ISSUES

ONLINE COMMUNITY PROJECTS: LEARNER-CENTRED DIGITAL MEDIATION TOOLS for SECONDARY-SCHOOL ENGLISH as a FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULA

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Young people today face an uncertain future. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in state education are investing their expertise in Online Community Projects (OCPs) as a digital mediation tool to help their students acquire intercultural awareness and experiment with new uses for technology. This qualitative study employs analytic autoethnography to investigate the experiences of a secondary-school English as a Foreign Language teacher using OCPs in southern Italy. Data were analysed and debated through relevant EFL and sociocultural theory literature. Results revealed the learner-centred qualities of OCP activities and their effects on secondary-school EFL curricula.

This research contributes to the literature on teaching English with technology, learner autonomy and online community projects in secondary-school EFL curricula. It will interest policymakers and teachers who wish to include learner-centred approaches in their practices.

1. Introduction

Online Community Projects (OCPs) are collaborative school projects that involve classes from different cities or countries. They use technology for communication and a particular website as a home space to create a community. They have gained popularity in secondary-school classrooms since the introduction of the internet and communication devices, such as smartphones and computers. Foreign language teachers can encourage communication in the target language through learner-centred activities that can be adapted to suit social and cultural requirements (Fearn, 2021). Numerous studies explore the global and digital properties of OCPs, such as those hosted on specialised platforms such as eTwinning (Akdemir, 2017; Camilleri, 2016; Gajek, 2009; Gulbay, 2018). However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding how OCPs use technology to embrace learner-centred approaches resulting from sociocultural theory.

In recent years, qualitative research has witnessed a surge in interest surrounding autoethnography as a practical methodology for understanding and exploring personal experiences within cultural and social contexts. As a form of self-reflexive inquiry, autoethnography allows researchers to engage in rigorous introspection while shedding light on broader cultural phenomena

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(Wall, 2006). By adopting an autoethnographic approach, this study aims to bridge the personal and the social, drawing connections between the author's experience with OCPs and the broader cultural landscape. It contributes to existing literature through self-reflection, writing, and critical analysis while examining the effectiveness of OCPs as learner-centred digital mediation tools for teaching or learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in secondary-school contexts.

This study is vital because learner-centred approaches can provide secondary-school EFL students with the skills they need to work in a constantly changing society (Qambaday & Mwila, 2022). Sociocultural theory (SCT) in education requires learner-centred activities (Panhwar et al., 2016), and international institutions such as the EU and UNESCO urge education systems to use them (Council of Europe, 2020; United Nations, 2020). OCPs necessitate a learner-centred approach that considers the participants' social and cultural settings by placing the learner at the axis of learning (Fearn, 2021). However, research has shown that many secondary-school teachers in Italy and other countries prefer teacher-led approaches that control knowledge inputs (Morgana & Shrestha, 2018; Qambaday & Mwila, 2022).

This study contributes to the literature by introducing OCPs as digital mediation tools for EFL curricula. It justifies analytic autoethnography as the most appropriate methodology for this enquiry and rationalises the thematic analysis used to collect and analyse data. The findings are discussed qualitatively to examine and discuss how OCPs can be used as learner-centred digital mediation tools in secondary school EFL curricula and the advantages and disadvantages they might bring. The following section will define the concept of 'learner-centred' regarding Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and then provide insight into the literature on OCPs, SCT and digital mediation tools.

2. Literature

2.1. Online Community Projects?

OCPs are a form of Project-Based-Learning (PBL) but on a broader scale. It incorporates classes from other cities and countries and uses technology as a tool for communication. Many teachers living in the EU might be familiar with eTwinning,[1] which has become an eponym for what this study calls OCPs. Research has shown that to become an active learning community, OCPs require four critical factors. Firstly, they need a title and theme that interests students and meets the requirements of the EFL curricula. For instance, the EU encourages teachers to respect themes such as inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, environment and fight against climate change, participation in democratic life, shared values and civic engagement (European Commission, 2022). Secondly, teachers and schools from different cities or countries need

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1 In 2022 eTwinning was moved to the European School Education Platform (ESEP).

to collaborate. Partner schools, projects, and teachers can be found through specialized OCP platforms like eTwinning,[2] iEARN,[3] PenPal Schools,[4] Connecting Classrooms,[5] ASEF,[6] or other non-specialized social media like Facebook and Twitter. The administrating teachers decide on an initial plan of activities that will lead to a final product or objective, and at least two schools need to be involved, but there can be many more. Thirdly, a private web space is necessary. Websites can be created using specialized platforms or software like Google Sites, WordPress, Weebly, or others. The web space needs to be private when working with minors, and rules on eSafety and netiquette should be respected at all times (Blyth, 2015). Finally, exciting, authentic learner-centred activities that stimulate socialization are essential. Communication and collaboration are fundamental to OCPs. Unless at least some participants engage in these activities, a community will not be created (Reyes & Vallone, 2007). OCP activities can include anything from scanning work done with pen and paper to creating digital material like videos and posters. Learners are encouraged to communicate both asynchronously, via forums, chat rooms, and email, and synchronously using conference tools such as Zoom, Meet, Skype or any other communication software. The following section will provide more information about SCT and learner-centred activities and their connection to OCPs.

2.2. Sociocultural theory and mediation tools

SCT and digital mediation tools can enhance teaching and learning EFL by providing students with opportunities to collaborate, co-construct knowledge, and use technology to mediate their learning experiences. SCT is usually linked to work by Vygotsky, for example, Vygotsky (1962) and academics such as Lave (2012) and Lave and Wenger (1991). Vygotsky did not name the concept of mediation, but it is a crucial concept throughout his work (Wertsch, 2007). Digital mediation tools encourage learning by negotiating ideas because the world is understood through socialisation and can be implicit or explicit (Hung, 2001). Implicit tools are socialisation devices that occur naturally, such as language. In contrast, explicit ones are created intentionally to encourage communication and learning (Ohta, 2013; Ortega, 2012), such as OCPs and OCP activities. Figure 1 presents five key aspects common to SCT and OCPs to aid understanding of how OCPs can be considered explicit digital sociocultural mediation tools in secondary-school EFL curricula.

2 https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/networking/partner-finding

3 https://www.iearn.org/cc/space-2

4 https://go.penpalschools.com/topics

5 https://school-partner-finder.britishcouncil.org/?_ga=2.214052882.485979198.1656486380-637499434.1656486380

6 https://asef.org/all-projects/open-calls/

Figure 1. Sociocultural learning, learner-centred activities, online tools, and teaching methods

SCT. Learning is considered to be:
- Socially constructed;
- An active process;
- Influenced by and built upon previous knowledge, personal beliefs and cultural contexts (Hung, 2001).
The role of teachers is to:
- Organise and facilitate learning situations;
- Create supportive and motivating environments that avoid competition;
- Encourage activities where learners can discover new concepts and shared meanings (Harris & Hofer, 2009)
Learner-centred activities involve:
- Social interaction;
- Scaffolding and collaboration;
- Groupwork;
- Problem-solving and critical thinking;
- Authentic topics that relate to the learner's social, cultural, and historical contexts (Reyes & Vallone, 2007).
Online tools:
- Collaborative software that facilitates asynchronous socialisation. For example, emails, forums, games and quizzes, bulletin boards, polling tools, social media, and many others;
- Synchronous communication software. For example, video conferencing, gaming, and social media applications (Wang et al., 2001).
Teaching methods include:
- Task-Based-Language-Teaching (TBLT) (Willis, 2021);
- Project-Based-Language-Learning (PBLL) (Markham, 2011);
- Network-Based Language-Learning (NBLL) (Jones, 2015);
- Content-Based Language Learning (CBLL) (Lyster, 2011).

Moreover, explicit digital mediation tools, whether digital conference software or OCPs, can help facilitate communication and learning in education. This advantage was highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown when teachers were forced to use technology and online conference tools to access their students and continue lessons. Research has shown that digital conference tools can be successfully used in a learner-centred way that encourages independence and allows for personalised learning (Di Pietro et al., 2020). However, emergency remote teaching differs significantly from classes designed and planned to be carried out online (Hodges et al., 2020). Additional difficulties arose in many secondary schools in Italy and other countries because families lacked digital devices and stable internet connections, and teachers lacked experience and expertise in digital education (Fearn, 2022; Giovannella et al., 2020; Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). In light of these circumstances, the subsequent sections will introduce the settings of this study and provide a practical description of how OCPs can be used in EFL classrooms as an explicit mediation tool.

Figure 2. Participating schools

2.3. Settings

This study originated in a secondary school in southern Italy. It uses an OCP called *Be the Change, Take the Challenge* (Zielonka & Fearn, 2018) as a background. This OCP used the Sustainable Development Goals as its central theme and lasted one school year from September 2017 to June 2018. It included over one hundred secondary-school teachers and around two thousand students worldwide. Figure 2 shows the ample distribution of the partner schools on Google Maps, a collaborative tool that can be accessed publicly. Still, most efforts were made by teachers in Norway, Portugal, Spain, Romania, the Czech Republic, Turkey, Canada, the United States, and Italy. All schools were secondary schools with students from 14 to 19 years of age with varied levels and contexts. Tasks were flexible, so they could easily be adapted to suit a variety of social, cultural, and historical settings and their stages and interests. The author involved three classes from the school where she was teaching: one had students aged 14 and were level B1 on the CEFR, while the other two were 18 years old. One could be described as around A1 to A2, while the other was at a B2 level.

It is difficult to encapsulate a large, non-linear OCP, but this study has attempted to provide a summary in Table 2. It illustrates *Be the Change* by summarising the activity nodes, timeline, sub-nodes (descriptions), the people and when and where the activities were carried out. The nodes were divided into three main categories: the preparation, the four assignments and the conclusion. It shows that teachers spent significant time preparing OCPs, defining clear objectives, and a flexible timeline. Consent forms and netiquette were also given attention. The four assignments followed the same

organisation. However, each teacher would have interpreted them differently and chosen the digital tools available to them according to their class's social, historical, and cultural interests. The OCP concluded with evaluation, dissemination, and a section where online meetings were documented. Please note that the author, an administrator of this OCP, took the necessary steps to inform and obtain signed permission from all other administrators and partners to use the OCP data in research and publication. Approval was acquired from other participants through a request published on the OCP platform and via email.

OCP nodes	Timeline	OCP Sub-Nodes (Description of material uploaded)		People	When and where
Preparation	September		o Objectives o Promotional and informative material. o OCP timeline o Parent Consent forms o Netiquette o Teachers' introductions o Creating and voting for the project Logo	Teachers	Not during lessons
Assignment 1: **Introductions:**	September to October	Students' introduction	o Avatars o Padlet o Group photos	Teachers and students	During lessons
Assignment 2: **Brainstorming**	November to December	Brainstorming	o Students use Padlet and forum to brainstorm about the problems and challenges regarding the SDGs in their local communities that need attention; o Poster making.		
Assignment 3: **Inquiry**	January to February	o Problem-solving	o Students make videos to ask partners about local SDG issues; o Students researched and answered the questions they were asked.		
Assignment 4: **Collaborative presentations**	March to April	o Collaborative presentation	o Students work in international groups using Google Slides to create a collaborative informative presentation about the SDGs		
OCP conclusion	May to June		o Online Meetings o Final product o Collaborative video constructed from Assignment 4 o Dissemination (o OCP evaluation (Google forms)	Teachers and students	During and after lessons

Table 1. OCP nodes adapted from Zielonka and Fearn (2018)

Be the Change, Take the Challenge was initiated during the summer of 2017 to inspire students to learn English through communicating about essential and inspiring topics while at the same time learning about critical global matters. The objectives were met mainly through the principles of project-based learning and network-based language teaching and emerged from three main principles:

1. English as a 'global lingua Franca' is a fundamental part of the globalisation process (Sung, 2013, p. 377);

2. Teachers are 'agents of social change' and therefore need to be aware of and encourage global competencies (Camilleri, 2016, p. 10);

3. Online knowledge-sharing is empowering, and students need to be technologically prepared (Kang & Lee, 2017).

The OCP was hosted on Twinspace with an external website on WordPress (Zielonka, 2018) for participants outside the EU. A third platform Loomio.org was reserved for partner teachers to make decisions, each teacher bringing their expertise into the discussion. The primary assignments were decided upon collaboratively but were modified and amplified as the project progressed.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative paradigm with a reflective, analytic autoethnography methodology to examine how effective OCP activities can be as learner-centred digital mediation tools in secondary-school EFL curricula. The following two sub-research questions are presented to answer these questions and elicit reflexivity:

Question 1. What insights can be gained from the author's experiences as a secondary school EFL teacher with OCPs as sociocultural digital mediation tools for learning EFL?

Question 2. What advantages and disadvantages did the author observe when using learner-centred OCP activities in secondary-school EFL curricula?

3.1. Analytic autoethnography

Autoethnography was chosen as the best research framework for this study for several reasons. Firstly, it allowed the author a deeper understanding of how OCPs impacted her practice. Secondly, autoethnography acknowledges that each context is unique and recognises the importance of teachers in informing pedagogical theory. Thirdly, the author's lived experience and first-hand account capture the complexity and nuances of OCPs that may not be fully apprehended through other research methods. Lastly, it allowed the author to recognise how theory resonates with her OCP experience. These aspects were helpful because she had been teaching EFL in Italian state secondary schools since 1989 and experimenting with OCPs since 2009. These experiences kindled a curiosity regarding the success of these tools. Therefore, autoethnography presented a reflexive means of exploring connections between the author's experiences with OCPs and broader social and cultural contexts.

The objective of autoethnography is to systematically analyse the author's own experience to reach an understanding of a cultural phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011). It emphasises the practitioner's voice as an 'insider' researcher through layering multiple voices and reflexive analysis rather than measuring 'the truth' (Dyson, 2007). It sheds light on social phenomena that would not be visible without the insider's experience (Anderson, 2006). However, this advantage can also be a disadvantage because the subjectivity of autoethnography can introduce bias into the research process and findings. Also, the context-specific nature of the author's experience may limit the applicability of the results to other situations. Therefore, excerpts are discussed using the voices of other academics taken from relevant literature to increase reflexivity and extend

relevance to a wider range of contexts. Finally, as a qualitative study, autoethnography reflects an ontological belief that reality will result differently for every individual, and every interpretation of an experience will depend on cultural, historical, and cultural factors (Rogoff et al., 2017). Epistemologically, it considers the author's subjective viewpoints and understandings as a secondary school EFL teacher, OCP administrator, and participant.

3.1.1. DATA COLLECTION AND SETTINGS

OCPs typically involve multiple participants, but autoethnography is a research approach that centres around individual experiences. This study collected data from the author's personal experiences using OCPs in secondary-school EFL classrooms in southern Italy. Specifically, the author focused on her participation in a particular OCP called *Be the Change, Take the Challenge* (Zielonka & Fearn, 2018), which was selected randomly from a range of OCPs the author had previously been involved in. All of these were organised similarly and are presented in Table 2. This OCP provided a basis for comparison for the author's study, and the field notes she took during the experience served as the primary data source. By analysing patterns of cultural understanding, the author identified vital themes that significantly impacted her teaching practice. Ellis et al. (2011) describe these insights as "epiphanies", as shown in Table 1.

3.2. Analysis

The aim of analysis in autoethnography is to understand a social phenomenon that is not perceptible from data alone (Anderson, 2006). This study gathered data from the completed OCP (*Be the Change*) and the author's field notes. These data were analysed through relevant literature to understand better how OCPs can be used as learner-centred digital mediation tools and the advantages or disadvantages they might bring to secondary-school EFL curricula. Inductive thematic analysis was used to uncover challenges and similarities because its flexibility means it can be adapted to all kinds of data (Braun & Clarke, 2021), including autoethnography. Inductive enquiry means that data were collected with an open mind and without preconceived ideas that generate data-driven analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The data consisted of field notes and reflections recorded by the author over three days. The first was on May 10, 2017, before OCP *Be the Change* started. The second was dated February 5, 2018, during the OCP, and the last was on November 21, 2022, after the Covid-19 pandemic, when the author gained more experience. Data were read many times, and other summaries were made until it was possible to identify codes. Codes were then grouped into clusters to answer the two research questions. Table 2 shows how each question generates one theme and one sub-theme. The first research produced six codes: *Socialisation, Active, Previous knowledge, Authentic and supportive environment, Tools and facilities,* and *Learner-centred.* The sub-theme is *SCT,* and the main theme is *Pedagogical theory in EFL* because it links the data to

the research question. Codes for the second research question could be divided into two main sub-themes: *Advantages* and *Disadvantages*. Codes related to the former are *Identity, Diversity, Authentic,* and *Professional development,* while those relating to the latter are *Lack of facilities*, *Assessment, Behaviour, Lack of support*, and *Lack of time*. The main theme that ties the research question to the codes is *Motivation.*

Codes	Sub-theme	Theme	Research Question
Socialisation, Active, Previous knowledge, Authentic and supportive environment, Tools and facilities, Learner-centred	Sociocultural theory	Pedagogical theory in EFL	**Question 1:** What insights can be gained from the author's experiences as a secondary school EFL teacher with OCPs as sociocultural digital mediation tools for learning EFL?
Identity, Diversity, Authentic, Professional development	Advantages	Motivation	**Question 2:** What advantages and disadvantages did the author observe when using learner-centred OCP activities in secondary-school EFL curricula?
Lack of facilities, Assessment, Behaviour, Lack of support, Lack of time	Disadvantages		

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes, and codes

Excerpts from the author's field notes are used as a starting point to incite conversation with relevant studies to reflect upon how others might perceive the same experience. Results are organized under the themes discussed above and analysed using literature on SCT to appreciate the extent to which OCPs can be considered digital mediation tools for learner-centred activities. Gaining knowledge from experts in the field is a way of offering other perspectives and increasing credibility. Also, reflective inductive analysis reduces bias and increases rigour and transparency.

3.2.1. TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ETHICAL PROCEDURES

Reflective analysis, thick description and extensive reading of related studies and literature provided credibility because personal experience depends upon social and cultural context and could be a source of bias (Poulos, 2021). There is debate about the ethical correctness of utilising data posted on Social Networking Services (Blyth, 2015). Therefore, OCP participants were not asked to provide data, nor were any of their posts or uploads used in this study. On the other hand, an email was sent to all OCP members, informing them of the author's intentions to use the OCP as a background to this study. Utmost care was given to how this study might affect others, and ethical approval was requested and provided by the Open University Human Rights Ethics Committee (HREC/4242).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. How are OCP activities learner-centred?

The first research question is examined through pedagogical theory in SCT. It compared the author's experience with research by experienced academics in the field of EFL, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and pedagogical theory in second language learning (SLA) (see Figure 1). This section is organised under the codes listed in Table 2.

4.1.1. SOCIALISATION

Scholars in SCT believe learning is influenced by past events, culture, and knowledge (Hung, 2001). Therefore, socialisation among people with different cultural and historical backgrounds will provide a rich arena for learning (Reyes & Vallone, 2007). The following excerpt shows how inconsistent and uncontrollable socialisation can be among enthusiastic teachers. Socialisation is done with the other teachers, who all provide their own ideas. It can become erratic at this stage because all members have their designs, and they want to share them. Socialisation is disorganized in OCPs, but teachers can guide their professional development by asking questions motivated by their unique social and cultural contexts. Social discussion is just as unsystematic among students. OCP activities seldom evolve as the administrator planned (Hampel & Stickler, 2015). The author points out that although students might not use English as much as they hoped, their attitude towards learning it changes.

> These activities help students learn English, but most socialisation is done in class at school and in Italian. That is also important because students can bond and feel good about themselves. This way, they feel more confident about using English to communicate with others outside the classroom. (10/05/2017)

This extract, taken from field notes written towards the end of the project, resonates with situated learning by Lave and Wenger (1991). Situated learning is derived from SCT and sees learning as a construction of skills through "an evolving form of membership" in a social community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Lave and Wenger (1991) use the term legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) to describe learning from more experienced individuals until they reach a stage where they can pass expertise onto others. When successful, a phenomenon known as a community of practice (CoP) is formed (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The key to situated learning is that it is done through socialisation and not by formal teacher-led lessons. Therefore, the social aspect of the OCP can potentially generate a CoP inside and beyond the classroom confines.

4.1.2. ACTIVE

TBLT is founded upon the principles of SCT and can be helpful when learners study in a country where English is not an official language. Activities can be created using real situations that stimulate communication (Savignon, 2007). The following excerpt shows how a CoP is formed among teachers from other cities and countries with varied social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. It begins with the practical construction of the OCP. Online collaboration and socialisation provide the basis for producing CoPs, where teachers share their expertise and learn from each other. Newcomers become experts who inspire new novice teachers in a continuing cycle of professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

> The two administrators are in close contact while deciding the themes and activities. Once settled, other teachers are invited into the discussion. At this point, the responsibility is reduced because the workload is shared. I spend at least an hour of my weekly free time on the OCP. But I don't mind. It is fun, and I enjoy doing it. It is much better than doing the same thing week in and week out. (21/11/2022)

Through collaboration, teachers learn how to organise OCPs and activities from colleagues with more experience. The workload is shared, but teachers must spend additional time outside their regular work periods (See Table 2). However, the motivational qualities of learner-centred activities mean that inexperienced EFL teachers are inspired to continue developing their teaching skills informally and independently and building upon previous knowledge (Panhwar et al., 2016). Since each individual has a unique social, cultural, and historical background, learners need to determine their own learning for it to be at the correct level and interest. It is the teachers' role to design flexible activities for the learners to find that level and be on hand when needed as guides rather than instructors (Reyes & Vallone, 2007).

4.1.3. PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Communication is fundamental to SCT and learning EFL or any foreign language (Fearn, 2021). An internet connection and digital technology can provide tools that facilitate and promote contact with peers of similar ages but different first languages. It is also important to choose communication tools familiar to learners so they do not become the learning focus (Stickler, 2022). The following excerpt shows some of the tools that are popular on OCPs.

> We try to create activities that encourage active communication among learners. For example, Kahoot is great for playing games with students in other countries. We also use video conference tools such as Meet and Zoom. We communicate using emails, chats, forums, brainstorming, and presentation software such as Padlet, Google Slides, and Wakelet to post our work. When

> making decisions, we use Polling software such as Doodle and Tricider. There are hundreds, but when possible, I prefer to use tools that do not require student registration. (21/11/2022)

These applications are examples of the many digital mediation tools for communication available to teachers today. They provide a way of reaching outside the classroom to a broader community with varying social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. Thus, they provide a more efficient learning community that allows learners to build upon knowledge gained from their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Communication software also incites genuine socialisation. There is no need to simulate conversations in English among learners who speak the same first language when it is possible to converse with peers with different first languages. Moreover, authenticity is fundamental to learner-centred approaches (Wang et al., 2001).

4.1.4. AUTHENTIC AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

The following excerpt shows how the community aspect of OCPs necessitates genuine communication and interest and can be adapted to the EFL curricula.

> For example, the introductions and descriptions at the start of the OCP are included in most textbooks, but introducing yourself to real people is authentic and much more fun for the students. The same is true for most of the activities. Especially if you design them to cater for specific needs, for example, using certain grammar tenses such as the imperative or modal verbs when listing ways to save energy. (05/02/2018)

Whereas many textbook activities aim to teach a grammar structure, function or skill, the purpose of OCP activities is communication in EFL and creating a final product. Additionally, experienced teachers can adapt activities to meet their EFL curricula requirements so that syntax can be learnt through usage (Dooly & Sadler, 2013). These factors are among the many advantages of using learner-centred approaches.

4.1.5. LEARNER-CENTRED

Learner-centred approaches also produce confident learners who are more motivated to learn outside the classroom, independently from the teacher (Sanio & Hileni, 2017).

> The preparation is done before the lesson; with experience, you can design tasks to allow for any difficulties you might encounter. The best way is to develop assignments that can be flexible. Learners like to be independent and to work to their strengths and interests. Even if they are shy, they are curious to see or speak to peers who live in other countries. As a teacher, it can be challenging to relax and let the students get on with learning on their own. But in my experience, it is the best way. (10/05/2017)

The role of the teacher is fundamental to learner-centred environments. Teachers need to allow their students the freedom to learn for themselves. Mistakes are essential for learning, and teachers must act as facilitators and mentors rather than top-down instructors (Bhavani, 2017). Using OCPs can also benefit teacher development because inexperienced teachers can learn from more experienced ones, as in a CoP (Fearn, 2021; Townsend & Bates, 2006). Each community has unique social, cultural, and historical conditions, requiring individual teaching and learning goals that require distinctive strategies (Schiefelbein & Mcginn, 2017).

4.2. Effects on curricula

4.2.1. ADVANTAGES

The second research question regards the advantages and disadvantages of OCPs in secondary-school EFL curricula, both relating to their motivational qualities. The first section discusses the benefits under the codes indicated in Table 2.

Identity. As noted previously (see Section 4.1.4 Authentic and supportive environments), learners need a supportive, stable, and user-friendly webspace to feel part of an online community, similar to Marx's belief that workers' identities are shaped by their jobs and tools (Nicolini, 2012). Moreover, Kondonijakos (2021) points out how human beings continually assess who they are and where they should be. They will not perform to their full potential if they believe they do not belong in a specific group, such as an EFL classroom. Research by Gajek (2018) and Gilleran (2019) has shown that using OCPs such as eTwinning improves learning motivation and attitudes towards school. This statement is confirmed in the following excerpt:

> It's crucial that students feel confident with the website home and that the project is theirs. When they produce something digitally and can communicate with a peer living in another country, they feel proud of themselves and are motivated to continue and improve. Their confidence certainly improves, and so do relationships within the class. I have noticed that they have become more fluent and studied more. (21/11/2022)

When learners are confident, they make friends more quickly and are likely more motivated to learn EFL (Akdemir, 2017). Additionally, research has shown that eTwinning OCPs can inspire teachers and learners to experiment outside their comfort zone and thus increase confidence, identity, and EFL skills (Kitade, 2014). These improvements also lead to better relationships within the classroom (Burden & Naylor, 2020; Fearn, 2021).

Diversity. With learner-centred activities, the role of the teacher changes radically.

> When tasks are challenging, I ask the first student who understands what to do to go around and help those with difficulty. When the activities are well prepared in advance, and the students know how to use the platform, I find myself with little to do in the classroom, so I walk around and speak to individual groups about what they are doing and check they are ok and working. This way, I get to talk to groups of students, so my relationship with them improves. I can also spend more time with those who need help. (21/11/2022)

Instead of being the source of knowledge, the teacher is an assistant or guide (Schweisfurtha, 2022). Learners search for meaning using digital technology and interpret it through negotiating ideas influenced by varied social, cultural, and historical factors (Panhwar et al., 2016). The OCP acts as a social constructive digital mediation tool in this case. This factor is critical to learning EFL in secondary-school settings because, unlike higher education, where most EFL research is focused, not all learners want to attend classes or are interested in learning English (Fearn, 2021).

> Secondary schools often have large classes with various cultures, socio-economic statuses, and skills. Plus, teenagers can be difficult at the best times, and if they are not interested in school or learning English, our jobs are all the more challenging. The discovery of OCPs has made a considerable difference in my practice. (21/11/2022)

Many secondary-school classrooms are enriched with students from mixed-racial backgrounds and cultures from many countries in Italy and the EU (EUROSTAT, 2023). This factor, combined with the large number of learners allocated to each classroom due to reductions in the number of staff, can be a challenge for some teachers (Burden & Naylor, 2020) and can be aggravated when teachers try to use teacher-led approaches. Therefore, learner-centred approaches can be a helpful alternative in these situations. Still, research by Qambaday and Mwila (2022) reveals that secondary-school teachers resist change, especially those working with large classes, and are untrained in learner-centred approaches. The research also found that teacher formation in learner-centred approaches is either not done or is insufficient.

Authentic. A curriculum that includes EFL as a tool for communication can strengthen language skills. The following excerpt by the author shows how this can be done using both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools in OCPs:

> We encourage communication among students from different countries. Synchronous communication is manageable within the EU but impossible with teachers living outside of it because of time-zone differences, so we use asynchronous

communication tools. My students love both synchronous and asynchronous contact. Nowadays, young people use technology and written forms of communication all the time. They are so proud of themselves when they can communicate with other people in English. (05/02/2018)

In higher education, a similar approach to OCPs is termed "telecollaboration", which Dooly and O'Dowd (2018) believe was developed from pen-pal exchanges. The advantage of asynchronous written communication is that learners have time to consider what to say and how to say it (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Moreover, Kitade (2014) reveals that communicating and asynchronous communication has improved writing quality, and Abdollah and Ahad (2009) believe that regular interaction using asynchronous methods can also enhance speaking skills. The following section shows how the benefits of using OCPs extend to teachers.

Professional development. The advantages of using OCPs as social constructivist digital mediation tools can also be applied to teachers. In this case, socialisation with colleagues living in different cities and countries helps them experience teaching from a new perspective, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> It is always nice to learn new ideas and share them. We all make suggestions and chip in. (10/05/2017)

Sharing ideas is fundamental to constructing a CoP and crucial for professional improvement (Bocconi et al., 2012). Teachers not only improve their practices but their language and global skills too (Germain-Rutherford, 2015), as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> Working in an online community with other secondary-school English teachers has profoundly affected my practice and life. I have learned so much and continue discovering new things and growing professionally. For example, I have understood the many advantages of integrating learner-centred activities into lessons. (21/11/2022)

This excerpt resonates with Daniels (2007), who affirms that teachers can develop professionally using learner-centred activities founded in social constructivist theory. Furthermore, it suggests that the author identifies as a competent language teacher (Crişan, 2013; Kitade, 2014). However, findings also revealed numerous disadvantages relating to the motivational qualities of OCPs.

4.2.2. DISADVANTAGES

Lack of facilities. The following sections focus on the disadvantages of using learner-centred OCP activities in secondary-school EFL curricula. The results showed that all difficulties were connected to practical issues. Firstly, her school had received funds to invest in digital devices, but the author noted that few teachers were using them to their potential:

> In the past, it was difficult, but during the lockdown, we were given funds to buy digital devices. However, we still only have one IT lab. This is ok for me because I am the only one who uses it. Teachers can sign for devices and take them to classrooms, but not many do. (21/11/2022)

There could be various reasons teachers choose not to use digital technology in their lessons. The apparent reason would be due to a lack of equipment. In fact, during the Covid-19 lockdown, when schools depended on technology to continue educating, the lack of devices and stable internet connection was a noticeable issue affecting many socially deprived areas (Williams & Marcus, 2021). Other reasons could be that teachers feel apprehensive about new approaches or do not know how to use technology in their lessons (Camilleri, 2016).

> Students are not used to using digital devices at school in my area, so everything takes much longer. I must help them with the basics before we can do anything. For example, students forget their passwords or have difficulty signing into their accounts for various reasons. (10/05/2017)

Despite never knowing the world without digital technology, research has shown that young people are primarily passive users and often have difficulty using it as a digital mediation tool for learning (Brennan et al., 2010). Helping learners to use their devices in a dynamic way that is fertile for learning languages is time-consuming but worthwhile because when learners have understood how to use them as learning tools, they will continue to do so outside of school hours (Rosell-Aguilar & Fernand, 2016). Additionally, it is fundamental to give importance to time spent on OCPs in the EFL curricula. Therefore, evaluation of the time spent on OCPs during lessons is essential.

> I set a time limit for these activities; otherwise, my students would take a long time, and I ensure they know their work will be evaluated. They are not only assessed on the work they produce or their English skills but also on how they use their time in the classroom. Assessment is essential in secondary schools if we want to give importance to OCPs. (10/05/2017)

Assessment not only gives OCP activities status but is also fundamental in secondary-school EFL in most countries where end-of-school assessments will contribute towards determining the young person's future (Dufaux, 2012). Hence, learners need to be prepared for them.

Assessment. The CEFR encourages teachers to incorporate "the task-based approach, the ecological approach and in general all approaches informed by sociocultural and socio-constructivist theories" (Council of Europe, 2018, pp. 29-30). Some scholars agree with Vygotsky that learners should be assessed on their potential rather than on their level of achievement, memory, or understanding (Daniels, 2007). However, examining bodies such as Cambridge, IELTS, and even end-of-term exams do not do this (Broek & Ende, 2013). Assessment is a vital part of the EFL curricula, but there is little support for assessing learner-centred activities (Fearn, 2022). The following excerpt notes the author's problem when evaluating learning with OCP activities.

> The only real difficulty I have is assessment. And that is a real problem. We need a way of measuring progress because education systems require grades. We just need to justify OCP activities as another form of exercise or course work contributing to students' development in language skills such as listening, speaking, comprehension and writing. But that is not enough! (21/11/2022)

Although students enjoy the practical and innovative stance to learning EFL, they are confused because they are used to being tested on their memory skills (Duncan & Buskirk-Cohen, 2011). Moreover, if secondary-school students feel they are not being assessed, they might believe the activity is unimportant and misbehave (Wingate, 2016). Research has shown that teachers fear losing control of their classes during OCP activities or that their students will misbehave (Duncan & Buskirk-Cohen, 2011). Bad behaviour, exclusion and bullying are issues that secondary schools have always had to deal with (Thomson & Gunter, 2011), and studies on cyberbullying, such as Smith et al. (2008), reveal that these issues are not limited to the classroom and are reflected in the following excerpt.

> Another disadvantage might be if any student feels excluded. Shunning can happen, but it is more usual that they make friends and strengthen relationships during OCP lessons. Another issue can be if students post unethical messages. However, in my limited experience of having students who did this, once they realised peers from other countries could see and understand their writing, they were ashamed and did not do it anymore. As far as I know, my students have never had it done to them in OCPs, possibly because the partner teachers successfully regulated the activities. (21/11/2022)

Rogoff (2003) warns that youths are influenced by their peers in good and bad ways. For this reason, it is essential to supervise learners working on OCP activities. However, learner-centred activities require a level of commitment from all community members. The following section discusses the difficulties encountered when partners miss their assignments.

Lack of support. Research by Gouseti (2014) noted the demotivating effect when peers and colleagues lacked commitment. The following excerpt shows how the author overcame this issue:

> It sometimes happens that OCP colleagues work little or not at all. OCPs reflect what happens in real life, after all. To avoid disappointment, I ensure that my learners always have something to do, and I design activities that have value even if they do not receive feedback. Also, if the OCP has many teachers and schools taking part, then it is more likely that at least someone will do some work that will satisfy the curiosity of our learners, even if they are from the same country. It is important not to expect too much from each other. (10/05/2017)

It can be disappointing when posts are unanswered, so the author designs flexible activities independent of outside responses if necessary. This point is interesting because the eTwinning directives place contact as the focus of OCPs such as eTwinning (European Commission, n.d.). Also, telecollaboration activities are centred around and depend upon communication among learners and usually involve just two groups (Fearn, 2021), for example (Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2018).

The lack of support and collaboration can also be found within individual institutions. Research shows that digital technology improved in many education systems after the Covid-19 pandemic when many countries went into lockdown and depended on communication software such as Zoom and Meet (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). Teachers are now more aware of the advantages that blended learning can offer, and schools in Italy and possibly other countries have benefitted from investment in digital devices (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). However, Maftoon and Shahini (2012) note that secondary schools in many countries are still not using digital technology to their total didactical capacity. This failure can be seen in the excerpt below:

> Many of my colleagues think I am wasting my time even if they show interest in new didactical uses for the technology. I even had issues with the lab technician, who told me I should teach the students to write with a pen before teaching them how to write on a computer. As a secondary-school EFL teacher and as a human being, I know that it is important that our youth are prepared for a competitive digital future. Through OCPs, I feel I am doing all these things because while students are learning

> digital skills, they are also learning language skills. They use English to research and improve their reading skills and write messages, summaries and essays to improve their writing skills. (21/11/2022)

This excerpt shows that the author has noted a lack of interest within her workplace among colleagues and even gives an example of how non-teaching staff showed resistance and suspicion concerning change.

Lack of time. Finally, a noteworthy disadvantage of using OCPs is the lack of time.

> The disadvantage of OCPs is finding time to prepare and fit them into school curricula. For example, this year, I have had countless personal commitments, so I didn't initiate an OCP but joined one that a colleague and friend working in Portugal made. This way, I could learn new project management methods. (21/11/2022)

Teachers are busy and might not have time to follow teacher training courses outside work hours (Burden & Naylor, 2020; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Therefore, they often rely on textbooks for lesson plans because they lack time to prepare their own (Dooly & Sadler, 2013). However, schoolbooks treat all students as having the same social, cultural, and historical contexts, needs and interests and are suitable for only the most intrinsically motivated learners (Ortega, 2008).

5. Conclusions

This study examined OCPs as sociocultural, learner-centred digital mediation tools and discussed their advantages and disadvantages in secondary-school EFL curricula. The findings primarily reflect subjective perspectives on the motivating qualities of OCPs. It was recognised that real-life activities could be developed to suit the participants' social, cultural, and historical contexts, but some teachers found them intimidating. The well-organised OCPs had the potential to construct an active CoP, facilitating learning between inexperienced and skilled participants. Students showed increased independence in their knowledge, while teachers had opportunities for professional growth. Moreover, the OCPs discussed in this study were found to support online socialisation, which aligns with SCT and proves valuable when learning foreign languages. Tasks could be designed to strengthen various language skills, with teachers able to choose digital tools based on their specific needs and learn new didactical uses for technological tools from more experienced colleagues.

On the other hand, the study also identified significant drawbacks. It was observed that many teachers do not have the time, means or incentive to learn how to use OCPs, or to experiment with learner-centred activities. Also, the obligation to assess and measure students' learning progress in secondary

schools and the lack of knowledge regarding evaluating learner-centred activities deterred many teachers from using them. Based on these subjective findings, this study suggests that secondary-school EFL curricula should include at least some approaches drawn from SCT. The design of flexible tasks and establishing support networks among colleagues and institutions are deemed necessary. Additionally, the limited research on OCPs contributes to teachers feeling ill-prepared and unmotivated to tackle the challenges they pose. However, without a better understanding of the time-efficient implementation and suitable assessment methods to measure progress, it is unlikely that widespread adoption of learner-centred approaches will become standard practice among secondary school EFL teachers.

The subjective results of this study are significant in at least two major respects. Firstly, they confirm the value of OCPs as practical digital mediation tools for learner-centred activities, highlighting their advantages in secondary-school EFL curricula. Secondly, the findings shed light on significant obstacles that hinder EFL teachers from incorporating OCPs or learner-centred activities in their curricula. These outcomes have important implications for EFL teachers, practitioner-researchers, and policymakers.

However, this study has limitations due to the subjective nature of analytic autoethnography. Firstly, despite complementing findings with other perspectives to enhance validity and reliability, the author's interpretations and reflections may have been influenced by her views, emotions, and preconceptions, potentially impacting the objectivity of the findings. Secondly, the focus on individual experiences reduces the generalisability of the findings, although the results might provide insights to other EFL teachers with similar difficulties locally, nationally, and internationally. Lastly, reflexivity is fundamental to analytic autoethnography but can also present challenges. Hence, the author tried to be aware of her biases and assumptions and critically reflected upon how they might influence interpretations and the representation of their experiences.

On the other hand, the "insider" nature of analytic autoethnography allowed the author to examine an overlooked area. Based on these outcomes, this study recommends that OCPs are included in initial teacher training programmes and that education leaders encourage EFL teachers to experiment with them in their curricula. Finally, this study has revealed a severe lack of knowledge regarding learner-centred assessment, which is fundamental to secondary school EFL curricula. Further research is needed to understand the prevailing assessment practices in secondary school EFL classes and the potential benefits of incorporating learner-centred assessment in secondary school EFL curricula for student-learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement.

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