5 occurrences), *sorry* (4) and *afraid* (1) to define their feelings towards the exchange, their peers and the activities. As in the Padova corpus, the use of these adjectives was not interpreted as entirely negative: the fact that the participants were feeling nervous, sorry or afraid, in fact, appears to suggest their deep commitment to their group, as well as their strong will to do their best for the community. This is evident in the following concordance line for *sorry*, in which the writer shows empathy for her Italian peers who had to cope with technical problems: "We had some problems with background noise and I'm very sorry for the girls in Padova" (IBK_diaries subcorpus). In this light, therefore, the analysis of the contexts in which the adjectives *sorry*, *afraid* and *nervous* were used unveiled the students' positive intentions and deep engagement in their group's enterprise, and therefore reinforced the idea of the emergence of a third space.

In sum, the investigation of the concordance lines for the adjectives used in the Innsbruck corpus revealed that the Austrian students also faced some difficulties over the course of the project: these were mostly due to the complexity of the topics and tasks as well as to technical issues, and represented a challenge in the construction of a third space. In this light, these findings suggest that third space is not only a pleasant and comfortable place that stimulates positive feelings and responses, as was evident in the use of adjectives such as *great* and *wonderful*. On the contrary, third space can be also seen as a site for struggle, in which interactants

have to cope with continuous challenges, especially when communication takes place in an online environment. Within this scenario, however, what still emerges with particular force is the students' willingness to take part in the project as effectively as possible, as well as their sense of empathy and understanding towards their peers. On the basis of these observations, this corpus-based investigation of the students' written output appears to suggest that, despite difficult or frustrating moments, the students continuously signalled their commitment to the aims of their Community of Practice and their engagement in the construction of third space.

7.6 Discussion

Adopting the *corpus-based mixed methods design* described in Chapter 5, the analysis illustrated in the previous sections shed light on third space and subject positions from a variety of perspectives. The investigation of the personal pronouns *we*, *you* and *they*, for instance, indicated the presence of a third space originating from the students' intercultural encounters: as shown by the predominant number of occurrences of the inclusive pronoun *we* (§ 7.2.1), this third space nourished the seeds of transculturality and transnationality, in that it enabled the exchange participants to feel part of a common group which transcended the national and cultural borders of the countries they belonged to. In this light, the third space promoted the construction of transnational/transcultural membership identities and allowed for the negotiation of a common third culture: this was further confirmed by the analysis of the pronoun *they* (§ 7.2.3), which indicated that the students were stimulated to look at other cultural and national groups, especially their own, from a third and detached perspective. Thus, it can be argued that the third space originating from the students' participation in the exchange promoted the emergence of a novel and critical standpoint from which to look at the world: no longer tied to the cultures

of a specific country or region, the students were able to construct a third culture and take this as a starting point for their metacultural reflection on the topics proposed in the project.

Besides activating a predominant sense of membership identity, however, the analysis of personal pronouns in both corpora also showed that the third space emerging among the students still encouraged the expression of personal national, gender and ethnic subject positions (see, for instance, the examples related to *we* in § 7.2.1). In this light, third space can be interpreted as a fluid and dynamic space which not only stands in-between two or more cultures, but also stimulates its members to constantly re-imagine their cultural identities and activate multiple 'both/and' subject positions (Bretag 2006).

The emergence of a third space was also further detected in the use of agreement/disagreement expressions across the two corpora (§ 7.3). Adopted to convey the writers' conformity with their peers' opinions, as well as to unveil and describe the negotiation processes that took place within the discussion groups, agreement expressions were interpreted as indicators of the students' attempt to claim common ground, express proximity and negotiate a shared repertoire of ideas, practices and values. This sense of proximity and closeness confirmed the findings obtained in the analysis of the pronoun *you* (§ 7.2.2), whose use with direct reference to other group members was interpreted as a marker of familiarity and inclusiveness. Proximity is also what emerged from the investigation of other indicators of third space, namely greetings, gratitude expressions and apologies, as well as exclamations and emoticons (§ 7.4), which gave further evidence of the common ground established among the exchange participants.

The analysis of the concordance lines for the adjectives used to comment on the exchange and describe the students' feeling towards it also provided illuminating

insights into the nature of the third space (§ 7.5). On the one hand, the use of adjectives with positive connotation such as *amazing* and *happy* conveyed the students' enthusiasm, optimism and appreciation for the collaborative space that they had created together over the course of the project. In this light, the third space originating from the exchange was seen as a collaborative and meeting place which obtained the participants' enthused and passionate consensus. On the other hand, the presence of adjectives that normally convey negative connotation (e.g. *difficult*, *hard*, *nervous*, *afraid*, *sorry*) revealed that the third space was not only a pleasant and comfortable place, but also a site for personal and collective struggle, in which the interactants had to cope with the continuous challenges caused by technical problems and/or the complexity of the topics under discussion. Interestingly, however, the analysis of adjectives with negative connotation also revealed the writers' profound willingness to contribute to the activities of the project as effectively as possible, despite the challenges posed by the online environment and the exchange topics. From this perspective, therefore, the students' use of such adjectives was not entirely negative, in that it shed light on the depth of their commitment to their collaborative group. This, in turn, seems to confirm that a successful third space is not an automatic outcome of online intercultural contact (Pegrum 2009), but can only flourish if participants are willing to interact and collaborate across cultural and linguistics differences and despite challenging situations.

As emerged across the various sections above, the analysis of third space and subject positions also helped to gain insights into the nature of the students' online Community of Practice. Thus, for instance, the exploration of the two corpora showed that the inclusive use of *we*, *you* and *they* (§ 7.2) delineated the boundaries of the community, and therefore distinguished between its members and those who did not belong to it. The idea of a CoP, and more specifically of a joint enterprise, is

what emerged from the investigation of the contexts in which the inclusive pronoun *we* was used to describe the tasks that the students had carried out together and the experiences that they had shared (see § 7.2.1). In addition, the exploration of the concordance lines of the pronoun *we* also revealed that the students made reference to a shared repertoire of norms for successful intercultural communication – including curiosity, openness and critical attitudes –, something that emphasized their commitment to common "ways of doing" (Dooly 2011: 334) within an online Community of Practice.

The use of agreement expressions (§ 7.3), as well as of apologies, gratitude formulae and greetings (§ 7.4), also confirmed the students' commitment to the aims of their online Community of Practice: drawing on Clarke (2009), for instance, the expressions and episodes of agreement that were found in the two corpora were interpreted as representing a form of support that the students adopted in the negotiation of a shared discourse repertoire and in the collaborative engagement in the community's joint enterprise. Moreover, in the exploration of apology expressions, the pragmatic use of *sorry* was interpreted as expressing the students' desire not to deceive their peers, and therefore indicated their willingness to participate in the group's joint enterprise in an effective and successful way.

The idea of a Community of Practice was also detected in the exploration of the adjectives used in the two corpora: in particular, the words *angry* and *upset* discussed in § 7.5 revealed that one of the students' uncomfortable feelings arose when a group member broke what she perceived were the internal rules of the community and challenged its sense of cohesive identity by explicitly expressing disagreement. As the analysis demonstrated, the two students involved in this episode were later able to re-build a respectful space for collaboration, thus creating enhanced opportunities for dialogue within the Community of Practice.

In sum, the exploration of the Padova and Innsbruck corpora signalled the emergence of a third, transnational and transcultural space among the participants in the telecollaboration project. Stretching beyond national and cultural borders, this third space enabled the students to imagine and re-imagine a variety of subject positions, which also included individual gender, national and ethnic identities. Within this variegated scenario, what constantly prevailed was the feeling of belonging to a common group, something that is revealed by the students' predominant identification with their community and its goals. In this sense, the transnational and transcultural nature of this third space appears to have helped the students develop a sense of common identity and to negotiate a shared set of rules for collaboration despite the continuous challenges offered by the project. This, in turn, seems to have created a profound sense of commitment to the activities and aims of the group, which included the discussion of metacultural topics, the exchange of ideas and experiences, and collaborative work to produce a final product. Thus, it can be argued that the students' sense of belonging to a common group, their construction of a shared repertoire and of a transnational culture, as well as their engagement in a joint enterprise are the main components of the third space that was detected in the analysis of the two corpora. As has been suggested above, these findings provide clear evidence of the relationship that exists, in this specific study, between third space and Community of Practice.

What the analysis discussed so far has not yet clarified is the link between *lingua franca* communication and third space/Community of Practice. The fact that none of the indicators of third space discussed above provided insights into this relationship is, in my view, due to the nature of the texts that make up the two corpora under investigation. Neither the diaries, the posts to the wikipage or the comments in the Facebook forums, in fact, contain any explicit indication of the

students' perception of their use of the *lingua franca*: although the authors of these texts did indeed describe both the collaboration within their group and the challenges that they encountered in the use of a foreign language, no specific reference was made to the adoption of a *lingua franca* for communication and collaboration. In this sense, the analysis presented in this Chapter does not allow one to draw any observations on the consequences that using a contact language may have on the construction of a third space and CoP. To clarify this point, however, it may be useful to take into account the answers that both groups of students gave, at the end of the project, to the post-questionnaire (see Chapter 4) and, more specifically, to the question "How did you feel interacting with other learners of English, using a lingua franca? Bring examples to justify your answer". Overall, the use of a *lingua franca* was described by both groups as *great*, *interesting*, *exciting* and *engaging*, something which reminds of the enthusiastic adjectives illustrated in § 7.5. As already discussed in Chapter 4 (section § 4.6), most students – especially the ones from Padova - felt less anxious and nervous in using English with other non-native speakers, with which they felt they shared the same circumstances and difficulties: in their words, using a *lingua franca* meant helping each other with the language (Mara, IBK), discuss common mistakes and doubts about its use (Sofia, PD), and negotiating language forms and meanings (Elisabetta, PD). Although some students from Innsbruck also reported on some challenges in the use of ELF, which were apparently mostly due to their Italian peers' lower level of proficiency, the adoption of a *lingua franca* was generally welcomed with enthusiasm and appreciation: from what emerged from the answers to the post-questionnaire, using ELF encouraged the participants to negotiate a shared linguistic repertoire and to help each other so as to communicate as clearly and effectively as possible. In this light, therefore, the adoption of a contact language seems to have fostered the construction of a Community of Practice with a "common

communicative purpose" (Jenkins 2009: 211), and to have cemented the participants' feeling of proximity, mutual support and membership within a transnational and transcultural third space.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Introduction

The present Chapter represents the final shore of our journey across the various disciplines that have underpinned my research. As suggested in Chapter 1, the work presented in this thesis situates itself in the still limited but growing body of literature on telecollaboration exchanges which adopt English as a *lingua franca*, and aims to explore their impact on intercultural learning and their implications on the negotiation of shared spaces and identities. In order to do so, Chapters 2 and 3 outlined the disciplinary fields underpinning my research, namely telecollaboration and intercultural communicative competence. More specifically, Chapter 2 addressed the nature of telecollaboration by describing it as a form of institutionalized NBLT which, drawing on the potential of CMC, aims to foster learners' intercultural communicative competence, language skills and new online literacies through online interaction with people from different cultural and language backgrounds. Chapter 3, for its part, attempted to define the role played by the cultural component in the teaching and learning of a foreign language in greater depth: after outlining the complex and multifaceted relationship between language and culture that has permeated L2 education over the past five decades, the Chapter described Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997) as a valid approach to L2 teaching, in that it gives prominence to the cultural component of the learning process while at the same time rejecting NS supremacy over the appropriateness of sociocultural and linguistic behaviours. Besides outlining the major strengths and

weaknesses of Byram's framework, Chapter 3 also touched upon the notion of third space, intended as a negotiated and fluid site which originates in the interstices of the cultures involved in interaction (Kramsch 1993), and in which identities and values are constantly re-shaped and re-imagined by the interlocutors. Seen in this light, third space was described as the ideal site for intercultural learning, in that it allows participants to embrace different cultures and values from a critical perspective and recognize the dialogic relationship between them.

After outlining the various disciplines that constituted the theoretical framework for my research, Chapter 4 of this thesis described the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange, in other words a three-month telecollaboration project between students majoring in *Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale* at the University of Padova (Italy) and students attending a course in Cultural Studies at the University of Innsbruck (Austria). For both groups English was the foreign language of their studies, and was therefore used as a contact language for communication. In line with the goals of other telecollaboration practices (Guth and Helm 2010), the project aimed at providing the participants with opportunities to manifest intercultural communicative competence, perfect their language skills and stimulate their 'new online literacies'.

Besides describing how the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange was set up, reporting on the students' feedback about it, and outlining the major difficulties that were encountered by both participants and instructors, Chapter 4 placed particular emphasis on the description of the various tasks, topics and tools that were adopted to prompt discussion and collaboration. Of these, the topics chosen for the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' exchange nourished two major strengths, in that they had a metacultural nature, and aimed at prompting a transnational and transcultural stance. As for the former, the Chapter highlighted the potential of selecting metacultural

topics such as culture, identity and representation to foster intercultural dialogue: by proposing topics that have the 'nature of culture' as their object, the students were encouraged to unveil, clarify and identify what they meant by the definitions and assumptions that they used to describe culture and other related issues. In this way, they were stimulated to investigate the various personal and collective linguacultures at play in the interaction, and to address the relationship between culture and language (a tie that, as suggested in § 3.3.2, is not given explicit attention in Byram's framework of ICC). In addition to prompting metacultural discourse, the topics of the telecollaboration project aimed at enabling a transnational and transcultural stance: instead of focusing on cultural issues within a national framework, they encouraged the students to address the issues under discussion by gradually moving from a personal, local and national perspective to a transnational view that could embrace a variety of global standpoints. As suggested in Chapter 4, the choice of adopting transnational topics to prompt discussion and critical reflection aimed at shifting the focus away from the national paradigm that seems to still permeate foreign language education - and that also emerges in Byram's 1997 framework -, according to which learning a foreign language implies acquiring knowledge about a target, dominant and national culture.

Chapter 5 described the methodology that was adopted to search for evidence of intercultural communicative competence in the students' written output (*RQ1*), and to investigate the emergence of a third space and of various subject positions on the part of the exchange participants (*RQ2*): starting from an overview of qualitative and quantitative research, the Chapter attempted to demonstrate the potential of a mixed methods approach to gain deeper understanding of research problems. Adopting a pragmatic stance (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003a), Chapter 5 also provided examples of how MMR was implemented in this research by

describing the *multistrand conversion mixed methods design* that was adopted to respond to *RQ1*, as well as the *corpus-based mixed methods design* that was specifically developed to answer *RQ2*. On the basis of these designs, the following chapters presented and discussed the findings obtained from the investigation of intercultural communicative competence (Chapter 6), and the exploration of third space and subject positions (Chapter 7). Drawing on these results, the aim of the following sections is to sum up the inferences drawn from the analysis presented in the previous chapters, in order to explore the extent to which my analysis has been successful in answering the initial research questions (§ 8.2), and to unveil some implications for further practice and research in the field of telecollaboration (§ 8.3 and § 8.4).

8.2 Returning to my research questions

Drawing on Byram's framework (1997) and adapting it to the context of this telecollaborion exchange, the first aim of this study was to search for evidence of intercultural communicative competence in the Italian students' diaries and posts to the Facebook forums (see *RQ1* on page 19). By adopting a mixed methods approach, the investigation described in Chapter 6 gave evidence of the *savoirs* that the participants activated during the Skype sessions and later translated into their weekly diaries and Facebook posts. In addition, as in the case of the skills of discovery and interaction, the inquiry pinpointed some of the strategies that were used to acquire new knowledge in a transnational and transcultural context such as *lingua franca* communication, in which little or nothing is known about the various Cs3 (Cultures-three) involved in interaction.

For each dimension of ICC, the analysis conducted on the students' personal journals and Facebook posts unearthed significant trends across weeks and

forums, and suggested the existence of a potential link between topic selection, task design and the manifestation of intercultural communicative competence. Thus, as demonstrated in § 6.2, the dimensions of attitudes, knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction emerged with remarkable frequency in the diaries devoted to the first Skype session, whose tasks encouraged the students to explore their peers' lifestyles and learn more about their interests and studies. Instead, the skills of interpreting and relating, as well as critical cultural awareness, appear to have been particularly stimulated by the topics and tasks of the third Skype session, which enabled the participants to discuss the notion of identity and to interpret similarities and differences between the metacultural meanings attributed to it. Similar observations were shared in the analysis of the students' posts to the Facebook forums (§ 6.3): Forum 1, for instance, appears to have greatly stimulated the participants to interpret other values, meanings and behaviours, and to relate them to their own culture, as well as to critically reflect on differing points of view and cultural practices. In this sense, the prompts for Forum 1 seem to have stimulated the students' skills of interpreting and relating and critical cultural awareness. The tasks and materials of the second forum on Facebook, in turn, appear to have prompted the participants' ability to reflect on metacultural issues in particular, something that was considered as the key to understanding the relatively high frequency of stretches of text that are related to the dimension of critical cultural awareness.

The observations shared above were reinforced by the two mixed methods case studies described in § 6.4: thus, for instance, the analysis of Ester's written output, as well as of her answers to the final self-assessment, pre- and post-questionnaires and interview, indicated that the topics and tasks of the project (e.g. 'identity' in the third Skype session, and 'culture' in Forum 2) were conducive to the manifestation of the student's *savoirs*, and in particular of the dimensions of critical

cultural awareness and skills of interpreting and relating. In Matteo's case study, it was the student's posts to the forums and wikipages that gave proof of his intercultural communicative competence, and in particular of the dimension of critical cultural awareness, right from the early stages of the project. Interestingly, however, evidence for ICC was harder to find in the weekly diaries, in which Matteo seemed more concerned about his language skills and his group's collaboration than on reporting on his intercultural learning: as suggested in § 6.4, the fact that certain features of the Skype sessions, namely language and collaboration, were given prominence in the student's personal journals was seen as the reason why some of Matteo's *savoirs* appear to have remained dormant in his initial diaries.

On the basis of the observations shared above, Chapter 6 proposed a view of intercultural communicative competence which slightly differs from that outlined by Byram (1997): instead of emerging as a competence with differing degrees of development on the way to a threshold of proficiency, in fact, in the present study ICC appears as a set of *savoirs* that the exchange participants manifested when appropriately stimulated. As suggested in § 6.2.1, this does not imply that ICC is an innate quality: yet, what the investigation revealed is that all the Italian students involved in the project, regardless of the frequency and intensity of their previous contacts with 'otherness', nourished the seeds of intercultural communicative competence right from the early stages of the project. It was through the engagement in meaningful activities and encounters that some of these seeds were stimulated and given evidence of – for some students to a greater extent, for others in a less remarkable way – in the participants' written output. The extent to which ICC was manifested appears to be linked to a variety of factors, which include the depth of the students' commitment to the activities and, as Matteo's case has exemplified, the nature of the major concerns that guided them when writing their personal journals.

As will be suggested in section § 8.3 below, these observations highlight the importance of selecting topics and tasks that can provide students with potentially rich opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction.

The second aim of this study was to identify whether the participants' written output indicates the emergence of a third, shared space, and to determine how the two groups of students positioned themselves in relation to it (see *RQ2* on page 23). In order to do so, a *corpus-based mixed methods design* was adopted to explore the weekly diaries, forum posts and contributions to the activities on the wikispace that were produced by both the Austrian and Italian students over the course of the project. After compiling the two corpora, the analysis focused on a series of discursive features that were considered as potential indicators of third space and subject positions, namely in-group identity markers such as the pronouns *you*, *we* and *they*, agreement and disagreement expressions, other forms of explicit reference to group members and group dynamics, as well as the adjectives used by the students in their posts and diaries to evaluate the experience.

The investigation demonstrated the presence of a third space originating from the students' intercultural encounters: as suggested in § 7.6, this third space promoted the construction of transnational/transcultural membership identities and allowed for the negotiation of a common third culture which, no longer tied to the cultures of a specific country or ethical group, empowered the students to look at reality and discuss metacultural issues from a third, critical standpoint. Within this scenario, it was also interesting to note that, alongside the predominant feeling of sharing a common identity, the students also still activated a variety of other national, gender and ethnic subject positions. In this light, third space was interpreted as a fluid and dialogic place which promoted the emergence and cohabitation of different, yet not mutually exclusive, cultural identities.

As the analysis also demonstrated, the emergence of a third space went hand in hand with a sense of proximity, familiarity and closeness: this was indicated by the use of inclusive pronouns, greetings, gratitude and agreement expressions and apologies, as well as exclamations and emoticons. These discursive features were also interpreted as indicators of the students' attempt to claim common ground, and to negotiate a shared cultural repertoire related to the topics and tasks of the project.

The investigation of the adjectives used to comment on the exchange and describe the students' feeling towards it confirmed that third space is not an automatic outcome of intercultural encounters. The students involved in the project, in fact, also experienced difficulties and uncomfortable moments that represented a challenge in the construction of a shared space. In this light, the use of adjectives such as *difficult*, *hard* and *nervous* was interpreted as a sign of the personal and collective struggles that the participants had to face over the course of the project. Yet, almost paradoxically, the analysis of the contexts in which these words appear uncovered a sense of profound commitment to the aims of the collaborative group: instead of solely conveying negative feelings, adjectives such as *nervous*, *afraid* and *sorry* revealed the students' willingness to contribute as effectively as possible to the activities of the project, despite the challenges offered by the online environment and the complexity of the topics under discussion. From this perspective, the use of these adjectives was not perceived as entirely negative, but as a key to understanding the depth of the participants' commitment to the purposes of the exchange. From this standpoint, third space does not only appear as a site for personal and collective struggle, but first and foremost as a place which stimulated the emergence of a close-knit collaborative group with common goals. As suggested in § 7.6, the students' deep commitment to the activities and aims of their group, together with the emergence of shared membership identities and of a negotiated repertoire of "ways

of doing" (Dooly 2011), was interpreted as confirming the existence of a link between third space and online Community of Practice.

The construction of a third space and of a Community of Practice seems to have also been fostered by the use of English as a *lingua franca*. Although no explicit clues were contained in the two corpora under investigation, the students' answers to the post-questionnaire provided useful insights into the role played by ELF in the promotion of shared spaces. As discussed in § 7.6, the use of a *lingua franca* was generally welcomed with enthusiasm, in that it decreased the students' feeling of anxiety and nervousness: in their view, using a contact language that was not the mother tongue of either group stimulated them to help each other, discuss doubts and negotiate a shared repertoire of language forms and meanings. Thus, the use of a *lingua franca* seems to have contributed to the construction of a Community of Practice, in which proximity, mutual support and membership feelings were the pillars of a transnational and transcultural third space.

Although the two research questions (*RQ1* and *RQ2*) were answered and discussed separately in the previous Chapters and above, the notions of third space and intercultural communicative competence are closely linked together. As Kramsch suggests (1993), third space originates from a dialogic process of re-construction and negotiation with otherness: in this sense, third place helps interactants to develop a third perspective, thanks to which they are empowered to look at their own and other cultures from both an insider's and an outsider's perspective. As such, third space appears to be the ideal site for learners who are on the way to becoming intercultural speakers, in other words language users who are able to 'decentre' (Byram 1997) and put their own cultures in relation with those of others, thus manifesting the skills, attitudes and knowledge that make up intercultural communicative competence. In the specific context described in this study, intercultural learning seems to have taken

place because the exchange participants were willing to establish, shape and negotiate a third space, and to engage in meaningful and participatory processes of de-construction and re-construction of knowledge and meanings from a third, detached and critical standpoint. From an opposite, yet complementary perspective, it can be said that the third space emerging from the students' intercultural encounter and collaboration was a successful one (Pegrum 2009), in that – as demonstrated by the analysis discussed in Chapter 6 and above - it fostered the activation and manifestation of intercultural communicative competence. In this light, the findings of this study appear to indicate that ICC and third space were in a relationship of mutual dependence, and were both the fruit of and conducive to intercultural learning.

8.3 Implications for further practice in telecollaboration

The analysis carried out on this study suggests a few implications for further practice in telecollaboration. The first of these relates to the choice of the topics and tasks that should foster intercultural learning in online exchanges: with ICC emerging as a set of *savoirs* that can flourish, if appropriately stimulated, right from the earliest stages of a telecollaboration project, the observations shared above indicate the importance of selecting topics and tasks that can foster the activation and manifestation of the seeds of intercultural communicative competence nourished by exchange participants. In the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project, this was achieved in various ways. Firstly, through the choice of themes and topics that followed a sort of ascending journey of several interrelated aspects linked to culture (intercultural misunderstanding, culture and identity, difference and exclusion, discrimination and representation - see § 4.3.1). By embedding these topics in a variety of tasks and activities such as ice-breaking games, guided group discussions, online forums and

group presentations, the students were enabled to approach the multifaceted nature of culture by moving from the exploration of the other participants' lifestyles and personal experiences - in which attitudes, knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction were mostly stimulated - to the negotiation of wider processes of metacultural discourse, in which critical cultural awareness and interpreting abilities were required to access and understand a variety of linguacultures. In this sense, in particular, the study also highlighted the potential of metacultural topics to stimulate critical cultural awareness (see § 6.2.5): although entirely neglected in Byram's model of ICC (1997), the adoption of metacultural topics can in fact help students develop as critical and conscious citizens who are able to discuss, negotiate and reflect on the nature of culture and cultural discourse.

A second, yet interrelated way in which ICC was stimulated was through the selection of topics that could promote a transnational and transcultural stance. From this perspective, the analysis presented in the present study revealed that adopting topics that transcended rigid national borders and that enabled the students to shift the focus of their reflections from the personal to the local, national and global levels (e.g. gender discrimination) was conducive to the activation and manifestation of intercultural communicative competence. Not being centred around the national and dominant cultures of the two countries involved in the project, the transcultual and transnational stance that was promoted in the exchange stimulated the students to explore a variety of linguacultures, while at the same time fostering the skills, attitudes and knowledge that are necessary in any intercultural encounter. This demonstrates that moving away from a somewhat rigid national paradigm in the acquisition of a foreign language can still provide opportunities for intercultural learning, something that challenges Byram's claim (1997 and 2007) that knowledge of a foreign language should be accompanied by the learning of its national - and

dominant – culture (see § 3.3.2). This appears to have been particularly true in the *lingua franca* context of the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project, in which it would have been limiting to focus solely on the national cultures associated with English without also considering the potential of a transnational and transcultural perspective, which included and expanded upon the exchange participants' cultures by embracing a variety of Cultures-three.

A further implication that emerges from the present study relates to the notion of third space. As the analysis discussed in Chapter 7 clarified, a third space can grow out of a sense of common identity, shared repertoire and joint enterprise. This implies that promoting and constantly supporting the students' willingness to participate in the activities of a telecollaboration project can help them construct a third space despite potential challenges and difficulties. From this perspective, project instructors should monitor their students' behaviour, feelings and levels of engagement with the awareness that a third space is a fundamental site for intercultural learning.

In sum, the study discussed in this thesis suggests that the topics of any telecollaboration exchange should be selected and embedded in specific activities in such a way as to *stimulate* the students' attitudes, skills and knowledge right from the beginning of their online encounters, and not with the ambitious aim of *developing* them to reach a threshold of proficiency. More specifically, the present study also suggests that teachers and project instructors should be aware of the potential of metacultural topics to foster the activation and manifestation of ICC, and in particular of critical cultural awareness. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of promoting a transcultural/transnational stance towards the issues under discussion, so as to enable exchange participants to explore a variety of cultures and standpoints that extend beyond the traditional national paradigm of language/culture

education. As has been suggested, fostering a transnational/transcultural perspective appears to be a particularly valuable way of stimulating students' attitudes, skills, and knowledge in *lingua franca* telecollaborative settings, in which a sole focus on the national culture(s) associated with the contact language would limit the opportunities for authentic intercultural learning. In this sense, the present study highlights the potential of *lingua franca* telecollaboration exchanges in promoting the activation of intercultural communicative competence, and therefore helps to open up a new and fascinating line of work on the area of telecollaboration. Finally, the observations shared on the third space originating from the encounters promoted in the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project emphasize the importance of supporting and promoting students' commitment to their group's activities and aims, so as to empower them to overcome challenging situations and uncomfortable moments and build a successful site for intercultural learning.

8.4 Implications for further research on telecollaboration

The present study also suggests some implications for further research on telecollaboration. Firstly, the analysis discussed in this thesis appears to show the potential of telecollaboration exchanges to provide rich and meaningful data sources, namely personal journals and other forms of student written output, which can be used to investigate intercultural communicative competence and third space. In particular, this study confirms the utility of using the diaries produced by exchange participants as a primary source of information about the students' own beliefs and feelings (Pavlenko 2007) towards their intercultural experiences and learning processes. Furthermore, it shows that other text types produced over the course of a telecollaboration project (e.g. posts to online forums) can offer useful and meaningful insights into the attitudes, skills and knowledge that were activated by

the exchange participants, and can shed some light on the subject positions and spaces that were constructed and shared within the group. Although the scope of this study was limited to the exploration of ICC and third space, there is reason to affirm that the students' diaries and online posts can also potentially be used to explore whether and how telecollaboration fosters the development of language skills and new online literacies: given the richness of the data that it contains, the written output that originates from telecollaboration partnerships appears therefore to provide tremendously rich data and to offer a variety of different standpoints from which to look at the impact of telecollaboration.

A further implication that is worth sharing at this point is linked to the relationship of mutual dependence that exists between third space and intercultural communicative competence. As suggested in § 8.2, third space emerged from this study as a site for intercultural learning, in that it allowed the students to embrace a detached and critical perspective, and to become aware that their own ideas were not the only ones. In turn, third space was also described as the fruit of the intercultural learning processes at stake within the collaborative group, in that it was fostered through the students' engagement and identification in the joint enterprise promoted by their intercultural encounters. On the basis of these considerations, it can be suggested that any investigation of ICC in telecollaborative contexts should be accompanied by an exploration of shared spaces and subject positions, something that can enable researchers and practitioners to unearth the inherent link between these two dimensions and gain more comprehensive insights into the students' intercultural experiences.

Before concluding this section, a final comment should be made on the benefits of adopting a mixed methods approach to investigate the impact of telecollaboration on the activation of ICC and the negotiation of a third space and

cultural identities. As illustrated in Chapter 5, the use of a *multistrand conversion mixed methods design* as well as the development of a *corpus-based mixed methods design* allowed me to collect and analyze data, combine findings and draw inferences using both a qualitative and quantitative approach, and to finally gain deeper and better understanding of the phenomena under investigation than by using one approach alone. This was also confirmed by the two mixed methods case studies discussed in Chapter 6, which integrated both qualitative and quantitative data sources and thus enabled me to explore Matteo's and Ester's experiences from a holistic point of view. Given these observations, this study highlights the utility of combining approaches and methodologies to conduct research on intercultural communicative competence and third space in the context of telecollaboration.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Overview of assignments and topics

Appendix A provides a general overview of the assignments and topics of the 'Padova-Innsbruck 2011' project and their distribution across weeks. Far from being exhaustive, the table that follows aims at offering insights into the way the activities of the exchange unfolded over time. A more detailed version of this table was provided – and updated week by week - to the students on the 'Assignment' page of the wiki.

Meeting	Topic	Assignment
Before October 14	**Pre-exchange individual activities**	1. First of all, read the wiki homepage carefully: it is very important that you have a clear idea of what an intercultural exchange is, and of the aims and requirements of the Padova-Innsbruck project before it actually begins. If you have doubts, contact Marta at…. 2. On the Skype Names Table on the homepage, you will find a link to your personal page (identified by your name): click on it and then click on the "edit" function at the top of the page: you can now fill it in with a brief introduction about yourself. If you want to upload a picture of yourself or of anything else you like, carefully read these instructions on how to add images or files to any of the workspaces (=pages) of the wiki. 3. In this exchange, you'll be interacting online with people from another country: as preparation for your first meetings, we would like you to reflect on what makes intercultural interaction constructive and fruitful. Here is

		some 'food for thought': read this extract by Robert O'Dowd, and reflect about what makes intercultural interaction, both face-to-face and online, authentic and constructive. Do you agree with the author's claim? Reflect on it and take notes: your ideas and comments will be useful in your next class meeting! 4. Before class, please sign up in Fotobabble and have a look at the website. Choose a picture which best represents yourself and/or your 'world' or culture: you can choose it among your personal ones, or from the web. Save the picture so as to bring it to your next class meeting. For now, don't worry about using it, just make sure you have an account on Fotobabble and a picture before coming to class. 5. Complete the Pre-questionnaire . 6. Make sure that you have a Facebook account, and accept the invitation to join our private Facebook discussion group!
October 14	**Pre-exchange in class**	1. In class, with your respective tutors: what makes communication effective even across different cultures and languages? Which values, behaviours and practices come into play? On the basis of your experience and of the article by O'Dowd that you were asked to read, discuss with your peers and brainstorm some ideas on how to interact effectively with people from other cultures. Individually or in small groups (as suggested by your tutors), post your ideas on the following "wallwisher": http://www.wallwisher.com/wall/interculturalcomm. To do so, simply double click anywhere on the screen, change "anonymous" into your name and add your "sticky note". Your peers abroad will be able to read your notes too! 2. Individually, choose a picture which best represents yourself and/or your 'world' or culture. Go to Fotobabble, upload the picture

		following the instructions and record a short message which explains why you have chosen that picture and in what way it represents yourself and your culture. You'll need a microphone to record your voice. You can record as many times as you want before you save the link. Once you have saved it, copy the link to your Fotobabble by following the instructions, and paste it onto your personal page by clicking on Edit, as usual. If you can't finish this activity in class, please have it ready by October 20, 2011.
October 21	**Skype 1:** **Effective intercultural communication** **Getting to know each other**	• BEFORE the Skype session: 1. make sure that you have finished and saved your Fotobabble, and that you have pasted the link onto your personal page. 2. if you have not done it yet, please complete the Pre-questionnaire. 3. read the introduction that your discussion partners posted on their personal page. "Who are my discussion partners?" Check on the Skype Names Table in the homepage! Go to your peers' page, read their introduction, click on their Fotobabble, listen to it and think of some questions to ask them during the Skype session: your questions may relate to your peers' lives, studies, hobbies, origins, cultures, study life etc...If you want, you can directly comment on the Fotobabble or ask questions to your peers by posting them as a comment to their personal pages. Feel free to interact with them! 4. complete the following word-association game: for each given word, simply write **2 or 3 words** that immediately come to your mind. For example: what would you associate to the word "war"? You can write your answers either in English or in your mother tongue, as you prefer. Don't think too much about them, just follow your instinct!

		5. go to the wallwisher and read all the posts that you and your partners abroad have posted. Be ready to discuss them in your groups. • DURING the Skype session: 1. with your partners, present yourself and explain your Fotobabble. Ask each other questions about life, hobbies, future plans and cultures, and try to investigate the reasons why your peers chose a particular picture. Try to relate them to your experience, culture or habits: would you have chosen the same picture? Why? Why not? 2. on the basis of what you discussed in class last week, talk with your partners about what makes intercultural communication constructive: does anything different emerge from the ideas that you and your peers abroad posted on the wallwisher? How can you put your ideas into practice in authentic intercultural communication (as you are having now!)? Justify your answers by giving examples, and try to agree on 3 or 4 rules for effective communication with your exchange partners. **Describe the rules you have agreed upon in a collaborative post to your Group page!** To do so, simply go to your group's page from the Skype Names Table on the homepage, click on Edit, and add your content. If you wish, you can also add pictures from the Web to illustrate your ideas (remember to write the source where you have taken your pics from!) • AFTER the Skype session: 1. on your personal page, write a diary entry on the first session. In order for your diary to be useful and effective, see the instructions on the homepage. 2. visit our Facebook group page and start exploring **Forum 1**. For more information about the forums and the Facebook group page,

		go to the homepage.
October 28	**Skype 2:** **Views of the world**	• BEFORE the Skype session: 1. go to the Intercultural (mis)understanding page, read the guidelines and complete the activity as required. 2. read the answers to the word-association game on the dedicated page, **select two or three different lists of words that strike you**, print them and work out any vocabulary you are unfamiliar with. Can you notice any recurrent associations in the lists you chose? Are there any differences/similarities in the way you and your peers abroad reacted to the given words? How can you explain them? Take notes and **prepare some questions** for your peers in the other country! • DURING the Skype session: 1. if a new participant has joined your group, take some time to present yourselves and become familiar with them. Talk about anything you'd like to know from him/her. If you are meeting the same people from last week, take some minutes to discover more about any topic that you started exploring last week (religion, university system..). You have 5-6 minutes to do this activity 2. now, let's play a **game** in your small groups: you have a few minutes to think about 3 things about yourself. **Two of the things are true, the third is a lie**. Examples? "I'm an excellent cook, I've got five brothers and sisters etc..". Don't be repetitive, try to be funny! In turn, each person presents their 3 things, and the others try to guess which are true by writing in the chat box in Skype what they think is a lie. You have 7-8 minutes to do this game. 3. with your peers, discuss the three stories on intercultural misunderstanding, and focus on

		your answers to the questions suggested on the Intercultural (mis)understanding page: did you give similar interpretations of the causes which led to misunderstanding? Have you ever been in or witenessed a similar situation as those illustrated in the text? **Are cultures discrete and separate 'blocks' that share no common ground and will necessarily collide, as in the three stories?** And **if you go to and live in a different country, should you keep your traditions and cultural values as they are in your native country, or should you try to adapt to the new culture and values?** When you have finished, write a common commentary to the stories, including your reflections on the last questions, and post it as a comment to your Group page. Remember: this is a collaborative activity! 4. in the last 15-20 minutes, discuss the lists of words that struck you in the word-association game: ask each other what they associated to those words, and why. Can you notice any similarities/differences? Is there any cultural explanation for your answers? What about the answers given by the rest of your peers? Does any stereotype appear? • AFTER the Skype session: 1. write a **diary** entry on your personal page. Did this week's activities (stories, icebreaking game and word-association game) help you learn anything new about your peers, other cultures and your own culture? Did they help you 'step out of your own shoes' and see things from a different perspective? How does culture affect the way you interpret the world? Explain your reasons by giving examples (from your past experience and from the exchange activities).

		2. now that you have gained some more awareness on the influence of culture on our world view, go on posting your comments on Forum 1 in the Facebook Group forums...new prompts have been published there!
November 4		• no lesson at Innsbruck University = no Skype session **t**his week! Please work on the assignments for next week. • **Students in Padova meet with their language instructors**: how can I improve my English in authentic communication? Focus on form in a communicative context.
November 11	**Skype 3:** **Multiple and fragmented identities**	• BEFORE your Skype session: in our next meeting you'll be discussing the notion of 'identity'. Go to the Identity page and complete the assignment as required. • DURING the Skype session: What is your identity made of? To discuss today's topic with your peers, go to the Skype 3 page and follow the instructions. • AFTER the Skype session: 1. write a diary entry on your third Skype session, following the instructions on the homepage. 2. in bigger groups, as agreed upon with your tutors, start working on your Final Project following the instructions on the dedicated page. On it, you will soon find the list of people you will be collaborating with. NOTE: the deadline for the final project is December 2, 2011
November 18	**Skype 4:** **Difference, representation and power**	• BEFORE your Skype session: Some of our identities may be a marker of difference. Go to the Differences and Power page and complete the activity as required.

		• DURING the Skype session: let's explore differences into more depth! Go to the Skype 4 page and discuss today's topics with your peers. • AFTER the Skype session: 1. write a diary entry on your personal page, focusing on the things that you have learnt about your peers, their points of view, as well as about yourself and your culture. 2. keep on working on your Final Project
November 25	**Skype 5:** **Difference, gender and sexuality**	• BEFORE the Skype session: after discussing challenges and problems related to identity, difference and 'social labels', this time you will be exploring Gender and Sexuality. Go to the dedicated page and complete the activity as required. • DURING the Skype session: for the topics of today's session, go to Skype 5 and follow the instructions. • AFTER the Skype session: 1. write a **diary** entry on your personal page, giving examples of the things you have learnt and the way you felt. 2. post your comments in the NEW forum on Facebook, which deals with identity. 3. keep on working for your Final Project
December 2	**Skype 6:** **Final project**	• BEFORE the Skype session: make sure that you have completed your Final Project as explained in the dedicated wikipage. Remember that each group should have two coordinators (one from Padova, one from Innsbruck) and two spokespersons (idem). • DURING the Skype session: this week you will enjoy a **'whole group'** Skype session! This means that you will all be able to listen to each other and ask question to

		the rest of the class. During the session, the spokespersons for each group will present their PowerPoint to the rest of the class, focusing on the various aspects of the film that you have analysed. • AFTER the Skype session: write a diary entry on the experience: remember to focus not only on the things you have learnt, but also on your feelings and personal experiences! Here are some suggestions for this week's diary entry: what have you learnt from the film that you have watched and those that your peers have presented today? Is there any aspect in the film(s) that is particularly relevant to your life? And how did you feel in collaborating with your peers for the film analysis? Did you apply any of the rules for successful intercultural communication? Did you encounter any problems while collaborating? If so, were they due to cultural differences?
December 9		• Holiday at Padova University = **no Skype session** on this day. Please work on the assignments for next week. • Students in Padova meet with their language instructors on December, 7: how can I improve my English in authentic communication? Focus on form in a communicative context.
December 16	**Skype 7:** **Intercultural Christmases**	• BEFORE the Skype session: 1. make sure that you have posted your comments to **Forum 2** on the Facebook Group page. 2. in your final session, you will explore how Christmas is celebrated in your peers' countries and families. As preparation for the discussion, go to the page One thing about Christmas and complete the activity as required. • DURING the Skype session:

		1. go to the Intercultural Christmases page and follow the instructions for today's session. • AFTER the Skype session: 1. **no** diary entry for your this week... Instead, we would like you to reflect on the way -if any- this exchange helped you activate your intercultural communicative competence (remember ICC as defined by prof. Byram? If not, go to the wiki homepage!). Go to the Self-assessment page and read the intructions to assess your own progress. 2. please go to the Questionnaires page and complete our final survey: it is very important for us to receive your feedback about the project, so..make your voice heard!!

APPENDIX B

Case Study A: Ester

Appendix B contains all the texts that Ester composed over the course of the project, and that were posted as part of her personal journal or as reflective comments to the activities promoted on the wikispace and the Facebook Group page. In addition, this appendix reports Ester's responses to the pre- and post-questionnaires, as well as to her final self-assessment on ICC and the semistructured interview. None of the texts has been modified: the only exception relates to the names of the participants, which have all been substituted by pseudonyms.

Pre-questionnaire

1. *Enter your name*

Ester

2. *How would you define your cultural background (i.e. Italian, Austrian, Turkish-born Austrian resident since 1998...)?*

Italian

3. *How often have you dealt with people from other countries in your studies and/or personal life? Explain and give examples*

As I've lived in Spain I've often had the opportunity to deal with people from other countries.In addition, I've worked as a ground hostess at the Barcelona airport and it gaves me the opportunity to improve my skills both in English and Spanish.

4. *How many times have you been abroad?*

more than 10 times

5. *How long did your longest stay abroad last?*

more than a year

6. *How many languages do you know well (including dialects)? List them and indicate the approximate proficiency level (B1, B2, C1, C2) for each skill (writing, listening, speaking, reading)*

I can speak English and Spanish. English Listening: B1-B2 Reading: B2 Spoken interaction: B1 Spoken Production: B1 Writing: B1-B2 Spanish: Listening: B2-C1 Reading: B2 Spoken Interaction: C1 Spoken production: C1 Writing: B2

7. *How much time do you spend online every day for study reasons?*

more than 2 hours

8. *How much time do you spend online every day for personal reasons and fun?*

up to 30 minutes

9. *How often do you use the following Web-based tools?*

	Facebook	**MySpace**	**LinkedIn**	**MSN**	**Skype**
More than 2 hours every day					
up to 2 hours					
30 min - 1 hour					
up to 30 minutes	X				
twice a week					X
seldom				X	
never		X	X		
Other (please specify):					

10. *What do you expect to learn/improve from this exchange, in terms of both: a. intercultural competence; b. language skills?*

Regarding the intercultural competences I hope to learn something new about this culture that's unknown for me. Regarding the language skills I really expect to improve my spoken interaction/production and if it possible, I would also like to improve my writing skills because I know that I'm not very good in writing. I'm very

hopeful about this course because finally I've the opportunity to speak English regularly.

Personal Introduction (wikipage)

I'm Ester, I'm 22 and I'm at the third year of "Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale" at the University of Padua. Though I live in a small town near Padua named Pernumia, this year I decided to move to the city centre in order to be able to give all the energies in my studies. At the moment in the flat where I live there are other five people : two guys and three girls. As this is not my first experience far from home I can say that I love sharing the flat, especially if they are young like me. It gives me the opportunity to understand that there is not only my way of thinking but many others and above all I have to assume my responsibility in order not to annoy the other mates and so on. I think I'm an outgoing and lively person, I love staying with friends, have fun together even if sometimes I'm quite moody.

I'm studying Spanish and English at University and I have to admit that between these two languages I prefer Spanish for its cheerful and melodious sounds and above all because I've lived in Spain for a year and this experience has changed me in many ways. Otherwise, I love English in a different way from Spanish: it fascinates me for its culture, literature, history, wonderful places and living style.

I'm very interested in doing this experience not only to improve my English skills but also to get in touch with people from an unknown country for me (as I've never been to Austria and studied German)!

I know this is a very brief introduction of me, but I'm sure that we will have the opportunity to know us better!!!

See u soon guys! ;)

Diary for week 1

<EVAL-POS> What a funny experience I had last friday! </EVAL-POS>

<FEEL> I had my first skype session with <NAME> Petra </NAME> and <NAME> Maria </NAME>. At the beginning I felt quite nervous because I didn't really know how I could interact with them but consequently I understood that they felt excactly like me, so I decided to start speaking in order "to break the ice" </FEEL>. We have talked about our experiences, what we like doing, which university course we're attending.. ect. <ATT> Curiosity allowed us to know each other even though we didn't follow completely the main topic of the session. <CCA> Moreover, it is important to know a bit who you are talking to before starting to speak about more "serious matters". </ATT> A clear example of this, during the skype session, has been the topic of the death of Gheddafi which I tried to introduce in order to understand what <NAME> Petra </NAME> thinks about it, and how the mass media of her country related to this issue. Maybe it was too early to discuss about it..as I felt <NAME> Petra </NAME> quite reluctant of starting this conversation I decided immediately to change the topic! <FEEL> (and I felt sorry) </FEEL> </CCA>

<INT-DIFF> We've also talk about university, and I noticed an enormous difference between our university system and the Austrian one. <KNW> As a matter of facts, <NAME> Petra </NAME> has to study two subjects, which are completely different, in order to become a teacher. </KNW> Actually, I don't completely understood if their system is better then our, above all because we didn't talk about of pro and cons of our respective universities. <ATT> I will ask it her next week! </ATT> </INT-DIFF>

<KNW> We have also talked about dialects. In Austria there are many as in Italy; each region has its proper dialect. <INT-DIFF> However, they use it also in the

evereyday language and this is a big difference between our tradition; for example they can address to their university professors in dialect, wherease we are not used to do so. As a matter of facts,we consider dialect rude. </INT-DIFF> </KNW>

<TASK> <COLLAB> At the end, we had a great discussion and we decided together the 5 words to get the intercutural exchange interesting and usefull.

We have also enjoyed sharing some immages which express the key-points of our discussion! </COLLAB> </TASK>

<ATT> I'm really looking forward to next session, in order to speak again with my nice mates! </ATT>

<GRP> See ya! </GRP>

Diary for week 2

<GRP> <FEEL> I'm sorry girls for our last Skype session but I was too nervous for speaking and the funny thing is that I don't know why it happened! SORRY again! </FEEL> </GRP>

Even if I was quite "out of order" we talked about many issues. <TASK> We started the session doing a game, in which we had to think 3 sentences that could represent ourselves, paying attention to invent a lie. The others had to guess which could be the wrong information. </TASK> <EVAL-POS> Thanks to this game we had the chance to know us better and as it was the first time I met <NAME> Alexandra </NAME>, it has been really useful! </EVAL-POS> <FEEL> Incredibly I discovered that <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> and I have some friends in common! As a matter of facts my roommate is from Bolzano, the same city which <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> comes from. It has been an unexpected discovery that made me feel closer to my Austrian peers because, actually, Innsbruck is not too much far from Padua! This sense of closeness let me feel free to invite them to our little city. </FEEL>

<TASK> Then we followed with the second session's assignment and we discussed the three intercultural misunderstanding stories provided by our teachers.</TASK> <CCA> I think that everybody should be more comprehensive and tolerant towards people and the other girls agree with me about this. </CCA>

<TASK> During the last part of the session we worked on the word-association game and I discovered some interesting things about Austria and its tradition; <DIS> in the grid <NAME> Maria </NAME> and I read a strange word: Tracht ; we asked to our Austrian peers what it was. They explained us that it is a typical dress which is worn during a special Austrian events. </DIS> </TASK>

<EVAL-POS> Even if I had some problems interacting with my group I found it a very useful experience for my speaking skills and it helps me also to be more self-confident. <COLLAB> In spite of this <NAME> Petra </NAME>, <NAME> Maria </NAME> and <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> have been very kind and understanding. </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS> <FEEL> I hope that in the next session I will feel more comfortable! </FEEL>

<GRP> See you on Friday. </GRP>

Ester

Diary for week 3

<EVAL-POS> This Skype session has been very very interesting of course! </EVAL-POS> <INT-SIM> Starting with the six-words game (family, friends, etc…) we discovered that we were all agree on the fact that family and friends are important in the forming of an identity. However, I differed to them about religion because they considered it the less important, while I put it at the third position. During this game, another interesting aspect came out has been the question of nationality. Is it very important in the forming of an identity? We were all agree that it is not important and I think that <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> gave the best conclusion affirming that

she feels European and I agreed with it. </INT-SIM> <INT-DIFF> <NAME> Maria </NAME> and I differed to our Austrian peers about language because of different usages. As a matter of facts, we don't use dialect in any conversation, it depends on the person we are speaking with, while <NAME> Alexandra </NAME> and <NAME> Petra </NAME> use it as everyday language. </INT-DIFF>

<EVAL-POS> We had also a great discussion dealing with multiple identities. <CCA-COM> Initially there were no doubts on affirming that we have multiple identities but afterwards, analyzing the point 2.2 we wondered if we were dealing with <CCA-IC> "multiple identities" </CCA-IC> or simply facets of ourselves. I was very confused because I was agree on the multiple identity concept at once, but I think that we don't have to confound this concept with the fact that we have to behave differently in different contexts. It has been quiet a difficult topic to talk about, but it made me think a lot about myself and about the behavior I usually have with people in different contexts. </CCA-COM>

<GRP> See u on Friday girls!!

Posts to Facebook Forum 1: challenging stereotypes

<CCA> I decided to watch it one more time and many thoughts came up to my mind. I was wondering how much economical power and political situation could affect the development of steteotypes. <INT> If we pay attention on our (italian) situation and we read international newspapers we can realize that as a population, we are considered blind and uninterested whereas it is not so. </INT> Mass media have a big responsibility on it and they don't always consider this important aspect of their work.</CCA> <CCA> When I was living in Spain I felt often judged because of my nationality. People just see what the mass media <CCA-IC> LET </CCA-IC> them see. In this way, people who have come to me to discuss about Italy and its political/economical situation have the only negative figure of Berlusconi! What's

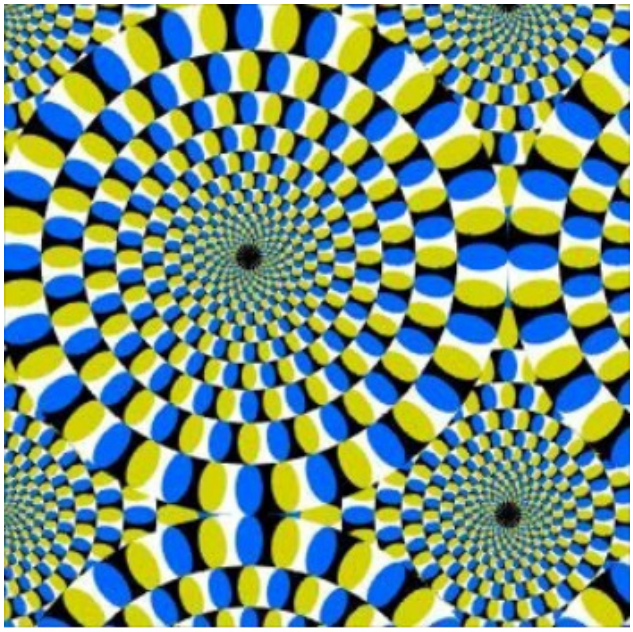
more, the fact that Italians stood that situation made those people think that we were <CCA-IC> ALL </CCA-IC> agree with it and implicitly with <CCA-IC> BUNGA BUNGA </CCA-IC> , corruption and so on. </CCA>

<CCA> I know that it could be quite different to what Chimamanda wants to say but I think that this is another kind ok stereotypes. Nowadays we are badly seen because of our internal political problems. We are judged as stupid people eating pizza at every moment, <CCA-IC> BUT WE ARE NOT SO! </CCA-IC> <CCA-PO> In my opinion before stereotyping we should firstly, as Chimamanda "advices", listen more than one, more than two, more than a billion of stories and secondly plunge into a culture to understand things that before you couldn't understand maybe becuause they are different to your culture. After doing these things we will understand that streotypes don't exsist, that I'm Ester, you are Mustafa, you are Maria and so on. Each person is different, is person must have the opportunity to be known. </CCA-PO>

Posts to Facebook Forum 2: defining culture

<CCA-COM> I think we all agree in the fact that it's impossible to give a clear definition of culture and I think that is because culture it's something too close to our unconsciousness. </CCA-COM> <CCA> Culture is how we move, how we relate to people, how we greet, how we react in specific moments of our lives. </CCA > <CCA-COM> It's something that we have inwardly but we cannot explain what it is. I would define it like a feeling that we always show but we don't know what is it. Is like our face: we know that we have it, we can see it reflected in a mirror but we cannot know how people see that face and its every single expression.. </CCA-COM> <CCA> During this exchange I've been thinking about the difference between culture, ethnicity and identity, but I couldn't solve this matter. Why couldn't they be the same thing? Why do we have to split these <CCA-IC> "concepts"

</CCA-IC> if they build up the same thing? Let's take another example: a paint. A coloured paint is made up by maany many colours and they are all mixed together. If we look at just one of them we just see a part of the whole paint. If I have to choose one of these metaphors, I would choose the last one (the ocean), because I totally agree that we are totally in a dynamic state (consequently our identities). However, I think that there are no suppressed facets, but it is simply a mix that we always show.</CCA> <GRP> Pay attention to this photo! This is quite my idea of identity!! </GRP>



Like · Comment · Unfollow post · 15 December 2011 at 22:41

D G and A like this.

"The living bird is not its labelled bones," says Margaret Atwood in The Blind Assassin... what you say, reminds me of this quote.
16 December 2011 at 11:21 · Like · 1

Ester of course..it's not JUST bones!
23 December 2011 at 19:07 · Like

Other comments in the Facebook Group page

I've no doubts that we are all completely satisfied with this project! Not only for the opportunity to improve our spoken interaction but also because let us mature in a new way. What I want to say is that before this experience I've never interacted with

people I've never met, above all using skype! It's not so easy to express yourself and to explain your tradition to people you don't know. This is a great project of course!! well done!! (November 2011)

Posts to the wikispace: discussing 'Intercultural misunderstandings" (preparation for Skype 2)

<CCA> <GRP> I agree with <NAME> Melinda </NAME> when she says that is not a question of 'no-respect' but only a lack of knowledge about the foreigner culture </GRP>. Starting from the third story, we all agree about Mr Chang's exaggerate reaction but I think that Scott should have checked Chang's tradition before doing such a misunderstanding, above all if he was in a work meeting! The second story deals with two important companies that are both too close-minded. None of them tries to cooperate culturally (sharing ideas and so on) with the other. We can see the enormous differences between German and American cultures. The former is methodical and quite traditional, while the latter one is more dynamic and look more at the future. I think that the title suggests that even if these two companies seems to be very similar, actually they are completely different one another! it's not enough sharing money and power, but for having success you have to share also your culture In the first story Clinton has not simply considred that maybe his idea was not a very good one. That party would have reflect only American culture and not the others. I wouldn't accept the invitation for this reason even though I'm sure that Clinton was full of good intentions of course! These stories reflect the importance, under all relationship, to be not only open-minded but also curious in order to understand many aspects of a certain culture. In this way you will be sure not to offend the people you are speaking with </CCA>.

Posts to the wikispace: discussing 'Differences and Power' (preparation for Skype 4)

<CCA> This video it's a sort of metaphor that try to underline the <CCA-IC> "labels matter" </CCA-IC>. Nowadays in our societies and above all in the youth generation we feel the urgent necessity to be labeled (and label ourselves) under a certain stereotype depending on what we <CCA-IC> WOULD LIKE </CCA-IC> to be. <CCA-PO> I think it depends on the fact that in this way we are more self confident, not only with people that you share your social life but also with yourself because it is as if you perfectly know who you are and what do you expect from your life. </CCA-PO> As I said before we can examine this matter above all among young people because it is important for them to follow any characteristic rightly in order to be respected and recognized as <CCA-IC> "a person who knows who he/she is" </CCA-IC>. However, as the time goes by, people change their manner of living, their social contexts (friends, high school/university etc..) and make new experiences that led them change their views and consequently their manner of appearing and being. This mix of consequences often create a sense of confusion because you can't follow anymore a single stereotype of what you would like to be, but a mix of stereotypes. You can be at the same time a free spirited person and a preppy one, both boy crazy and goth..you can be all kind of labels at the same time, as a vortex of thoughts, living styles, social contexts, colours and so on. The question "who am I?" suddenly appears in your mind. I think that we should understand that this is exactly the beauty of life: picking up a piece of many cakes you build up your identity. <CCA-PO> As you know, I come from a small village and I have ever felt this matter close to me. Due to my experiences I've learnt to be who I prefer to be, without looking on what the others think about me. I'm conscious that in the opinion of many I'm an <CCA-IC> "odd" </CCA-IC> person, somebody labels me as a

spirited person just because I've lived in Spain and I wear strange trousers, but actually, I'm much more of this!!I always laugh when I think that people try to set me in a perfect box! I don't even know who I am!! As I said before, I think that every single experience, every single person we meet in our path is important. Family conveys the principal values, friends help us to follow a stereotype and a living style, mass media make you crazy because it show you what you don't have to achieve that kind of stereotype and lastly experiences shape all this facets. I would like to deal with <CCA-IC> "power" </CCA-IC>in sense of being self- confident of yourself and yes, I think it's a question of power and self-determination in the social context. However, I'm totally convinced that if you build up your identities without looking the others you will be stronger that anybody else because you will perfectly know why you are so, who you are and what can you expect to yourself and to your skills! </CCA-PO> </CCA>.

Final self-assessment

Dear students,

through the following questions, we would like you to reflect on the extent to which this exchange has been useful in activating your **Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).** As illustrated at the beginning of the project, having some degree of intercultural competence means being able to see relationships between different cultures and interpreting each in terms of the other. It also involves being able to change attitudes and beliefs when interacting with people from other cultures, and adopting effective rules for intercultural communication.

The following questions are based on the skills and competences which make up ICC as defined by Prof. Byram: **before** starting with the self-assessment, please take some time to read and reflect on the five skills and competences that you can find on

the homepage of the wiki. When you are ready, follow the instructions below to answer the questions:

1. copy the questions from this page and paste them in a Word document;

2. read and reflect on the questions. Go back to your **diaries and comments** to the weekly activities both on the wiki and on Facebook, and reflect on episodes which might be indicative of any activation of ICC from the beginning of the exchange until now;

3. provide answers and examples to each question. If you feel that what is written in a question does not correspond to the way you felt or to what you experienced (= if you feel nothing has been activated in terms of ICC), please tell about your real feelings/experience

4. please try to be honest as possible: your responses will in no way affect the evaluation process. They are just aimed at helping you reflect on and learn from this experience.

A. Feelings and attitudes

1. Episodes which have aroused my curiosity and interest in other sets of values, experiences and beliefs (examples): It has been interesting to know about their family concept because it is quite different from ours. I was also interested in knowing their university system because it's totally different from ours.

2. Episodes in which I was able to relativise my own values and suspend judgement with respect to other cultures and perspectives: When I have been talking to Petra about politics.

3. Moments in which I felt uncomfortable and why: The first time I knew Alexandra I felt unconfortable because I didn't know her and I was too nervous to speak to her. This was also due to the fact that she can speak English better than me and this difference didn't allow me to speak!

4. Moments in which I felt comfortable and why: I have always felt comfortable with my peers because they have been funny and very patient with my English!

B. Knowledge

1. The most important things I have learnt from my Austrian/Italian peers about their cultures, experiences and values: comparing our concept of family with theirs, they are less involved with the family „chains“, in the sense that they are more predisposed to leave the family in order to follow their ambitions, while this is more difficult to do for us.

2. The most important things I have learnt about the way my Austrian/Italian peers see my culture (where they true or were they affected by stereotypes? How did I feel?): Sometimes they were affected by the typical italian stereotype (people that speak loudly and that gesticulate a lot) but I didn’t feel offended at all!

B''. Knowledge about online communication

1. I know how to use effectively tools (e.g. Skype and wiki) that I was unfamiliar with or had not used very much before the exchange. Example of 'things' I know how to do now that I didn't before: I have never used the Wiki before this exchange but it hasn’t been difficult to understand its functioning. Concerning Skype, I have always used it, so I didn’t have problems.

2. I know how to manage the difficulties and challenges of online communication. Examples of difficulties I had and how I overcame them: I didn’t have problems about this matter.

C. Skills of interpreting and relating

1. Moments in which I was able to understand and interpret my peers’ cultures and values by seeing them from a different point of view and by looking at my own culture from their perspective: there weren’t many differences between our

cultures actually. However, I had to identify myself in their point of view when we talked about the religion and also about the concept of family.

D. Skills of discovery and interaction

1. Episodes in which I was able to ask meaningful questions to discover more about my peers' cultures and opinions: when we have dealt with the religion, and its importance in the society.

2. Episodes in which I was able to ask difficult questions about controvertial topics, and to cope with misunderstanding or different points of view: when we have dealt with the multiple identities and our concept of ethnicity

3. Moments in which I was able to adopt successful rules for intercultural communication: in a first time my shyness didn't allow me to express what I really was thinking about. Fortunately, my peers helped me to put my shyness aside. There isn't a particular moment.

4. Moments in which I was able to cope with real-time interaction in English as a lingua franca: Many times I had to use English as a lingua franca. For example, two week ago I had to explain to a Brazilian tourist where the Sant Antonio was and as I can't speak Portugese, we had to use English.

E. Critical cultural awareness

1. Moments in which I was able to evaluate critically my own values and points of view, as well as those of my peers, without necessarily looking for agreement nor for the feeling that 'deep down we are all the same'. I could evaluate both mine and my peers' values and points of view just after the sessions. Actually, I've analyzed all these things when I was with my friends or I had to interact with other people in general. I think that everyone may say that all these matters we analyzed are generally known by everyone, but if you "study" them you'll become aware not only of yourself and of your attitudes towards the others, but also of the fact of being

apparently different and actually similar. We all have stereotypes to pull down and this is not obvious at all.

Final survey

Dear students, thanks for participating in this intercultural exchange! This survey is aimed at collecting your impressions on the project and its effects on your learning process. Please be as honest and direct as possible, as the information that you will provide will be only used for teaching and research purposes, so as to plan more effective intercultural exchanges in the future. In no way will your answers be used to assess your performance.

1. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your speaking skills? (from 1, nothing, to 5, very much):* 5 points

2. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your listening skills? (from 1 to 5):* 5 points

3. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your reading skills? (from 1 to 5):* 4 points

4. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your writing skills? (from 1 to 5):* 5 points

5. *How much do you think it helped you improve your fluency and confidence in speaking in English?* 5 points

6. *How much do you think it helped you reflect on your own culture and how it might be seen by 'others'?* 5 points

7. *How much do you think it helped you reflect on the 'other' culture and the similarities and differences with yours?* 4 points

8. *How much do you think it helped you learn to use the Web tools more efficiently for language learning purposes?* 3 points

9. *How did you feel in interacting with other learners of English, using a lingua franca? Bring examples to justify your answer.*

I feel part of a same "group". Even if people who I'm speaking with don't belog to the same country of mine, we can exchange our ideas through the English and this is fantastic!

10. Would you have preferred an exchange with native speakers of English? Why/why not?

Maybe an exchange with native speakers would have been better for us due to their perfect accent.

11. What did you like most about the exchange?

What I liked most was to think about a very important matter, which identity is , and "compare" my ideas with others.

12. What did you like less about the exchange?

What I liked less was to write the weekly diares!

13. *Among the tools that you have used (Skype, wikipage, Facebook Group), which did you like most/less? Why?*

I liked more Skype because I used to using it.

14. *How did you find the topics of the exchange?*

Very engaging and interesting

15. *Would you have preferred to have Skype sessions guided by a moderator? Why/why not?*

No I wouldn't. My aim is that I have to achieve my skills on my own

16. *In your opinion, is there anything that should be changed to improve future exchanges?*

Cut off the weekly diary!

17. *Have you remained in contact with your discussion partners outside "the classroom"? If so, HOW and through which tools?*

No, I didn't.

18. *This is the first time we use Facebook in an online exchange, so your feedback is really welcome: if you never (or very seldom) participated in the Facebook Group, can you tell us why?*

Facebook is just for socializing, not for 'homework' or university stuff.

Answers to the semistructured interview (January 2012 – length: 30')

R. (Researcher): Puoi raccontarmi meglio di come ti sei sentita durante la 'famosa' seconda sessione Skype?

E. (Ester): Non so bene, non so ancora spiegarmi. Mi sono sentita completamente bloccata, inibita, e non riuscivo più a parlare. Mi sentivo così in colpa perché non ero in grado di intervenire, e non riuscivo a spiegarmi in inglese. Il problema era la lingua, se avessi usato lo spagnolo sarebbe stato tutto più facile. Invece con l'inglese mi sono bloccata. Anche perché si era unita a noi Alexandra, e lei parlava benissimo l'inglese. Forse non mi sono sentita brava come lei, e allora non mi sono più sentita all'altezza della situazione.

R.: Però poi ti sei ripresa…

E.: Sì, perché ho fatto come mi avevi consigliato, ho aspettato un po' e ho detto alle ragazze che non riuscivo a interagire, e quindi le ho solo ascoltate per un po'. Loro sono state molto comprensive. Poi quando mi sono tranquillizzata ho iniziato di nuovo, ed è andata meglio.

R.: Sembra che il tuo rapporto con l'inglese ti abbia un po' condizionata. Mi hai sempre detto che non ti sentivi abbastanza preparata, eppure hai scritto dei diari e dei messaggi molto chiari e intensi.

E.: Dici? Mi sono impegnata tanto, perché so che a scrivere in inglese non sono

molto brava. Per questo ci mettevo un sacco di tempo per scrivere i diari, per me era difficilissimo. Ti ho anche scritto per chiederti scusa del ritardo, perché volevo fare del mio meglio, ma ci mettevo troppo tempo.

R. Dimmi del tuo rapporto con le ragazze di Innsbruck, è andato meglio dopo quell'episodio?

E.: Molto meglio! Anzi, è stato bellissimo. È stato proprio come essere parte di uno stesso gruppo di amici, e a dire la verità l'inglese ci ha pure aiutato in questo. Con Alexandra e Vania ci siamo trovate altre volte su Skype, da sole, e abbiamo parlato tanto. Con il fatto che Alexandra parla italiano abbiamo parlato in italiano però!

R. Di cosa avete parlato?

E.: Di tutto, musica, università, amici, e anche soprattutto di politica e economia. Anche dello scambio abbiamo parlato, e delle difficoltà che hanno avuto gli studenti di Innsbruck.

R.: In che senso?

E.: Perché avevano troppi compiti da fare per il corso, per noi era più semplice, ma loro avevano mille altre cose da scrivere e leggere per il corso.

APPENDIX C

Case Study B: Matteo

Appendix C contains all the texts that Matteo composed over the course of the project, and that were posted as part of his personal journal or as reflective comments to the activities promoted on the wikispace and the Facebook Group page. In addition, this appendix reports the student's responses to the pre- and post-questionnaires, as well as to her final self-assessment on ICC. None of the texts has been modified: the only exception relates to the names of the participants, which have all been substituted by pseudonyms.

Pre-questionnaire

1. *Enter your name*

Matteo

2. *How would you define your cultural background (i.e. Italian, Austrian, Turkish-born Austrian resident since 1998...)?*

Italian

3. *How often have you dealt with people from other countries in your studies and/or personal life? Explain and give examples*

Sometimes, foreign experiences

4. *How many times have you been abroad?*

2-5

5. *How long did your longest stay abroad last?*

A few days

6. *How many languages do you know well (including dialects)? List them and indicate the approximate proficiency level (B1, B2, C1, C2) for each skill (writing, listening, speaking, reading)*

English: writing B2 listening B1\B2 speaking B1\B2 reading C1 Russian: A2, A1, A1, A2

7. *How much time do you spend online every day for study reasons?*

up to 30 minutes

8. *How much time do you spend online every day for personal reasons and fun?*

up to 30 minutes

9. *How often do you use the following Web-based tools?*

	Facebook	**MySpace**	**LinkedIn**	**MSN**	**Skype**
More than 2 hours every day					
up to 2 hours					
30 min - 1 hour					
up to 30 minutes	X				
twice a week					
seldom					
never		X	X	X	X
Other (please specify):					

10. *What do you expect to learn/improve from this exchange, in terms of both: a. intercultural competence; b. language skills?*

a: To improve my knowledge from the cultural point of view, b: To improve my speaking and my listening

Personal Introduction (wikipage)

Hi everyone! My name is Matteo and I'm 22 years old.I think this experience will be very interesting and usefull, in order to improve my language and in particular way

to become more confident with the spoke interaction. I'm studying mediazione linguistica at the university of Padua, this is my third year, and I like this kind of university.I have many hobbies, I love sports; I have played football for many years, but now I'm doing Aikido.I like very much music, I've been playing guitar for several years even if now I don't have a lot of free time to spend on it.Another thing I love are motorbikes, in my opinion there is nothing which can give you the same feeling of freedom as a motorbike.I'm very curious about this exchange, and I'm looking forward to starting it.I'm very sorry for my English but I've made a full immersion of Russian for 4 mounths, and now I have to change again my mind in the English-modality. ;-)Well, I hope it could be interesting and funny, but no doubts about it. XDSo, see you soon everybody..

Diary for week 1

<FEEL> The first one.. wow!! </FEEL>

<EVAL-POS> Well, last Friday we have done the first session by Skipe, and personally I've found it very interesting from many points of view.. <COLLAB> first of all the interaction was successful, more or less we have clearly understood to each other and we have discussed about many cultural things. </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>

<LAN> I found great the English level of <NAME> Thomas </NAME>, he is very good in, also from the point of pronunciation, and I think it will be very important also to improve my language, I need of speaking and he is a very good mate. </LAN>

<COLLAB> We have spoken (me <NAME> Thomas </NAME> and <NAME> Sila </NAME>) for 50 minutes without any problems <EVAL-NEG> the last part on the other hand has been a bit fragmented, maybe because we didn't know what else to

say, <LAN> or also because we are not accustomed to speak for a such long time in language, and we were a bit tired. </COLLAB> </LAN> </EVAL-NEG>

<ATT> <LAN> However I think it could be a great way to improve my spoken interaction </LAN> and also to find out many new cultural things related to Austria. </ATT>

<EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> I think also all the elements for a satisfactory conversation have been respected, and we created the proper atmosphere for the conversation to let the new informations come out without any problems. </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>

<LAN> Of course I have to improve also my vocabulary and connected with the spoken interaction these could be the main goals for the next times. I want to be more fluent and clear, also in order to help the other who is listening to me. </LAN>

<EVAL-POS> I've found great pleasure getting in touch with another culture, with some of their habits, and at the same time (in this case) with his way of thinking. </EVAL-POS>

<ATT> For the next time I think I'll be ready with more questions, with the aim of not having waste of time.

(or at least I hope so.. ;)) </ATT>

Diary for week 2

<GRP> Hi everyone.. </GRP> <EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> this time I think went better than the previous one, first of all because we already known to each other, and we were less embarrassed. </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>

<EVAL-POS> <TASK> We have successfully discussed about several arguments; I found very funny and useful the lie-game, in particular because it helped us to explain something new connected with our hobbies or life in general. </TASK> </EVAL-POS>

<EVAL-POS> <TASK> Moreover also the words association game has been interesting, it gave us the possibility to share more information about our cultural point of view, to analyse the different opinions and to discuss also about stereotyped. </TASK> </EVAL-POS>

<EVAL-NEG> <COLLAB> As I've already said in the first diary, we have to improve the fluency of the conversation, because sometimes (in particular at the end) we don't know what else to add, and so there are some small empty spaces in the conversation; we must find out more questions or arguments to talk about, in order to make the conversation more fluent. </COLLAB> </EVAL-NEG>

<LAN> I also have to say that even if is quite difficult for me interact without the possibility to see the person who I'm talking to, it gives me the chance to improve my listening which is my weak point, also thanks to the fact that my peer is very good in speaking. </LAN>

<LAN> Then I must be careful when I speak because sometimes I make some very stupid mistakes. </LAN>

<GRP> With all these aims, see you the next time ;) </GRP>

Diary for week 3

<GRP> Here we are again for the third time ;) </GRP> <EVAL-POS> the last skype session went good enough, we talked a lot about personality, behaviour and identity </EVAL-POS>; <LAN> it has been interesting to focuse our attention on an abstract thing and try to explain it in English, as consequence it has been quite difficult, in particular try to let the other know what we meant by each concept.

<CCA-COM> it's difficult also in italian try to expain this concept, even more in English; </CCA-COM> but it was usefull trying to move in a field which is not very common in a conversation. </LAN>

<EVAL-POS> Even if there have been again some empty spaces in the conversation I think it was good; </EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> all the points have been analysed quite well, with many opinions and also some questions. </COLLAB>

<LAN> The next time I would try to use my English better with more attention and hopefully with less mistakes; we also have to find out some curiosities or questions in order to use the left time better. </LAN>

<GRP> No other things to say, so bye bye ;) </GRP>

Diary for week 4

<GRP> Hi guys everyone!!! this is number 4; </GRP> <EVAL-POS> <TASK> Last session we had a great discussion on the places in our city which are interesting or important and that show something or tell something about the city indeed. </TASK> It has been funny trying to explain why they are important and also what their functions are; on the other hand it has been a bit hard (quite obvious without the immages) trying to immagine them, just with the description of the peer, but everything went perfectly. :) </EVAL-POS>

<TASK> <CCA-COM> <LAN> Then we moved on the concept of identity again, and once more it was not so easy try to explain in English our ideas on an abstract concept; however we did, and also quite well I think. </LAN></CCA-COM> </TASK>

<EVAL-POS> <COLLAB> I have to say that this time we had no problems at all with time, meaning that we finished the discussion exactly at the end of the session, without any empty-spaces; </COLLAB> </EVAL-POS>

<EVAL-POS> so we had a great skype session this time ;)

With the hope that the next one could be as good as this one, <GRP> see you all the next week ;) </EVAL-POS> bye bye.. </GRP>

Diary for week 5

<EVAL-POS> Here we are, number 5; Last skype session has been as great as the previous one, no problems at all, everything went right and perfectly..</EVAL-POS> <TASK> We had a discussion on gender and sexuality, trying to compare the situation of women and of course the differences with men in the society in both countries. </TASK> <INT-SIM> <KNW> We have found out that more or less the situation is quite similar, in both countries we see the most important forms of women descrimination in the work field; that is ti say that for women is even more difficult to succeed in carrer, and there are some work places you can not look for. </INT-SIM> At the same time we have also analysed the situation in other countries, and there are realities which are worse, and some situations which are quite unbelievable nowadays. </KNW>

<COLLAB> Coming back to the skype session I can say that probably we have found the best way to attend the interaction, meaning that there are no more problems of time, <LAN> we are also a bit more fluent in the dialogue, even if personally I have to improve a lot.. and we also run better the speaking turns, so it is easier understand the other who is speaking..</LAN> </COLLAB> <GRP> So I think that's all.. ;) see you the next week..bye.. :) </GRP>

Diary for week 6

<TASK> Diary number 6; last Friday we showed and analysed the final project of each group, concerning three films which faced with different culture and with differences between these culture.</TASK> <KNW> Well, personally I have learnt some new aspects of Bangl. culture, for example the situation in the family, the roles, and the way of thinking; others were already known.</KNW> <CCA> It was interesting to see the woman position in that particular family, also the contrast

between the new women generation represented by the daughters and the old one by the father, and I found a bit strange that the older had some strong discussions with her father, a sort of microcosmo attemp for the emancipation; at the same time also the father figure didn't respect the idea which I had in my mind, he is severe and open minded simultaneously.</CCA> Then, the silence of the main woman character is strong too, maybe also stronger than the voice of all other charactres together; generally all the change line which goes through the film is very well expressed.<COLLAB> Working with peers was funny, I like collaborating together; maybe there have been just some organization problems, due to the lack of time, but nothing in particular, everything was good ;) </COLLAB> <EVAL-POS> <KNW> I think this activity has been very usefull and it gave us the possibility to learn not only the cultural background and habits of that countries, <LAN> but also a different English accent,</LAN> the situation of that kind of immigrants in London and their way of living.</KNW> </EVAL-POS> <ATT> It was nice also to see our peers in Austria, it would be fantastic to have the possibility in the future to see all of them personally and to talk face to face with them.</ATT> <GRP> Ok, see u the next time.. :)bye </GRP>

Posts to Facebook Forum 1: challenging stereotypes

<EVAL-POS> I've already watched it too two years ago, and I found this video incredible and impressive since the first time I listened to.. the way she analyses the details of her childhood, through things which could seem to us just banal but which are not.. the way she speaks and puts irony in her speech but hiding the sufferings of her past.. elements which are quite obvious for us, but which are "magic" for a children who has never seen the snow.. she gives us a vision of the life which is totally different.. and we should think about it.. </EVAL-POS>

<GRP> XD yeah very funny some of them in the pic.. </GRP>

Posts to Facebook Forum 2: defining culture

<CCA-COM> I've already studied these examples, and I find them very interesting..;) however is still not easy identify and define culture for me, coz we would have to analyse too much subjective and objective elements.. nevertheless I think that identity could be defined as the deepest part of yourself which is influenced by many elements, values, habits, situations and experiences during your life. (more or less) </CCA-COM>

<GRP> sorry the first time I mentioned culture in the first post I meant identity.. confusion XD </GRP>

<CCA-COM> I think that it is quite difficult also to define culture indeed, it's not easy trying to represent it; </CCA-COM> <CCA-PO> however I consider a core which is strictly connected with peripheral elements, and it influences and is influenced by all the elements around.. like the human heart more or less and the organs.. the core is identity, the influences which are costantly given by the dependent organs is culture.. there can not be one without the other.. more or less this is the vision which comes in my mind when I think about culture and identity..</CCA-PO>

Posts to the wikispace: discussing "Intercultural Misunderstandings" (preparation to Skype 2)

<GRP> <CCA> As my peers have already said the main problem is first of all the <CCA-IC> 'unawareness of the other' </CCA-IC>, all the misunderstandings are caused because they don't know well the other cultures. </GRP> <CCA-PO> But what I find very interesting is the fact that no one stops for a second and tells himself 'why is the other doing so?', in all the cases the misunderstanding is taken as a direct

insult, without the possibility of an explaination. We should stop for a moment and try to analyse all the causes which could have let the other doing a particular thing, maybe there would be less incomprehensions </CCA-PO> </CCA>.

Posts to the wikispace: discussing "Identity" (preparation for Skype 3)

<CCA-COM> 1. First of all, as we have already seen both in the text and in the video, we have to define what identity is..It is not easy to give a clear answer to that question indeed.. <CCA-PO> However from my personal point of view, even if we should discuss a lot about this assertion, yes, I agree more or less with that claim. </CCA-PO> </CCA-COM>

<CCA-COM> 2. It depends on the situation and on the contest, <CCA-PO> I think that sometimes identity influences situations, and others is influenced by life </CCA-PO>; but of course it would be a bit harder the discussion on it. </CCA-COM>

<CCA-COM> 3. Sometimes yes, and others not. Criteria? for example suitability. Then we have also to say that there are different kinds of people, so the case changes. </CCA-COM>

<CCA> 4. Maybe there are particular elements of one or more identities which are fixed in all the situations. </CCA>

<CCA> 5. Yes of course, ethnicity has an important role in it, And I think it could help you to define yourself, because we are influenced by the world around us. </CCA>

<CCA-COM> 6. Well, it's very difficult to answer.. <CCA-PO> However I think it is difficult to show completely opposite identities, because in my opinion all people have a main identity which influences the others; so showing complitely different identities would mean that you have not the main one. </CCA-PO> However to talk about identity we should define a lot of things, which could change in the mind of different people, so the discussion must be studied in depth. </CCA-COM>

Posts to the activities on the wiki: discussing "Difference and Power" (preparation to Skype 4)

<CCA-PO> In my opinion, the video wants to let us think about the importance of dressing (in this case) to show the way you are, and the way other people look at you. If we connect this video with identity we can say that dressing is a perfect way to show how you are, in a little part or complitely; it depends on the personal idea of identity. </CCA-PO>

<CCA-PO> I think that at the end she is confused because she could be everything and at the same time nothing of what she was supposed to be; meaning that dresses could show or hide who you are, they are just a way to express something which may be you or not, it depends on different behaviours. </CCA-PO>

<CCA-PO> Well yes, sometimes it happened; in my opinion it is more or less the same thing which we have already seen with the misunderstandings; before judging we should stop a moment and think about the cause of a particular action. There are many elements which influence your identity in the outside world, but it is also important many times the choice of who you want to be. </CCA-PO>

Final self-assessment

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through the following questions, we would like you to reflect on the extent to which this exchange has been useful in activating your **Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).** As illustrated at the beginning of the project, having some degree of intercultural competence means being able to see relationships between different cultures and interpreting each in terms of the other. It also involves being able to change attitudes and beliefs when interacting with people from other cultures, and adopting effective rules for intercultural communication.

The following questions are based on the skills and competences which make up ICC as defined by Prof. Byram: **before** starting with the self-assessment, please take some time to read and reflect on the five skills and competences that you can find on the homepage of the wiki. When you are ready, follow the instructions below to answer the questions:

1. copy the questions from this page and paste them in a Word document;

2. read and reflect on the questions. Go back to your **diaries and comments** to the weekly activities both on the wiki and on Facebook, and reflect on episodes which might be indicative of any activation of ICC from the beginning of the exchange until now;

3. provide answers and examples to each question. If you feel that what is written in a question does not correspond to the way you felt or to what you experienced (= if you feel nothing has been activated in terms of ICC), please tell about your real feelings/experience

4. please try to be honest as possible: your responses will in no way affect the evaluation process. They are just aimed at helping you reflect on and learn from this experience.

A. Feelings and attitudes

1. **Episodes which have aroused my curiosity and interest in other sets of values, experiences and beliefs (examples):**

A: Well, I think that all the exchange has been very interesting; it has been a pleasure to meet guys from another country, to see the way they are, what they think.. what I noticed is that there are not many differences between our ideas, we agreed more or less to everything.. and in my opinion it is not so strange, indeed Italy and Austria are not so far to see evident differences in The way of thinking. I found very strange the

fact that a lot of them want to become teachers, on the contrary here there are very few people with the same aim.

2. Episodes in which I was able to relativise my own values and suspend judgement with respect to other cultures and perspectives:

A: Honestly, we have talked about everything with no problems at all, we didn't have to suspend judgements and there has been respect in all the skype sessions.

3. Moments in which I felt uncomfortable and why:

A: Just in some cases with the English, because I wasn't able to express exactly what I meant.

4. Moments in which I felt comfortable and why:

A: Moments in which we shared ideas for example, It has been great to see my peer's vision, and very often it was similar to mine.

B. Knowledge

1. The most important things I have learnt from my Austrian/Italian peers about their cultures, experiences and values:

A: Of course I can not give a general judgement because I talked with just one person, but I felt that they are kind, respectful and open minded; this is what I received from the sessions.

2. The most important things I have learnt about the way my Austrian/Italian peers see my culture (where they true or were they affected by stereotypes? How did I feel?):

A: Well, it is quite normal that there could be some stereotypes, but I know it too about my country;

It is interesting to see how italian culture is considered as generally ancient, important and relevant; I felt proud. At the same time there are also some bad elements of my culture which are quite known, so nothing new.

B''. Knowledge about online communication

1.I know how to use effectively tools (e.g. Skype and wiki) that I was unfamiliar with or had not used very much before the exchange. Example of 'things' I know how to do now that I didn't before:

A: Well, I became more familiar with skype and it could be important for the future, and moreover I wasn't familiar at all with wiki, so I kept in touch with another online way of communication that could be useful.

2. I know how to manage the difficulties and challenges of online communication. Examples of difficulties I had and how I overcame them:

A: I didn't have particular difficulties, everything was clearly explained.

C. Skills of interpreting and relating

1. Moments in which I was able to understand and interpret my peers' cultures and values by seeing them from a different point of view and by looking at my own culture from their perspective:

A: Everytime he was analysing a particular element of my culture I tryed to see the situation from his point of view in order to better understand his idea; I think this is the first step to succeed in cultural exchanges.

D. Skills of discovery and interaction

1. Episodes in which I was able to ask meaningful questions to discover more about my peers' cultures and opinions:

A: Many times when my peer was talking I used to ask him some more specific questions, in order to discover something more or just because I was curious.

2. Episodes in which I was able to ask difficult questions about controvertial topics, and to cope with misunderstanding or different points of view:

A: Usually this happened when We were talking about some specific controversial topics, I used to give him different visions from different points of view(concerning stereotypes or misunderstandings), trying to see his approach to the discussion.

3. Moments in which I was able to adopt successful rules for intercultural communication:

A: I think that in all the moments of the communication you have to adopt successful rules, on the contrary probably there couldn't be a communication.

Moments in which I was able to cope with real-time interaction in English as a lingua franca:

A: Well, there have been more difficulties when we had to talk about astract topics or definitions, or

to explain something in details.. but overall it was fine without problems.

E. Critical cultural awareness

1. Moments in which I was able to evaluate critically my own values and points of view, as well as those of my peers, without necessarily looking for agreement nor for the feeling that 'deep down we are all the same':

A: I think that "critically" is a bit strong, better saying that we have tried to understand in the best possible way why sometimes my peer has a different vision from my own; trying to follow why and what are elements which influence my peer, from which point of view he analyses and in which way.. Dialogue is the best way to understand each other.

Final survey

Dear students, thanks for participating in this intercultural exchange! This survey is aimed at collecting your impressions on the project and its effects on your learning process. Please be as honest and direct as possible, as the information that you will

provide will be only used for teaching and research purposes, so as to plan more effective intercultural exchanges in the future. In no way will your answers be used to assess your performance.

1. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your speaking skills? (from 1 - nothing, to 5 - very much):* 3 points

2. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your listening skills? (from 1 to 5):* 4 points

3. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your reading skills? (from 1 to 5):* 2 points

4. *How much do you think the exchange helped you improve your writing skills? (from 1 to 5):* 3 points

5. *How much do you think it helped you improve your fluency and confidence in speaking in English? (from 1 to 5):* 3 points

6. *How much do you think it helped you reflect on your own culture and how it might be seen by 'others'? (from 1 to 5):* 4 points

7. *How much do you think it helped you reflect on the 'other' culture and the similarities and differences with yours? (from 1 to 5):* 4 points

8. *How much do you think it helped you learn to use the Web tools more efficiently for language learning purposes? (from 1 to 5):* 3 points

9. *How did you feel in interacting with other learners of English, using a lingua franca? Bring examples to justify your answer.*

It is great, even if sometimes it seems to be a bit strange (in a positive way).

10. Would you have preferred an exchange with native speakers of English? Why/why not?

yes probably, because I should become more confident in the way natives speak and use the language, which is different from people who are learning.

11. What did you like most about the exchange?

The fact we have met foreign and new people, with other way of thinking and habits.

12. What did you like less about the exchange?

The fact that I couldn't see my peer during the sessions.

13. *Among the tools that you have used (Skype, wikipage, Facebook Group), which did you like most/less? Why?*

no problems at all, I liked using all these tools, maybe for their easiness in the use.

14. *How did you find the topics of the exchange?*

Very engaging and interesting

15. *Would you have preferred to have Skype sessions guided by a moderator? Why/why not?*

no, everything went fine anyway.

16. *In your opinion, is there anything that should be changed to improve future exchanges?*

The possibility to see your peer substantially.

17. *Have you remained in contact with your discussion partners outside "the classroom"? If so, HOW and through which tools?*

Yes, through Facebook is quite easy to share opinions and talk to each other.

18. *This is the first time we use Facebook in an online exchange, so your feedback is really welcome: if you never (or very seldom) participated in the Facebook Group, can you tell us why?*

I did participate in the FB group and I enjoyed it

Answers to the semistructured interview (January 2012 – length: 20')

R. (Researcher): Puoi raccontarmi di un aspetto che non conoscevi dell'altra cultura e che hai appreso durante lo scambio?

M. (Matteo): Siamo molto vicini, non c'è stato nulla che mi abbia 'scioccato'

particolarmente. Però sì, sono stato molto interessato dalle descrizioni che Bernhard ha fatto delle città austriache e che ho poi confermato quando sono stato a Vienna, e anche dalle sue descrizioni delle tradizioni natalizie austriache. Però devo dire che ho visto che le due culture in sé sono molto simili.

R.: Quando sei stato a Vienna?

M.: Per Capodanno, con Vanessa [student from the Padova group], Eike [student from the Innsbruck group] e un paio di altri amici. È stato bello incontrarsi finalmente di persona e fare un viaggio insieme. Anche se Eike non era nel mio gruppo nello scambio, in effetti ci conoscevamo già e ci siamo conosciuti meglio anche dopo.

R. Quindi lo scambio è servito!

M.: sì, ho fatto delle belle amicizie, e ho imparato molte cose.

R. Puoi portarmi un esempio di quando hai provato a mettere in relazione the due culture e a vedere le cose dal punto di vista dell'altro?

M.: Sempre. Le ho sempre messe in relazione, però non ho visto grandi differenze. Una cosa che ho trovato molto diversa sì è che in Austria la professione di insegnante è molto ambita, cosa che in Italia non esiste.

R. Puoi raccontarmi un episodio in cui avete fatto domande più specifiche o diverse da quelle tracciate?

M.: Mah a dire il vero non abbiamo tanto approfondito certi aspetti perché esulavano dal tema principale della discussione. Avrei voluto approfondire ogni tema, ma avevo quasi paura di andare fuori tema.

R.: Raccontami di come è stato usare l'inglese, una lingua franca per tutti e due i gruppi.

M.: L'inglese non ha limitato la conversazione, anzi, è stato molto utile usarlo, anche se è stato difficile a volte parlare di argomenti delicati in una lingua che non

padroneggio abbastanza.

R. Quindi il tuo rapporto con la lingua è stato difficoltoso?

M. All'inizio forse sì, poi verso la fine mi sono lasciato andare.

R. Come sai, sarebbe bello poter ripetere questa esperienza anche con futuri studenti. Cosa dovrebbe essere migliorato, secondo te, in un prossimo scambio?

M.: Le espressioni del viso. Sarebbe bello poter vedere i proprio compagni e non solo sentirli. Questo permetterebbe anche di lavorare in gruppi più ampi. Poi proporrei di cambiare compagno lungo il percorso. Io avevo sempre lo stesso compagno da Innsbruck, è stato molto bello avere continuità, ma sarebbe anche bello avere altri punti di vista.