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Building global skills through collaboration in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

Empathy, mutual respect, curiosity, collaboration, awareness (of self, others and the world) and openness to new experiences are some of the skills the OECD (2019) has identified as being associated with academic success and better preparation for the challenges of an ever more global and interconnected world. As global skills grow in importance, educators are challenged to consider new pedagogical approaches and design learning experiences that foster the development of these skills. The aim of this poster is to present a collaborative project developed at the University of Aveiro, during the 1st term of the 2021/22 academic year, and involving students from two different departments and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) subjects. In addition to consolidating students' intercultural awareness and language competences, this learner-centred project also aimed to foster the development of personal, social and learning-to-learn competences, as these are defined in the *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (Council of Europe, 2018), which establishes a framework of competences citizens need in ever more diverse, mobile, digital, and global societies. In addition to a description of the project and presentation of the outputs, this poster summarises students' perceptions of the process. The data showed that students had a generally positive perception of the activity per se and that they engaged with the acquisition and expression of cognitive, social and intercultural competencies.

Keywords

Collaboration; Global skills; Intercultural communication; Language pedagogy; Learner-centred learning.

Introduction

The participants in our project were 3rd-year students taking C1-level English and communication subjects on the Languages and Business Relations and Office Management and Business Communication degrees, at the Languages and Cultures Department (DLC) and the Águeda School of Technology and Management (ESTGA), respectively. The project aimed to provide the students with a channel for developing a range of interconnected global competences (language, intercultural communication, personal, social and learning-to-learn) and their digital skills.

The project in figures

101 students (DLC: 79; ESTGA: 22)
3 EFL teachers
4 online events
4 speakers from Portugal & abroad
30+ discussion/research topics
27 research posters

Project timeline & description

Oct. '21 | The project's concept, goals and deadlines were presented to students, who then formed interdepartmental teams of four (3 DLC+1 ESTGA) to conduct research on topics relating to intercultural communication.

Nov. '21 | The students and the wider community were invited to three Tea Talks (Fig.1). These talks, organised in collaboration with the CLLC's Globalisation and Identities Project, had two specific objectives. The first was to bring students, researchers and professionals together to share know-how and experience and further their understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by the current labour market. The second was to provide the students with a pool of themes to inform, but not dictate, their choice of research subject.

24 Nov '21 > 17 Jan '22 | Students were required to complete their assignment, i.e. to conduct research, summarise their findings in poster format and submit their work to a Padlet mural (Fig.2), created to mimic a conference poster exhibition.

1 Feb '22 | Closing conference (Fig. 3) – A guest talk, plus presentations of a selection of posters, students' testimonials on the project and a best paper award brought the project to a close.
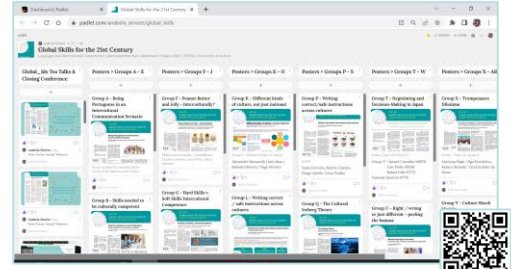

Fig.2 Global Skills for the 21st Century: virtual poster exhibition
Source: https://padlet.com/anabela_simoes/global_skills

Afterwards, 'Best Paper Award Certificates' and 'Participation Certificates' were sent out to students.

Outputs and students' perceptions

Nearly 90% of the 27 submitted works were graded with either 'good' or 'excellent'. It is worth highlighting that some groups produced extremely interesting, high-quality research work, despite this being a new and challenging experience for them as undergraduates. After the project was completed, students were invited to answer an online (anonymous and non-mandatory) questionnaire. The main aim here was to gauge how the activity had contributed to the development of specific skills. A Likert-like scale (1 to 5) was used to assess the perceived extent to which students had developed their i) cognitive/metacognitive skills, ii) social and emotional skills, and iii) digital skills. The response rate was 70% and data analysis shows that students viewed the activity positively, particularly as regards the development of their social and emotional skills, with empathy and

respect for others (4.23), intercultural awareness (4.16) and perseverance, self-control and responsibility (4.07) receiving the highest scores. Regarding skills of a cognitive/ metacognitive nature, academic writing skills (3.84), research/information selection skills (3.81), and creativity, critical thinking and problem solving (3.78) scored most highly. The development of digital skills was assessed at 3.75.

> "We learned how to work as a team, and gained many skills, like problem-solving, teamwork, communication, time management, and others, which is something that will definitely help us in the future." –Participating student

Conclusions

This project sought to promote the development of EFL students' language and intercultural competences, as well as their personal, social and learning-to-learn competences and their digital skills. Considering students' concrete outputs and overall feedback, it can be concluded that this activity was effective, with a beneficial impact in terms of both academic achievement and personal growth. All in all, by providing students with an opportunity to take an active role in the learning process, such assignments represent an opportunity for students to develop crucial transferable skills, such as communication and collaboration, as well as enter the workforce with some experience in the areas of research and project management.

References

Council of Europe (2018). Council recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, 189, 4.6.2018, pp. 1-13; OECD (2019). *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030*. https://bit.ly/OECD_LC2030.

Fig.1 Global.IDs Tea Talks

Fig.3 Global.IDs Final Conference