The e-Factor in e-Collaborative Language and Translation Classes: Motivation, Metacognition, Empowerment

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the growth of the Internet and the development of newer computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies have multiplied opportunities for communicating in other languages beyond the traditional educational settings. Learners are stimulated by the sheer amount of contacts they can make with people all over the world, and are more motivated to acquire the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural skills they need to participate in global communication spaces.

This study analyses the forms of interaction, collaboration and co-construction of knowledge learners experienced online, as filtered through quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques applied to the data collected from learners' interactions and reports. The analysis focuses on the metacognitive awareness raised, motivation enhanced and empowerment fostered in the e-collaborative language and translation classes offered in the past fifteen years. The suggestion is that social practice in virtual environments can provide a theoretical lens that allows researchers to examine language and translation learning in ways that other perspectives do not.

Theoretical framework

Recently, researchers have been focusing on how to incorporate the new Web trends into the learning process. Language-focused researchers have drawn on methods and key concepts from a variety of research traditions (including pragmatics, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, genre analysis, and the ethnography of communication) (Androutsopoulos 2008). Learning-focused researchers have tried to articulate some of the main theoretical perspectives in networked learning research (Social Constructivism, Actor Network Theory, Constructivism, Critical Theory, Action Research, Communities of Practice, STS, Scientific enquiry, Conversational framework, Philosophy of technology, Activity Theory, Anthropological views on tools, artefacts and technology (Conole, 2010).

Networked Learning (NL) has gained ground lately, although research into NL may be said to have started after the publication of Wenger's seminal study on Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems (1998). Much of the work that followed was based upon theoretical perspectives such as social constructivism and social learning theory, as employed in course design (Kirschner, Martens & Strijbos, 2004; Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen, 2002; Simons, Van der Linden & Duffy, 2000). The amount of work that has developed since can be linked to the changes introduced by Web 2.0 in general, and Web 2.0 communities in particular, especially professional learning communities.

Recently, researchers have been focusing on how to incorporate the new Web trends into the learning process and how to harness and apply Web 2.0 concepts to create new learning experiences and learn across communities. The underlying pattern is one of a shift from "push for learning" – the dominance of organization-driven models of learning – to "pull for learning" – a learner-driven demand for informal and lifelong learning, in which learners control what they learn, how they learn it, and with whom (Thißen, Zimmermann, Küchler, 2009).

Aiming at a more active involvement of learners in the learning process, current Web 2.0-driven learning technology focuses on the perspective of learners. They allow learners to design their learning environments individually on the basis of given tools and services, giving them full control over the learning environment, support communication and collaboration with other learners (Mödritscher & Wild, 2009), and, in sum, lead to a learning network of actors, artefacts (resources), and activities (Koper et al., 2005).

As regards collaboration and cooperation, which are particularly relevant to this study, an examination of the literature in this area suggests that researchers writing about online collaborative learning are often writing about cooperative learning instead, and vice versa. The two concepts often overlap in existing literature, and few scholars or practitioners have attempted to pinpoint them (e.g. McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Panitz, 1999). It seems important, therefore, to ascertain the similarities and differences between collaboration and cooperation, and between the two and communication. Table 1 below summarizes such differences and similarities, e.g. as to the type of learning involved and learning relationship developed, how decisions are made and who's accountable, based on Misanchuk & Anderson's study (2000).

The picture that is derived is one that exposes the complexity of collaborative learning contexts, in which the shared goal, agenda and accountability, together with the need for achieving consensus through social negotiation when making decisions, and the total interdependence of community/group members are all necessary conditions for the process of joint creation of knowledge to take place.

Figure 1 – Features of communication, cooperation and collaboration in learning contexts
(Adapted from Misanchuk & Anderson, 2000)

	Communication	Cooperation	Collaboration
Learning	Information transmission	Knowledge transmission	Knowledge generation
Inquiry	Individual inquiry	Delegation of tasks	Common inquiry
Decision-making	Agreement > < disagreement	Vote (majority rules)	Consensus through social negotiation
Goals / agendas	Multiple goals / multiple agendas	One goal / multiple agendas	One goal / one agenda
Accountability	Individual accountability	Individual accountability	Group accountability
Learning relationship	Complete independence	Partial interdependence	Complete interdependence

Networked Learning is deeply rooted in constructivism (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999) and is built on dialogue, collaboration and cooperation in the learning process, group work, interaction with online materials, and knowledge production (see figure 1). This idea of collaboration is perfectly depicted by the definition offered by Schrage (1991), which underlies our study:

Collaboration is the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none has previously possessed or could have come to on their own.

One step beyond constructivism has been taken by another emerging theory that provides a context and background for this study: Connectivism (Siemens, 2005). "At its heart, connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (Downes, 2007: 1).

Connectivism is therefore understood as:

[…] a networked learning model that reflects the technological and societal changes of the twenty-first century. It recognizes that individuals learn by making connections within their neural networks, and that these can be strengthened by creating networks with other individuals and repositories of knowledge. It is our receptiveness to engage with these connections that enables us to learn. (Hall 2016: 131).

Methodological framework

The ultimate goal of language teaching and learning is learners' development of their language skills in such a way that they undergo fundamental changes towards metalinguistic control, rhetorical expressiveness, and a higher order of semantic flexibility, while continuing with the acquisition of linguistic knowledge in the lexical, morphological, syntactic and discourse domains. This permits cognitive control over the form of linguistic production, which implies the ability to select appropriate linguistic forms, morpho-syntactic constructions and lexical expressions, to weigh alternatives, and to access non-default, less productive, marked options.

In order to attain this goal, learners are provided with a learning environment in which they can contextualize and organize their learning. Knowledge emerges from the connections established, is then reformulated and re-organized in the individuals' minds, and brought back into the learning context for further discussion with other learners and consensual decision-making. As collaboration requires learners to do this in a group, it is fundamental that the interactions taking place among them are studied in order to understand "how a collaborative group as a whole constructs knowledge through joint activity in a CSCL setting" (Stahl, 2011:108). In this context joint knowledge construction is demonstrated by: flow of proposals, questioning, building common ground, maintaining a joint problem space, establishing intersubjective meanings, positioning actors in evolving roles, building knowledge collaboratively, solving problems together (Blake & Scanlon 2012).

The reference model adopted in the e-collaborative language and translation classes taught since 2004 is based on the synergetic integration of a learning-focused model, i.e. the OLAR CoPs model (Gaballo 2009a), and a language-focused model, i.e. the systemic-functional translation competence model (Gaballo 2009b).

Constructivist and experiential learning theories inspire the learning-focused model. The diagram in figure 2 depicts the model, inspired by Soller's Collaborative Learning Model as adapted by Calvani (2005). It includes dimensions and steps that integrate people and technology in order to create and maintain "a sound collaboration system, in which online learning organizations may engage in proactive learning, develop reflective practice and pursue continuous change for continuous improvement" (Gaballo 2009c). The external pentagon identifies the preliminary, critical factors representing obstacles to the collaborative activity, i.e. unsuitable task, technological inadequacy, poor collaboration propensity, lack of domain expertise, and large gap

in expertise. Next is an area meant for both technological familiarization and the solution of any preliminary issues in domain ownership (elementary lexis, shared vocabulary, expert/layman gap reduction). Then we enter the area where individuals begin to interact with each other in order to create a good social climate and shared culture (through social grounding, trust, mutual understanding, and self-esteem).

Figure 2 – e-Collaboration system model
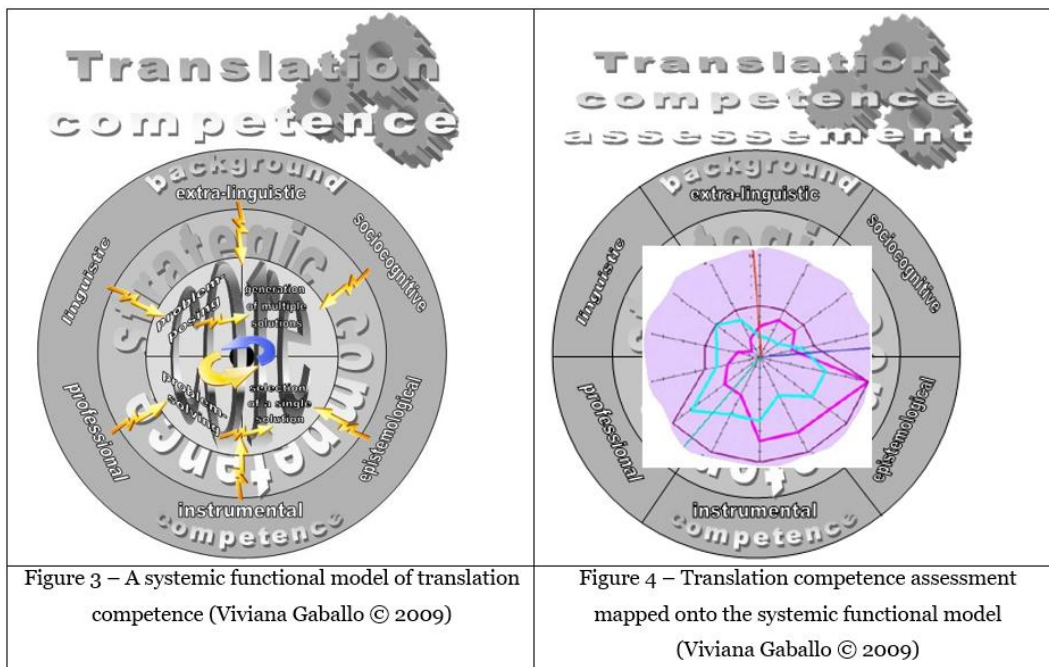*(Soller's Collaborative Learning Model as adapted by Calvani 2005)*
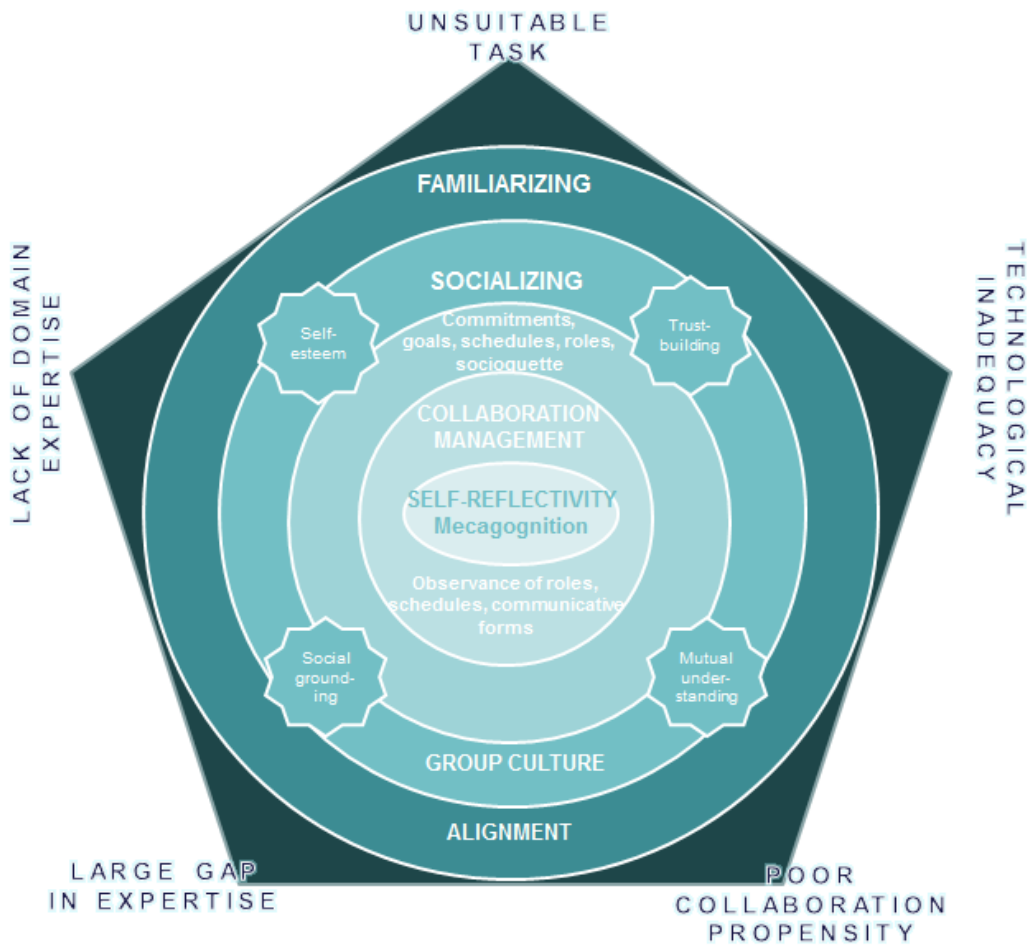
The fourth area more specifically concerns the commitments to be made in order to pursue an effective group model, consciously spelled out in a collaborative agreement or socioquette document (indicating types of goals, interactions, roles, schedules).

The *collaborative management* dimension concerns the actual management and observation of the collaborative process, and has the function to continue and consolidate the group's integration process. The inner dimension refers to the process of self-reflectivity, which, while expressed during the entire path, also requires a final moment of shared reflection by the group.

The use of CSCW (Computer-Supported Collaborative Work) technologies and the application of Action research principles lead participants to fully own their learning processes (as well as the

learning methodology and technology used), so they can achieve the empowerment that is the overarching goal of the entire learning process.

The language-focused model refers to the competence model (Gaballo 2009b) initially developed to provide a systemic-functional view of translation competence. The model also proved to be extremely versatile in (1) pinpointing (dis-)continuity between teaching and learning in language classes and teaching and learning in translation classes, and (2) providing a useful, visual, quantitative and qualitative representation of the students' emergent profiles (see figure 4 – blue and pink outline). The more rule-bound and grammar-oriented character of language learning is more likely to activate the linguistic, extra-linguistic and sociocognitive areas of the background competence with only some occasional tapping from the instrumental, professional and epistemological areas which, conversely, are fully targeted in the case of translation training (see figure 4 – downward-oriented "bell").

Figure 3 – A systemic functional model of translation competence (Viviana Gaballo © 2009)

Figure 4 – Translation competence assessment mapped onto the systemic functional model (Viviana Gaballo © 2009)

To the purpose of this study, we will zoom in on the area of the systemic-functional competence model that will best offer food for thought, i.e. the sociocognitive competence. The social-cognitive abilities identified in the systemic-functional model (i.e. cognitive interpretive understanding and interpersonal perspective co-ordination) are constitutive of competent communicative action, which is "the ability of the self-reflective subject to justify action to those affected by it" (Gaballo 2009b). Whenever the individual makes a choice within a specific discipline or life situation, or judges information as relevant or irrelevant, customary or anomalous, or decides about which way to go, s/he is taking responsibility of the choice made. It means taking on the burden of all the logical consequences that will follow, which prevents subjectivity and randomness. Within this system, great importance is also given to striking a fair balance between one's own independence of mind (which draws strength from the critical contribution of self-assessment) and the openness to integrate different contributions or even to modify one's own points of view.

Case study

This case study refers to language and translation courses given in MA degree programmes in Communications Studies, Political Sciences, Economics and Law between 2005 and 2015, and utilizes a subset of data from chat logs and forum posts from exchanges between students of non-language programs, and from various final reports and assessment forms.

With the exception of the first and the last class, the learning methodology used in this type of courses was web-based, with synchronous and asynchronous interactions occurring online only, even when classes physically met, i.e. in face-to-face (FtF) classes. The reason for extending online communication to FtF meetings relates to the additional opportunity of "learning by doing" CMC that learners were given.

Three types of activities were set up to achieve learning goals: individual, collaborative and project work. Individual activities, in spite of their low level of interaction, were also aimed at socializing knowledge. Brainstorming techniques are used in the start-up stage of each unit to make students aware of the different ideas they have on a specified topic that will later be introduced in detail. This initial activity helps to shape a first concept map of the class group that will be modified in the activities later proposed to the group. Since each student contributes by sending a message to the appropriate forum and this is visible to the rest of the class, each student will be able to identify, by comparison, the cognitive gap that s/he is requested to fill, under the guidance of his/her tutor and with the help of the class. The answers provided by each student are then discussed with the whole class group in order to re-shape the group's concept map.

The group-shared individual activity prompted students to individually reply to the question "What is a group? When is a group?" which was meant to initiate discussion and introduce them to the sociological foundations of CMC (of which they were already knowledgeable in their own mother tongues) through the English language. The extract from the online discussion board shows the replies sent by three students with different English proficiency (intermediate, lower-intermediate, and upper-intermediate) and the class attempts at systematizing the idea of the "group" by pinpointing the basic concepts extrapolated from students' contributions that will bring to a first reconstruction of the class group's cognitive map.

The integration of content (the sociological foundations of CMC) and language (using appropriate terminology, evidencing key concepts, rephrasing, summarizing) involves learning to use language appropriately while using language to learn effectively.

Among the collaborative activities used, collaborative translation (Gaballo 2009c) was particularly successful among students as they could learn and practice group work methods (sequential, parallel, reciprocal), and learn how to negotiate meanings online and interact with others to achieve appropriate translation solutions they would have been unlikely to come up with individually (Schrage 1990).

The activity consisted in translating a text into English, which had been subdivided into passages of equal length, each assigned to a group made up by three students. The groups worked online, no matter if they were in the same classroom or at distant places, and used synchronous communication tools (chat) for quick discussions and immediate decisions, and asynchronous communication tools (forum) to negotiate meaning and keep track of the evolving artifact (the translated text). Although the wiki tool was available, its versioning system was considered too bothersome, and students preferred to use the forum instead, to check the different versions of the text being produced, as the forum allowed them to create appropriate threads to discuss a specific word/expression/structure while keeping the communication flow in the main thread more ordered and coherent.

The messages posted by groups to complete the translation task varied in number. The most "communicative" groups exchanged more than 100 messages – against an average of 54-55 messages – to translate a passage of max 500 words.

The online activities of document sharing, collaborative search and knowledge co-construction helped group members contribute to the group's decision-making process and the completion of the task assigned.

The teacher's guiding and scaffolding strategies served to re-route the work of a group whenever it came to a halt, to support and appreciate the work done, but also to urge closer attention to the translation choices made.

A Project Work was assigned as part of the final exam, which did not consist of group work. It was an individual task; however, it could still be considered a collaborative activity because other people, outside the class and unknown to students, were involved in the project. Each student was asked to find one or more English native speakers or learners of English as a second or foreign language with whom they could collaborate to reach the following goals: 1) explore online collaboration modes: in a one-to-one or group context: 2) practice their ability to establish and maintain an online relationship with an unknown foreigner; 3) discuss some of the topics and ideas addressed in the course; 4) critically examine the differences between online and offline collaboration.

The assigned task consisted in communicating/collaborating online, for a number of weeks in a semester, with one or more unknown speakers of a language other than their own (native speakers of English or learners of English) to exchange opinions and points of view on CMC-related topic of discussion (digital divide, global English, cultural stereotypes, etc.), and finally evaluating the success of the communication/collaboration in a wide-ranging metacognitive activity, online and offline.

In the constructivist paradigm, assessing learning does not mean to judge whether a student has reached a pre-established learning goal after following a predefined learning path. It rather means involving the student in a process of observation (self-observation) and monitoring (self-monitoring) of his/her own knowledge construction processes. Attention is therefore paid not really on the results achieved but on the processes started to achieve them.

Collaborative work was assessed according to McConnell's Components of Collaborative Assessment: product achievement, communication skill, social relationships, and reflective skills (2006).

The data on which the assessment of the entire learning path draws are collected:

1) during the course, from students' posts on the course web site related to each task performed, and from the Project Paper, i.e. the final report on the CMC experience;

2) at the end of the course, through a Learning Self-Assessment form focused on A) new knowledge built and competence acquired; B) previous knowledge extended and competence improved; C) interest in acquiring/improving new knowledge/competences in the future (see examples below);

LIN205_LI:

A. Il corso mi ha sicuramente aiutato ad entrare in un'ottica di lavoro per me nuova, quella della cooperazione all'interno di un gruppo, e a considerare positivamente l'apporto che ciascun membro fornisce alla squadra, in quanto nuova possibilità di conoscenza e opportunità di migliorare se stessi e gli altri. Il teamworking si è così trasformato in un nuovo strumento di orientamento nel lavoro personale e altrui, insegnandomi che confrontarsi non può che essere utile a chi sceglie di farlo e che l'autocorrezione, nei confronti propri e altrui, ne è una conseguenza positiva. Inoltre, le lezioni e le attività svolte mi hanno permesso di ampliare la mia visione del processo traduttivo: ho infatti imparato a vedere non solo il testo come un insieme complesso che necessita di un'analisi dettagliata, ma anche la traduzione come una lunga catena di quesiti legati fra loro e a cui bisogna trovare una risposta coerente per ottenere un risultato soddisfacente.

B. Personalmente, ho vissuto il corso come il naturale proseguimento di quello del primo anno, approfondendo lo studio e la pratica del processo traduttivo. Ovviamente, l'approfondimento ha permesso di percorrere tale processo dall'inizio alla fine dando egual importanza a ciascun aspetto coinvolto e permettendone una maggiore comprensione oltre ad un'analisi dettagliata. Grazie a ciò, ho potuto cogliere meglio il concetto e l'importanza di "intended readership" e avere un'idea più completa dei diversi approcci che si possono e devono adottare in base al testo da tradurre. A ciò si è aggiunta una maggiore consapevolezza, grazie ai task settimanali e alla riflessione teorica, dell'essenzialità della fase preliminare alla traduzione, con lo studio del testo e la formulazione di una strategia da adottare. Infine, la diversità stilistica e strutturale intrinseca alle due lingue, sicuramente più evidenti con l'aiuto del lavoro metodico e meticoloso svolto.

C. Resta ancora molta curiosità da soddisfare, riguardo soprattutto l'equilibrio tra ST e TT, la coerenza testuale e una migliore resa a livello sintattico-strutturale nella traduzione. In particolare, avrei interesse nell'approfondire la questione delle marked/unmarked choices e del sequential focus, con cui non è sempre facile orientarsi, così come l'approccio del traduttore nei confronti di temi e aspetti percepiti diversamente dalle cultura italiana e inglese.

[Extract from a student's Self-Assessment form for LIN205 – Language and Translation course in the BA Programme in Language Mediation]

LIN403_PD:

A. In questo corso ho acquisito maggiore padronanza della lingua, capacità di individuare i principali contenuti esposti nelle argomentazioni, maggiore competenze interattive, e multimediali; individuazione di come vengono organizzate le pubblicità, come ci colpiscono, e come vengono strutturate. Sono aumentate in me le capacità lessicali ma anche le conoscenze dal punto di vista grammaticale. Ho imparato a scrivere e a capire le lettere di accompagno e la strutturazione di un curriculum vitae. Molte sono state le esercitazioni di traduzione e di apprendimento dei testi che hanno aumentato le conoscenze linguistiche e stilistiche; logiche, ma anche quelle riguardanti la quotidianità e la varia diffusione soprattutto in questi anni dei medium comunicativi.

[Extract from a student's Self-Assessment form for LIN403 - Language course in the MA Programme in Advertising and Corporate Communication]

LIN404_AC:

A. Questo corso mi ha insegnato soprattutto a guardare da un diverso punto di vista le cose, un diverso approccio: allo studio in primo luogo. L'idea di un'attenzione rivolta non solo al prodotto, ma anche al processo, come ci è stato richiesto per la prova finale, il project work, mi ha trasmesso un diverso modo di strutturare un lavoro, improntato su un principio di massima coerenza e di continua verifica delle motivazioni che hanno spinto ad una determinata scelta.

[Extract from a student's Self-Assessment form for LIN404 - Language course in the MA Programme in Multimedia Communication and Publishing]

Conclusions

Although Networked learning does not privilege any particular view of learning, when NL is applied to language/translation learning contexts, the connections, relations, and meaning-making that are developed in virtual spaces contribute to a more holistic learning experience, where the notions of identity, "otherness" and intercultural awareness come most conspicuously into play. In such a framework, learners will best develop their language and translation competence through collaborative and cooperative learning models.

The design of the language courses discussed in the case study was intended to support a collaborative learning approach. The students were encouraged to work together and part of their assessment reflected this group work. Students enjoyed the experience of working with a networking technology and believed that it helped them to learn. Our account of learning outcomes is based on the students' perceived learning.

The students' activity was organized around joint problem-solving efforts manifested in the co-construction of solutions and referring to and expanding one another's ideas. Collaborative activity was such that boosted individual intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. As learners developed an autonomous learning strategy, the links between synchronous decision-making activities, asynchronous learning tasks, informal tasks in their own learning networks, and personal reflections on achievement became pivotal in "forging an empowering framework" (Hall et al. 2009:144).

Both quantitative and qualitative research was used to surface participants' perceptions of skills learning through online interaction and provided insights into the competences that the technology-enhanced learning environment facilitated.

The results of this study suggest that the consolidated application of the learning-focused and language-focused models mentioned above can significantly enhance students' language/translation competence and their communicative skills as EFL learners, while raising their motivation and networking skills. The findings showed that contribution of learning motivation and metacognitive skills enhanced learners' systematic use of strategies that, in turn, supported their development as independent and empowered learners.

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