



RESEARCH PAPER

The Development of Foreign Language Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence through Telecollaboration

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How to cite this article:

Di Sarno-García, S., (2023). The Development of Foreign Language Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence through Telecollaboration. *The EuroCALL Review*, 30(1), 35-51. <https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2023.16693>

Abstract

Telecollaboration has proved to be an excellent means for the development of students' intercultural skills (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2012). Based on this presumption, a telecollaborative project was carried out between B2 level (CEFR) learners of English from Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain) and B1 level (CEFR) students of Spanish as a foreign language from the University of Bath (UK). The aim of the project was to help learners from both universities, Aerospace Engineering students in particular, to develop their intercultural communicative competence. Throughout a six-week period, students carried out asynchronous discussions focusing on two cultural topics in groups of four and participated in synchronous Zoom sessions in pairs. The topics at the core of the discussions were a) Catalan Independence b) Digital Education. Topic a) was conducted entirely in Spanish and topic b), in English. The social network used for students' written interaction was MeWe (www.mewe.com). To conclude the project, the participants completed a collaborative task with their overseas partners that was assessed by the instructor. Qualitative data was gathered through the students' posts on MeWe (which was then analysed following Byram's (1997) proposed objectives for the assessment of Intercultural Communicative Competence), analysis of transcripts from the Zoom sessions as well as a final project survey. The results from the qualitative analysis show traces and instances of all the objectives proposed by Byram (1997), while the findings from the final project questionnaire reveal that at the end of the

course all participants felt they had learnt something about their partners' culture. The quantitative analysis further demonstrates a correlation between the number of videoconference sessions and spontaneous conversation about cultural topics, which suggests that, in order for a telecollaborative project to be successful, students should attend the scheduled sessions.

Keywords

Intercultural Communicative Competence, Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication, Telecollaboration, Social Network.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalised society, it is of paramount importance that university students are trained to interact appropriately with speakers from different cultural backgrounds. Engineering students need to develop effective intercultural communicative skills that they will probably need later on in professional contexts (Seiz et al., 2015, p. 3), as well as successful communication skills in English, a key requirement currently (Gimeno-Sanz, 2013). For this reason, this study aimed to help Aerospace Engineering students from Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain) develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through a telecollaborative project with students from the University of Bath (UK). In this paper we discuss a six-week telecollaborative experience where students from both universities engaged in asynchronous cultural discussions and synchronous videoconference sessions is presented. Following work previously carried out by Vinagre (2014), we analysed students' comments following Byram's (1997, 2021) suggested objectives for identifying ICC. The Council of Europe also uses Byram's (1997) criteria as a starting point in the updated *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion Volume* (2020).

The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. Will there be any trace or evidence of the five objectives suggested by Byram (1997) in his model of ICC in the telecollaborative exchange between students who used MeWe for the cultural discussions?
2. Will students perceive that they have acquired cultural knowledge regarding their international partners' culture?

Previous studies such as Jauregi and Bañados (2008), Chun (2011), Llopis-García and Vinagre, (2014), Guillén and Blake (2017), Oskoz et al. (2018), Oskoz and Gimeno-Sanz (2019, 2020) and Gimeno-Sanz (2019) have already demonstrated the effectiveness of telecollaboration for increasing students' ICC. However, none of these studies used the social network MeWe (www.mewe.com) as a source of data to analyse students' intercultural discussions. Thus, in Section 3 we will its main functions and its utility for creating a safe environment for language learners.

The following section reviews the main concept dealt with in this article, i.e., the notion of ICC and telecollaboration. Section 3 illustrates the methodology used in the project, while Section 4 provides the results obtained. Finally, Section 5 is devoted to concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

2.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

Echoing Sykes' (2017) words "ICC is, perhaps, one of the best-known constructs used to describe where and how language and culture meet and, from the perspective of some, where they are inherently inseparable" (p. 119). As a matter of fact, this concept has been defined by several authors (Byram, 1997, 2021; Deardorff, 2009; Kim, 2009) and is one of the main competences researched within the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). One of the most widely accepted definitions of ICC is that provided by Fantini (2005), according to whom ICC is

The complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. Whereas "effective" usually reflects one's own view of one's performance in the LC2, [...] "appropriate" relates to how one's performance is perceived by one's hosts. (p. 1)

Several models of IC and ICC have been proposed, notably by Bennett's (1993), Spitzberg (2000), Byram (1997, 2021), Kim (2001), Fantini (2005) and Dearsorff (2004, 2006). For the purpose of this study, we will define Byram's (1997, 2021) model, which we used for the analysis of the data collected.

2.1.1. Byram's (1997, 2021) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram defined ICC as a series of five *savoirs* in the model he presented in *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (1997) and later revised in 2021. This is the model that the Council of Europe took as a starting point for the updated *Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion Volume* (2020), whose aim is to promote plurilingual and intercultural education. Byram also collaborated in the editing of the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Council of Europe, 2016).

According to Byram (1997, 2021), effective communication is the ability to establish and maintain relationships. The model presents five main *savoirs* or objectives:

- Attitudes of curiosity and openness: predisposed avoidance of scepticism of other cultures and presumptions about one's own culture.
- Knowledge of social groups and their products: the knowledge of practices and interactional norms in another culture and in one's own.
- Skills of interpreting and relating: the ability that a speaker possesses to interpret a fact or a document from the interlocutor's culture and relate to their own culture.
- Skills of discovery and interaction: the ability to acquire cultural knowledge and to use it in real-time interactions.
- Critical cultural awareness/political education: the ability to critically assess perspectives, practices and products in the interlocutor's culture and in one's own.

Byram distanced himself from the notion of the native speaker and argued that the ultimate goal of a language learner is to become an intercultural speaker, someone who "has the ability to manage communication and interaction between people of different cultural identities and different languages" (Coperías-Aguilar, 2002, p. 92). The difference between the two concepts lies in the fact that the intercultural speaker shares the knowledge of both his or her culture and that of the interlocutor's culture in interaction. Accordingly, Alonso-Belmonte and Vinagre (2017) argue that the goal of telecollaboration is to follow the norms of the intercultural speaker who acts as a mediator and interpreter of cultures, rather than gain a native speaker-like competence in the target language (TL).

Following the research conducted by Vinagre (2014), this is the model that we followed as a guide for evaluating students' intercultural communicative competence in the telecollaborative project.

2.2 Telecollaboration

No consensus exists on the nomenclature to be used to refer to online intercultural exchanges, virtual exchanges or telecollaborations. In this article we will use the term telecollaboration, coined by Belz (2003), to refer to it as an:

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.

(Guth & Helm, 2010, p. 14)

Although many other authors (Belz, 2007; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2012; Dooly, 2017) have provided extended definitions of the term, we believe that Guth and Helm's (2010) is the most appropriate for the purpose of this study.

O'Dowd (2010) distinguishes between two main modes of telecollaboration: the e-tandem model, and the blended intercultural model. The exchange described in this paper can be framed within the second type, which he has defined as "international class to-class partnerships in which projects and tasks are developed by the partner teachers in the collaborating institutions" (2010, p. 3). This model involves three different kinds of tasks: 1) information exchange tasks, 2) comparison and analysis tasks, and 3) collaborative tasks (O'Dowd 2010). Notably, the third type entails students' collaboration to produce a final artefact, which in the case of the telecollaborative

exchange reported in this paper was a PowerPoint presentation in which students summarised the main ideas discussed in the cultural dialogues on MeWe and explained their feelings about the whole experience.

Since telecollaborative exchanges can provide students with opportunities to interact with TL speakers in authentic communicative encounters (Belz, 2007; Chun, 2011) they can be highly beneficial for language learners, and in particular for the development of their ICC in particular. As stated by Godwin-Jones (2013) "telecollaborative projects have the potential for significant language learning as well as an increase in knowledge in both culture-specific and culture-general areas" (p. 4). Furthermore, O'Dowd (2010) argues that telecollaboration projects have contributed positively in different ways to foreign language education. Firstly, they can help students to better understand different cultural perspectives and emphasise intercultural negotiation skills. Secondly, the exposure to a higher level of authenticity within the classroom allows teachers not to depend exclusively on textbooks as a source of language input. Thirdly, telecollaboration allows students to engage in real interaction with TL speakers while tutors and peers can still provide guidance.

Telecollaborative projects are also a tool aimed at achieving the internationalisation of students, for this reason the European Commission has developed the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Project. According to the European Commission's *Achievements Report* (2020), virtual exchange differs from other types of online learning in that:

1. It is technology-enabled and connects geographically distant students.
2. Its primary focus is people-to-people real-time dialogues where there is mutual learning.
3. Educators facilitate face-to-face interaction that explicitly addresses intercultural understanding.
4. It is sustained over time as part of a pedagogical process.

Having reviewed the theoretical foundations of the study, the following section shall explore the methodology followed.

3. Methodology

The study described in this paper belongs to a bigger telecollaboration project leading to a doctoral dissertation. Its purpose is to develop Spanish-speaking students' pragmatic and intercultural communicative competence through telecollaborative exchanges. Here we present the results of the first telecollaboration, focusing solely on and the development of intercultural communicative competence. This section will give an account on how the research was carried out.

3.1 Setting and participants

This study was carried out between students from Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) and the University of Bath (UB). The UPV group consisted of eight 3rd year Aerospace Engineering students who were enrolled in an elective B2 level English course (CEFR), and the UB group consisted of eight highly proficient speakers of English who were taking a B1 level Spanish course (CEFR) at their university. These students were drawn from different disciplines, and one of them was a retired, mature student.

For the UPV students, the telecollaborative project formed part of their practical work, they were awarded 10% of their final grade upon its completion. Two of them were female and six were male. They were aged between 19 and 28. On the other hand, UK-based students were five females and three males. Their age ranged mainly between 19 and 21, with one participant being over 65.

3.2 Materials and procedure

First of all, students from both universities completed a nine questions survey administered via Google Forms, which aimed to gather information about their interests in order to pair them with somebody similar to them. After that, they started meeting in synchronous Zoom sessions where they accomplished collaborative tasks and where they were given free time to practice speaking. Although they were required to meet once a week, not all did so. Additionally, students carried out asynchronous cultural discussions on the MeWe social network (www.mewe.com) on a weekly basis and in groups of four. The topics discussed were a) Catalan Independence and b) Digital Education. Topic a) was conducted entirely in Spanish, while topic b) was conducted in English.

MeWe was the platform chosen for the asynchronous discussions because it allows learners to upload various types of file formats such as PDFs, pictures, videos, and to create polls. The instructor and researcher created a private group and the students were each invited to join. The

fact that only the students and the instructors from both universities could access this private community contributed to the creation of a safe environment for students. The first task consisted of uploading a video presentation or a picture of themselves with a recording to break the ice before the first Zoom session.

Figure 1

MeWe telecollaboration group.

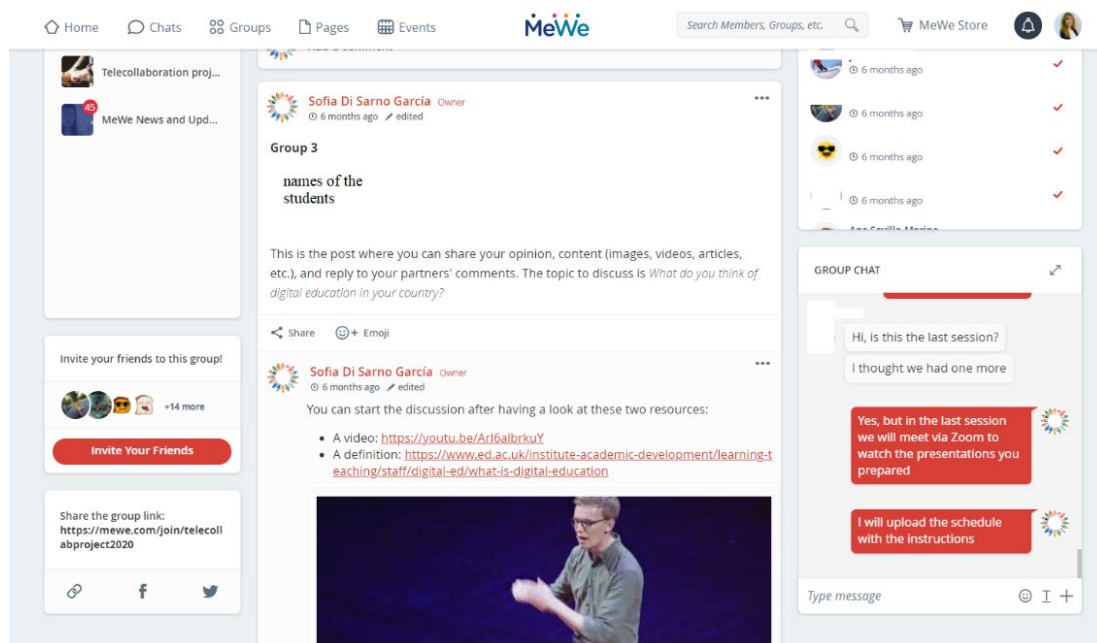


Figure 1 illustrates the MeWe platform. It was also used to give students instructions on how to conduct the collaborative tasks they were expected to carry out with their international partners. As we can see in Figure 1, at the beginning of the two cultural discussions the researcher provided a couple of resources (normally one in written format and one in video format) from which students could start the discussion. Although the general topics were Catalan Independence and Digital Education, students were required to answer the following questions:

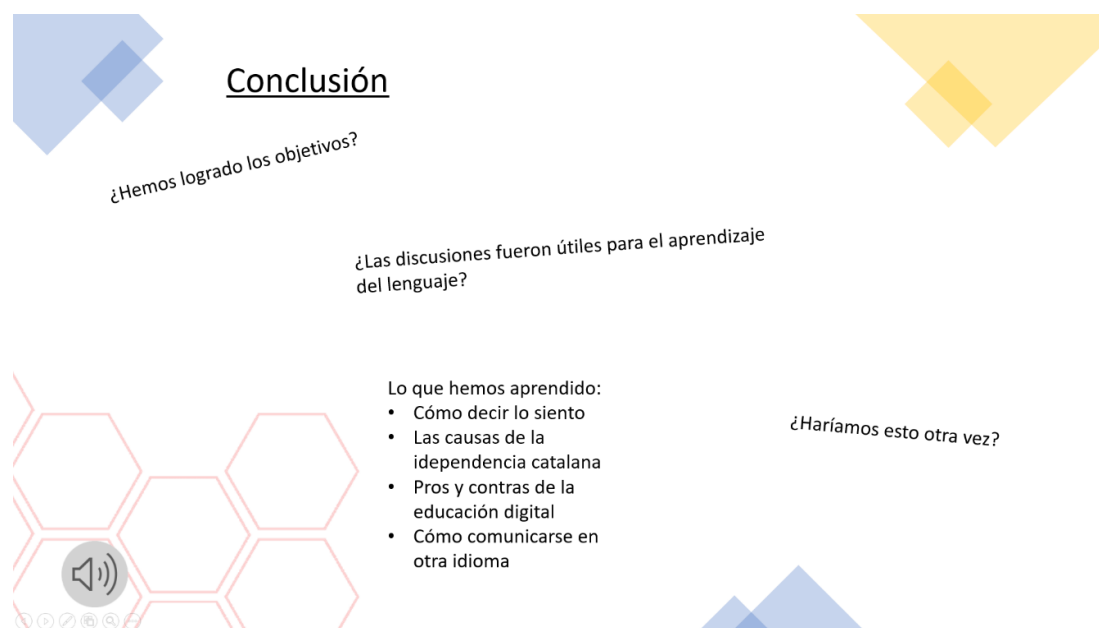
- a) *¿Por qué se ha llegado a pedir la independencia de Cataluña en España?* [Why has Catalan Independence been sought in Spain?]
- b) What do you think about Digital Education in your country?

In both cases the researcher's aim was to draw the participants' attention to the different perspectives that each student may have, depending on their cultural background. Also, the two cultural discussions were related to issues that had a particular relevance at the time of the telecollaborative exchange.

To conclude the project, students from both universities created a PowerPoint presentation with their MeWe groups. They were asked to collaborate in order to summarise the main ideas from the cultural discussions and to explain how they felt while dealing with the topics chosen with partners from different cultures. Since they were required to include an audio with an explanation for each slide, students from Spain did it in English, while the students from England recorded theirs in Spanish. All of the presentations were watched in class in a final Zoom session, together with the instructors from both universities. Figure 2 below is an example of the conclusions that students reached at the end of the project.

Figure 2

Example of students' presentation.



Here they discussed to what extent they felt they had achieved the goals of the project, whether they thought the discussions were useful and if they were willing to repeat a similar experience. Furthermore, they explained that thanks to the project they had learnt about the causes of the current situation in Catalonia, the pros and cons of Digital Education, and how to communicate in a second language.

The last step was to complete the final project survey, the aim of which was to gather the students' opinions of the project in general, and the tools used, and their perception of the acquisition of knowledge regarding their partners' culture. It consisted of 13 questions with set responses on a 5-point scale, a multiple-choice question and an open question. It was administered via Google Forms. Based on Godwin-Jones (2013), Likert style questionnaires can be a useful tool to assess theoretical cultural learning. The results from this questionnaire will be analysed in the following section.

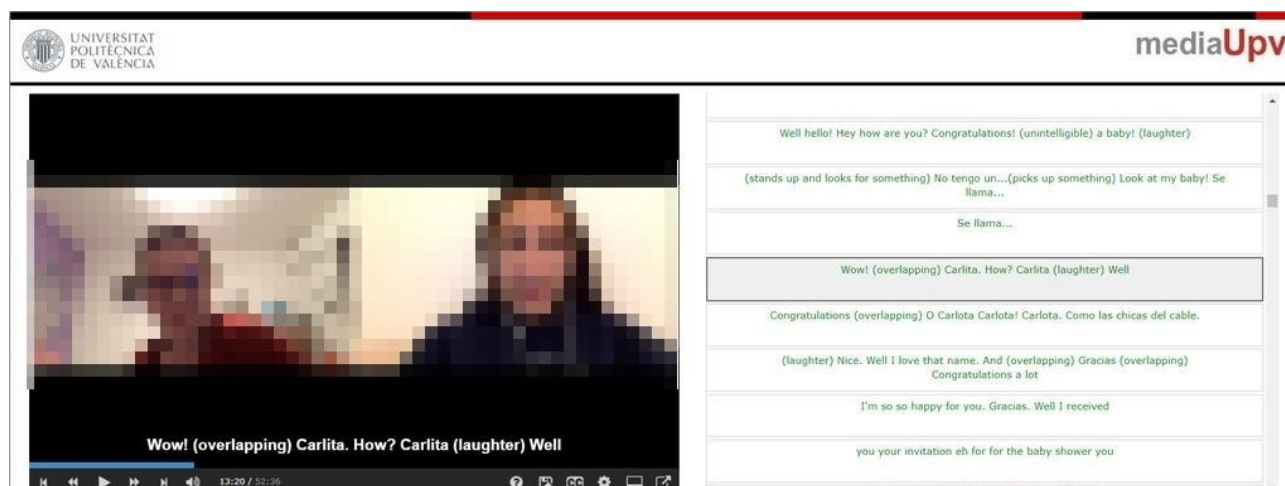
Having completed all of the project activities, students were awarded an Open Badge. According to Hauck and MacKinnon (2016) "an Open Badge is a digital image with encoded metadata which can be displayed online as evidence of an achievement" (p. 209) and it can be issued to demonstrate a person's participation in informal or formal activities (MacKinnon, 2021). In other words, it is a type of virtual achievement certificate.

After the project had ended, the researcher transcribed the Zoom conversations using of a digital tool developed by Universitat Politècnica de València called *MediaUpv* (www.media.upv.es). This online tool allows users to upload videos and generate automatic subtitles in a selected language. This can then be divided into in short chunks while one listens to the audio. Figure 3 below shows how the tool works.

Additionally, the platform allows the transcript to be downloaded in text format. Subsequently, we carried out the analysis of the participants' conversations.

Figure 3

Transcription using MediaUpv.



3.3 Data gathering and analysis procedure

Data was collected through an analysis of the transcript of the Zoom sessions, the final artefact (the PowerPoint presentation), and the final project questionnaire. Apart from this, the comments posted on MeWe by the participants were analysed following Byram’s (1997, 2021) objectives for the assessment of intercultural communicative competence. Previous studies such as Vinagre (2014) found evidence or traces of the objectives proposed by Byram thanks to cultural discussions and active dialogue. Table 1 contains examples of comments aligning to some of the five categories proposed by Byram. “D” stands for “discussion” (discussion 1 or 2), “L1/L2” stands for first or second language and “G” for “group” (there were four of them). For the sake of clarity, we have included translations of the original comments in this section, which can be found in Appendix 1. Features corresponding to the five objectives have been highlighted in bold type.

Table 1

Categorisation of the examples.

Objective	Students’ comments
Attitude of curiosity and openness	Hello!!! I am going to start the new debate about digital education. I recommend you watching the video that Sofia has posted because it has opened my mind. I don’t know how much you know about digital education or if you have been in touch with this methodology. I would like you tell me your experience (if you have) . When I was in the high school, some teachers used different apps or software in order to change our way of learning. It was a bad experience because they did not know how to change the way of teaching. Now, in the university I have met the same problem. Most of the teachers are trying to apply digital education methods but they do not know how. In my opinion, the way education is taught must change and I think that students and teachers have to discuss and develop a system which would be more attractive and more efficient. What is your opinion? What do you think about online teaching? Do you think it is better than classroom education? (D2, L2, G1)
Knowledge of social groups and their products	I believe that Catalan culture and tradition is very much rooted so that’s why the Catalan population wants to protect itself against foreign invasions. The feeling of protectionism in the North of Spain is understandable, however, being independent entails introducing regulations, laws, different mechanisms that may not concur with the rest of Spain. It is very difficult to have an objective

	<p>opinion on this topic because we live in other countries and it is difficult for us to understand all the local problems that people face in terms of immigration, financial systems, etc. According to the video, it is clear that independence divides the population between those who are convinced that Catalonia is a unique part of Spain and those who think that the local people need the help of Spain and who would not survive without the Spanish government. (D1, L2, G3)</p>
<p>Skills of interpreting and relating</p>	<p>I find it very interesting that the first thing on the list is football. This suggests that football has a great cultural influence on the region. It is not a surprise, since the Catalan region has one of the biggest teams in the world. The article says that the Barcelona FC (and the Real Club Deportivo) would not play in the League if Catalonia gets their independence. I believe that maybe, as a great influence, this on its own would make some people change their minds. We have seen in history that football may even cause a war like when El Salvador and Honduras started a war against each other in 1969 because of a football match (of course this was not the only cause). But I am digressing.</p> <p>I believe that one of the more important benefits that they would lose is the EU. Being a small country, (if it achieves independence) it would be advantageous to be part of that union since it would give them the political influence in regulations and economy. However, to become a member, the other countries would have to approve and not rejected by any country such as Spain... That's why, although the province of Catalonia is economically powerful now, being a country by itself would make it economically weaker because it would have to establish business partners, print its own money and make the country attractive for companies to stay. One might think that it will be like another Portugal (economically and in population); however, Portugal is in the EU and Catalonia would not be. I don't think Catalonia can prosper outside the EU (at least economically) like the UK could, for example. This is because the UK is far more economically powerful than Catalonia (and even Spain) and has advantages such as printing its own money and other such things. (D1, L2, G4)</p>
<p>Skills of discovery and interaction</p>	<p>Wow, I find your comment very interesting. I also believe that there is much truth in it. It is very interesting how you describe that some Catalan people who say they want independence, in the depths of their heart they do not want it, because they are manipulated by their leaders.</p> <p>I also find a fair argument that the independence of Catalonia is not something very original but an imitation of the Cuban model.</p> <p>I agree with the statement that at the moment Catalonia has not many fair reasons to demand independence, because history has changed a lot.</p> <p>Personally, I think that it is a bit exaggerated to say that the Catalan people do not know what being independent would entail, and that they are not thinking calmly. However, I agree with the opinion that probably many factors interact here and that a separation would have quite a negative economic impact on both sides and also on the whole of Europe. (D1, L2, G4)</p>
<p>Critical cultural awareness/political education</p>	<p>Hi guys, I make my first intervention only with the scarce knowledge I have regarding politics during the history of this movement. It is a fact that "a part" of Catalonia always had that feeling of being a separate nation or a different nation from Spain, I want to emphasise "a part" because this is the reason underlying the conflict. This movement started over 100 years ago, and it did not start in Spain but in</p>

	<p>Cuba. Once the island became independent from Spain, the first flag declaring that Catalonia was not part of Spain appeared.</p> <p>This, at least for me, makes me think that some people wanted to take advantage of the independence of a kingdom where a few people, who were probably nobody in a kingdom such as Spain at that moment, but who could gain a lot of power and control over the population in a young nation.</p> <p>I do not want to say that there are no reasons to demand and obtain the independence of Cuba from Spain, but I do want you to think about this Catalan movement taking advantage of the history of the division between kingdoms when Spain was not yet a nation only for the benefit of a few people.</p> <p>I mean that there may be a real history behind the Catalan independentism, but the tension created has been promoted by populist politics telling people who are not happy with the current situation that the solution is to become independent. That's why, the person who promoted today's independence movement, Jordi Pujol, filled his pockets by controlling that population.</p> <p>My conclusion about the topic is that with a society that tends towards globalisation at so many levels, it seems nonsense to separate into small communities only because a leader, who takes advantage of his power for his own benefit, says that we are different from each other instead of looking for peaceful understanding. (D1, L1, G4)</p>
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4. Results and discussion

Qualitative analysis shows that the students who met more frequently with their partners on Zoom, also participated more actively in the group discussion on MeWe. Consequently, they also dealt with cultural topics more often in the synchronous sessions on Zoom. The quantitative analysis supports this, whereby a Pearson coefficient reveals that there is a high correlation ($r = .947$) between the number of Zoom sessions and the number of times those sessions dealt with cultural topics. It might seem obvious, but it is important to bear in mind that although students were given a list of suggested generic topics (which was not compulsory), they dealt with cultural topics spontaneously during the interaction. Notably, they talked about the differences between educational systems, linguistic diversity in Spain, differences between varieties of Spanish across the world, preferred sports in each country, phonetics, differences in diet and eating timetables, notions of family, Christmas and New Year's Eve traditions. Therefore, it might be argued that for a student to get involved in the cultural exchange and develop his or her cultural awareness, the number of sessions affects learner engagement. Furthermore, a great effort should be made to ensure that students comply with the set schedule.

Regarding RQ1, the analysis of participants' comments on MeWe revealed several instances or traces of Byram's (1997, 2021) objectives. Table 2 below illustrates the total number of sentences collected from students UB and UPV that demonstrate their development of some of the five *savoirs*.

Table 2

Total number of instances or traces of the objectives.

Objective	Total number of instances or traces
Attitudes of curiosity and openness	49
Knowledge of social groups and their products	24
Skills of interpreting and relating	10
Skills of discovery and interaction	23
Critical cultural awareness/political education	22

It is important to mention that some comments could fit in more than one category, as the researcher believes that there is no clear-cut boundary between the objectives proposed by Byram, but rather a continuum between them. Nevertheless, when that happened, a decision was taken to include the comment only in one category.

In particular, the researcher found various examples of entries that showed an *attitude of curiosity and openness* towards their international partners. Notably, the readiness to engage with the other and the interest in understanding the other's perspective is reflected in questions such as "What do you guys think? How has the pandemic reshaped our thinking about learning online?" (D2, L1, G4). In this case, after replying to his keypal, the Spanish student concluded his comment with other questions "What do you think about these methodologies? What are your experiences with digital education?" (D2, L2, G4), which demonstrate his interest in his partner's perspective and personal experience which, in this case, was affected by the culture he belonged to. Other examples of this are "What do you think about the digital education in your country? Have you followed an online course?" (D2, L2, G3) and "¿Desde Bath qué pensáis? ¿Qué visión tenéis de este problema desde el extranjero?" (D1, L1, G1) [From Bath what do you think? What vision do you have of this problem from abroad?]. Another objective related to *attitude of curiosity and openness* is the willingness to follow conventions and rites of the interlocutor's culture. Several instances of this were found, such as "Hello everyone" (D2, L2, G3), "Gracias (name of the student)" (D1, L2, G2), "Hola (name of the student!)" (D1, L2, G1), "What do you guys think?" (D2, L2, G1), "Looking forward to hearing what you think 😊" (D2, L1, G1), "It has been a pleasure to discuss and share experiences and opinions with you" (D2, L2, G1). The last objective that Byram (1997) considers is the "willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment" (p. 92) which is crucial for avoiding preconceptions. An example of this predisposition is the following comment:

"I agree with the opinion of both. However, I believe that there is also another fact to bear in mind, which is that part of medias has divided the population more and more and have created a generalised hate in all the country towards the independentists. In my opinion this makes more difficult to reach a consensus between both parts, and it increasingly separates them." (D1, L1, G3)

The second feature of ICC is the "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" (Byram, 1997, p. 58). Knowledge of national memory is one of the main objectives of this, and the following comment is an example of that

For me the independence is a matter of heart and head: identity or economy. For me, being a Scottish is a matter of identity. If we ask somebody What does it mean to be Spanish, Catalan, English or Scottish? Generally people replies: the language, the culture, the educational system, the judicial system and most of all, the values and the unique sense of humour. The history is important and it contributes to our identity in a series of almost myths. (D1, L2, G2)

Instances of this were found also in the oral conversations through Zoom since students talked about Spanish co-official languages, Spanish dialects within Spain and different varieties of the Spanish language across the world. Apart from that, although the telecollaboration project was organized by the researcher and instructors, most of the participants were able to make contact and establish a relationship with their international keypals throughout the project.

Turning to the *skills of interpreting and relating*, an intercultural speaker is expected to be able to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts. This is reflected in the comment "Hello everyone and good morning! I am so sorry for de delay, but here it is my presentation. See you later!" (L2, G2). This apology shows that the student is concerned with the importance of uploading his video presentation on time so that his counterparts can see it and that politeness is a way of avoiding conflict. According to Byram (1997) these skills also concern the "ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own" (p. 98). An example of this ability is the following comment:

For this reason, although the province of Catalonia at the moment is economically powerful, to be a country on itself would make it economically weaker because it should have business partners, print its own money and make the country attractive for the companies to remain there. It might be thought that it would be like another Portugal (economically and in terms of population); however, Portugal is part of the EU and Catalonia would not. I don't think it can flourish out of the EU (at least

economically) as it would the UK, for example. This is because the UK is often economically more powerful than Catalonia (and even of Spain) and it has advantages such as the print of its own money and other things. (D1, L2, G4)

This demonstrates the participant's ability to relate the exit of the United Kingdom (i.e., an event from his own culture) from the European Union to the hypothetical exit of Catalonia in case it obtained the independence from Spain (i.e., an event from another culture).

The fourth objective is the *skills of discovery and interaction* which includes "the ability to identify contemporary and past relationships between one's own and the other culture and society" (Byram, 1997, p. 100). This skill can be observed in the following comment:

I believe that now in the world there is too much division and polarisation and to grant the independence to Catalonia will worsen the divisions in Spain, in Europe and in the world. All cultures have many things in common more than differences, and we have to celebrate differences together! Spain and Catalonia are more powerful together and rich in culture, I believe it is better for all to stay together. (D1, L2, G1)

This student is possibly establishing a parallelism between the independence movement in Catalonia and the ones which are present in other countries. Apart from that, the ability of "questioning another informant" and the "knowledge of conventions of verbal [and non-verbal] interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 62) are also an indicator of the intercultural speaker's skills of discovery and interaction. Evidence of that, as mentioned before, can be found in a number of comments where students make use of politeness formulas or make questions to gain cultural understanding.

The last objective of Byram's framework of ICC is *critical awareness/political education* which involves making "an evaluative analysis of the documents and events which refer to an explicit perspective and criteria" (Byram, 1997, p. 64). In the comment below the student is referring to his own personal experience with Digital Education in his own country (Spain), so he is analysing the events from his own perspective (both Spanish students in this group previously explicitly said that their experience with Digital Education was bad), although he also shows interest in knowing the English point of view.

It is very important that politicians take action now, and create a strong base for generations to come, so they can take high quality online teaching in the future, as I think that this pandemic is going to be the beginning of an era when digital education is going to experiment a huge growth. And that is why teachers better be prepared, either way future generations won't receive a good education, so humanity won't progress as we are used to it. And as you said, this kind of decisions must come from the governments, and must come as soon as possible, because none of us want our education to be damaged because teachers nowadays aren't able to teach via online means. What do you think, English students? Should we have laws to improve digital education's background? (D2, L2, G1).

The final presentations were also a source of data to retrieve students' feedback on the project. For instance, this is what students from group 2 said orally in their presentation:

1. I enjoyed the opportunity and the experience of talking with people from other cultures about these topics. I found it very interesting since learning about the culture, the norms of communication in Spanish were a crucial part of the learning of the language and I believe that the knowledge I gained through this telecollaboration project has equipped me with a better ability to talk to people from different cultures. What I liked the most is that the first topic covers a political situation very controversial and for that it is rare to be able to talk about the independence, but this project has been a suitable way to discuss it with native speakers of the language.
2. I enjoyed participating in this project since it is interesting to know other cultures and share ideas. X has been a fantastic partner and I hope that we can keep in touch.
3. I really liked participating in this experience. It has been a pleasure to be part of this telecollaborative project in which we have been able to meet, interact and discuss with people from another culture. It has been very rewarding. From the point of view of learning English, it has been very useful because while talking and debating I have been able to practice my spontaneous English allowing me to improve my way of communicating in this language. On the other hand, it has been very rewarding to know

the opinion of other people of similar age and situation to mine but who have experience such a controversial topics as the independence of Catalonia or the coronavirus pandemic from another point of view. On the other hand, I think that this experience could be improved by reducing the writing activities and doing this orally. Opportunities to be able to converse and listen to someone who is fluent in English are rare and in my opinion, they are the best way to learn the language correctly.

4. I really liked to do this experience in which all of us have had enthusiasms for looking for information, sharing our opinions and experiences with the rest of the team and learning not only the language that we are studying but also information about current issues. I found it funny to discuss topics with partners from other cultures because everybody participated and it allowed us to find out what people from other parts of the world think about current topics. Moreover, I found the comparison between the independence of Catalonia and Scotland that Bath partners did very interesting.

As can be observed, the four comments contain instances of some of Byram’s five objectives such as attitudes of curiosity and openness, skills of interpreting and relating, and the willingness to establish and maintain relationships. Also, regarding RQ2, it can be stated that students indeed felt they have acquired cultural knowledge regarding their partners’ culture.

Results from the final project survey revealed an overall satisfaction with the project and that students felt they had gained cultural knowledge, which answers RQ2. Students’ responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = *completely disagree* and 5 = *completely agree*. Regarding the statement *In general, I found the project useful*, 28.6% of the students answered 4 and 71.4% chose 5. This is a positive result considering that the literature reveals that there are cases of contentious telecollaborative projects (Turula & Raith, 2015). Regarding the statement *I found the Zoom sessions useful* all students chose 5. Regarding the statement *I found the MeWe discussions useful*, 71.4% chose 4 and the remaining 28,6% chose 5. Thus, it seems that students preferred the synchronous sessions on Zoom instead of the written interaction on MeWe. All the participants found the topics discussed on MeWe interesting (71.4% chose 4; 28.6% chose 5). Furthermore, they also felt that the tools used (i.e., Zoom and MeWe) were not difficult to use. Regarding their counterparts, in response to the statement *I felt at ease with my partner*, five students chose 5 and two students chose 4. Although 28.6% of the participants had problems trying to arrange a meeting with their partners, 14.3% of the students completely disagreed, and 57.1% disagreed. In fact, some students did not meet on a weekly basis as expected. Table 3 below illustrates the responses obtained to questions 1 to 13 of the survey.

Table 3

Results from the final project survey.

Statement	Percentages on a 5-point scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
In general, I found the project useful	0%	0%	0%	28.6%	71.4%
I found the Zoom sessions useful	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
I found the MeWe discussions useful	0%	0%	0%	71.4%	28.6%
I think the cultural topics discussed on MeWe were interesting	0%	0%	0%	71.4%	28.6%
I found the MeWe platform difficult to use	42.9%	57.1%	0%	0%	0%
I found Zoom difficult to use	71.4%	28.6%	0%	0%	0%
I felt at ease with my partner	0%	0%	0%	28.6%	71.4%
I had problems trying to arrange a meeting with my partner	14.3%	57.1%	0%	0%	28.6%
I met once a week with my partner	14.3%	28.6%	0%	14.3%	42.8%
When I came across communication problems with my partner, we solved them	0%	0%	0%	14.3%	85.7%

I had technical problems with my computer or the connection during the online sessions	42.8%	28.6%	0%	28.6%	0%
We practised both languages in the Zoom sessions	0%	0%	14.3%	0%	85.7%
I have learnt something about my partner's culture	0%	0%	0%	14.3%	85.7%

The above results show that all participants solved communication problems with their partners, if any, and that only 28.6% indicated that they had technical problems during the online sessions. Regarding language and culture, 85.7% of the participants completely agreed with the statement We practiced both languages in the Zoom sessions, in contrast to 14.3% who neither disagreed nor agreed with it. All the participants felt they had learnt something about their partner's culture to some extent. Moreover, in response to the question Would you like to keep on meeting with your partner after the end of the project?, 100% of the participants answered yes.

The researcher also received some comments regarding the project from students from both universities. The comments below are from a student from Bath and another from Valencia, respectively.

I just wanted to say I hope you have had nice holiday and wanted to once again thank you for this incredible experience, I really enjoyed my time with X, it was a fantastic experience and thank you for organizing it all! (L1)

I really enjoyed the sessions with X. They helped me to gain more fluency in speaking and knowing some cultural differences. Also, I take a good memory of X in particular, because I felt at ease from the beginning and she was very nice. I hope everything goes fine. (L2)

These comments corroborate the data collected from the PowerPoint presentations and the final project survey. The following section shall present the concluding remarks.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to foster Engineering students' and their partners' intercultural communicative competence through a telecollaborative exchange project where participants carried out asynchronous cultural discussions through the MeWe.com social network and, following Vinagre's (2014) suggestion, collaborative synchronous tasks through Zoom. To analyse this competence, we used the objectives suggested by Byram (1997, 2021), and completed a qualitative analysis of the data collected through the comments posted on MeWe. Regarding RQ1, results demonstrated numerous instances of Byram's (1997, 2021) five objectives for the assessment of students' ICC. And, regarding RQ2, the data gathered through the final artefact and the final project survey revealed that the students believed that they had acquired knowledge on their partners' culture and skills of intercultural communication. In fact, the quantitative analysis showed that the more students engaged in the synchronous sessions, the more they discussed cultural topics spontaneously. The results of this study corroborate the findings of previous research that used different online tools such as wikis (Vinagre, 2010, 2014, 2016) and Google+ online forums (Gimeno-Sanz, 2018). Therefore, MeWe can adequately to give language learners the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with TL speakers and acquire the ability to maintain the established relationship, which is a key feature of the intercultural speaker.

The main limitation of this study is the small data set collected due to the small number of participants. As the investigation relates to a larger project, it will be replicated to obtain a broader scope for analysis.

Acknowledgements

The study presented in this paper relates to a PhD project funded by Universitat Politècnica de València (Subprograma 1, PAID-01-19).

The author would like to thank the students from Universitat Politècnica de València and the University of Bath who participated in this study for the data they provided. Many thanks to

Professor Ana Gimeno-Sanz (Universitat Politècnica de València) and Professor Ana Sevilla-Merino (University of Bath) for allowing their students participate in this project.

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Ethical statement

All participants in this study signed a consent form which contained an explanation of the aims of the research and how the data collected would be used. Their anonymity is kept. The researcher discussed with the instructor of each institution the purpose and the context of the study in advance. The author of this manuscript does not have any conflicts of interest.

Appendix 1

Original comments:

Knowledge of social groups and their products:

Pienso que la cultura y tradición catalina es muy arraigada y por eso la población en Cataluña quiere protegerse de invasiones extranjeras. Es comprensible que se siente un sentimiento de proteccionismo de la parte norte de España, sin embargo ser independiente incluye instituir regulaciones, leyes, mecanismos diferentes que quizás no son de acuerdo con los del resto de España. Es muy difícil haber una opinión objetiva sobre este tema porque nosotros que viven en otros países no comprendemos todos los problemas locales que la gente encuentre en términos de inmigración, los sistemas financieros etc. Según la video, la independencia claro divide la población entre los que son convencidos que Cataluña es una parte única de España y los otros que piensan que la población local necesitara ayuda de España y que no podrán sobrevivir sin el gobierno hispánico.

Skills of interpreting and relating:

Me parece muy interesante que lo primero de la lista sea el fútbol. Esto sugiere que el fútbol tiene una enorme influencia cultural en la región. No es una sorpresa, ya que la región catalana tiene uno de los equipos de fútbol más grandes del mundo. El artículo dice que el Barcelona (y el Real Club Deportivo) no jugarían en la Liga si Cataluña se independiza. Y creo que a lo mejor, como una gran influencia, esto por sí solo podría hacer cambiar de opinión a algunas personas. Ya hemos visto en la historia que el fútbol puede ser incluso la causa de una guerra cuando El Salvador y Honduras entraron en guerra el uno con el otro en 1969 a causa de un partido de fútbol (obviamente esta no fue la única causa). Pero estoy divagando.

Creo que uno de los beneficios más importantes que se perdería es la UE. Al ser un país pequeño, (si se independizan) sería ventajoso estar en esa unión ya que esto podría darles la influencia política en la regulación y la economía. Sin embargo, para unirse tendrían que ser permitidos por los países que ya están dentro y no ser negados por ningún país como España... Por esta razón, aunque la provincia de Cataluña es económicamente poderosa ahora, ser un país por sí mismo lo haría más débil económicamente porque tendría que establecer socios comerciales, imprimir su propio dinero y tienen que hacer que el país sea atractivo para que las empresas permanezcan allí. Se puede pensar que será como otro Portugal (económicamente y en población); sin embargo, Portugal está en la UE y Cataluña no lo estaría. No creo que pueda prosperar fuera de la UE (al menos económicamente) como podría hacerlo el Reino Unido, por ejemplo. Esto se debe a que el

Reino Unido es muchas veces más poderoso económicamente que Cataluña (e incluso España) y tiene ventajas como la impresión de su propio dinero y más cosas.

Skills of discovery and interaction:

Wow, yo encuentro tu comentario muy interesante. También creo que contiene mucha verdad. Es muy interesante como describes que aún la gente catalán que dice que quiere independizarse, no lo quiere hacer del fondo de su corazón, porque está manipulada por sus líderes.

Lo encuentro también un argumento justo que la independencia de Cataluña no es algo muy original, sino que sea una imitación del modelo de Cuba.

Estoy de acuerdo con la afirmación que Cataluña ahora no tiene tantos motivos justos para independizarse, porque la historia se ha cambiado mucho.

Yo personalmente opino que es una exageración poca que la población catalán no sabe qué independencia significaría, y que no están pensando con cabezas sosegadas. Sin embargo, estoy de acuerdo con el opinión que probablemente muchos factores interactúan aquí y una separación tendría un impacto económico bastante negativo en ambos lados y también en todo de Europea.

Critical cultural awareness/political education:

Hola chicos, hago mi primera intervención únicamente con el poco conocimiento que tengo sobre la política durante la historia de este movimiento. Es un hecho que "una parte" de Cataluña siempre ha tenido ese sentimiento de nación propia o diferente a la española, quiero remarcar "una parte" porque este es el motivo de la disputa. Hace más de 100 años que comenzó este movimiento, y no empezó en España sino en Cuba. Una vez se independizó la isla de España apareció la primera bandera en la que se declaraba que Cataluña no formaba parte de España.

Esto, por lo menos a mi, me da lugar a pensar que se quisiera aprovechar el tirón del independentismo de un reino a partir del cual unos pocos que, tal vez, en un gran reino como era España en el momento no eran nadie, pero con una nación joven podían optar a un gran poder y control sobre la población.

No estoy queriendo decir que no se tengan motivos para pedir y conseguir la independencia de Cuba de España, pero si que quiero que se piense que este movimiento catalán aprovechó la antigua historia de las divisiones entre reinos cuando aún no se había formado España para el beneficio propio de algunos pocos.

Me refiero con esto a que, puede haber un historia real detrás del independentismo catalán pero la crispación generada ha sido promovida por las políticas populistas en las que se les dice a las personas que no están conformes con su situación actual que la solución es independizarse. De esta manera, el que volvió a promover el independentismo en los tiempos actuales Jordi Pujol se llenó los bolsillos con el control que consiguió sobre esta población.

Mi conclusión sobre el tema es que con una sociedad que tiende a la globalización en tantos niveles, parece una tontería separarse en pequeñas comunidades por el hecho de que un líder, que aprovecha su poder para beneficio propio, diga que somos diferentes entre nosotros y no se busque una vía pacífica de entendimiento.