EFL teachers' perceptions of online community projects in secondary school education

Castledown

Lesley June Fearn
The Open University, UK
lesley.fearn@gmail.com

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is crucial in most secondary schools within the EU and many other schools worldwide. Some teachers are integrating Online Community Projects (OCPs) into their curricula to provide a means of communication that motivates learning and incites learner-centred methods. This collaborative Action Research study reports on the perspectives and experiences of EFL teachers teaching in secondary schools in three European countries: the north and south of Italy, the east of Norway and the west of Sweden. Data were collected from six EFL teachers: four were users of OCPs, while the other two had chosen not to use them. Methods used to gather data were individual face-to-face interviews and open-question questionnaires. The results showed that all teachers perceived that working on OCPs could benefit professional development and their students' language skills. The choice not to use OCPs was related to the lack of time and difficulties in assessment. This research provides a lens through which to examine the advantages and disadvantages of integrating OCPs into the EFL curricula. It has implications for teachers wishing to include OCPs in their curriculum.

Keywords: e-Twinning, iEARN, community, teacher development, action research

Introduction

English as a Foreign language (EFL) is a core subject in many secondary schools worldwide, especially within the European Union (Berns, 2019). However, there is a lack of research on EFL in state education (Collins and Muñoz, 2016), including in Italy (Morgana and Shrestha, 2018). Many secondary school EFL teachers are familiar with specialised Online Community Project (OCP) platforms such as eTwinning, the International Education and Resource Network

(iEARN), Connecting Classrooms, PenPal Schools and others. In Europe, eTwinning has become so popular that it has become a generalisation for what the researcher has coined OCPs. Additionally, there is a large and growing body of scholarship and substantial promotional research showing the global advantages of eTwinning projects on teacher development, such as (Cinganotto, 2017; Gajek, 2018; Mouratoglou et al., 2021; Papadakis, 2016). However, there is a lack of research regarding the advantages and disadvantages OCPs bring to EFL. This study presents the perceptions of six secondary school EFL teachers: four who were using OCPs at the time of research and two who were not. It also uses a cross-case thematic analysis to understand why EFL teachers might choose not to use OCPs in their curricula.

Aims

This Action Research (AR) study seeks to bridge the gap in the literature regarding the use of OCPs by raising awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of integrating social-constructivist tools such as OCPs into the EFL curricula. The specific research questions that guided this study were: 1) What were the advantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula? and 2) What were the disadvantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula? These questions are answered by exploring relevant literature. It is to be noted that this research often uses the term *learner-centred* to describe social-constructivist activities.

Literature review

Online Community Projects. OCPs are school projects created by two or more teachers from the same school or schools in different cities or countries. After agreeing upon the aims and focus of the OCP, the administrating teachers decide upon a platform and set it up with an initial plan outline and timetable of all the steps and activities they intend to do. This plan is often modified during the progress of the OCP as partner teachers and students add their ideas and personalities (Farouk, 2016). For example, the first activity usually concerns introductions, and the last one is the final product and project assessment. Activities will be specific to the content focus of the OCP and typically comprise research and the construction of digital material that can be posted on the OCP website, such as videos, presentations, podcasts, learning objects and others. The advantage of working in this way is that each teacher can regulate tasks to the learners' individual social and cultural interests and allow for differences in ages and abilities (Dooly, 2017; Terhune, 2015; Ware & Kessler, 2014). Figure 1 shows an example of the final content nodes taken from an OCP about global warming on eTwinning (Fearn & Buyukuysal, 2022). There were various community-creating activities before the four modules began, such as getting to know partner teachers and students. Each module was given a particular theme regarding global warming. Activity suggestions were posted on the page, and participants uploaded their work so other members could see and

comment on it. There was also a page where teachers could share their time-tables for synchronised communication (online meetings) among their classes.

- ► Project Partners
- ► Timeline
- ► Objectives
- ► Online sessions
- ► Useful links
- ► Twitter and Microsoft Teams
- ► Online sessions 2018/2019
  - Assignment 1: Getting to know each other;
  - Assignment 2: Making informative digital posters;
  - Assignment 3: Making Podcasts;
  - Assignment 4: Creating Public Service Announcements (PSA).
- ► Netiquette
- ► Project evaluations
- ► Dissemination
- ► Research questionnaires
- ► Final Product

Figure 1. An example of OCP content nodes adapted from Zielonka & Fearn (2019).

The OCP platform is vital to its success and must be accessible to the participants and closely monitored. In addition to the specialised platforms mentioned previously, teachers can create their own OCP platform using websites such as Google Sites, WordPress, Weebly, WIX and others. Also, social media networks such as Facebook allow teachers to meet and share ideas. The advantage of using specialised OCP platforms such as eTwinning over open social media is that they are monitored to ensure educators use them in existing institutions. These precautions are essential when working with minors. They provide the space and facilities to build a private project website and community, allowing teachers and administrators to conceal uploaded work, communication, videos and images. They are, in fact, specialised social media where teachers can search for and contact like-minded colleagues or join projects already in progress. An additional advantage of using specific platforms is that participants can achieve recognition and awards. For example, the eTwinning platform rewards teachers, students, and schools with a quality label. These prizes motivate teachers (Papadakis, 2016) and can help when applying for Erasmus funds (Hunter & Austin, 2020). The following section will outline the situation of EFL in secondary schools in the EU and the countries involved in this study.

English as a Foreign Language: Curricula and policy. In most European countries, teachers can design their curricula and choose the textbooks that fit the guidelines set by the Ministry of Education (COE, 2020; European Parliament, 2021; Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Moreover, EFL curricula in the EU and many other countries outside the EU are determined by the Common

European Framework for Languages (CEFR) (Díez-Bedmar & Byram, 2018). For example, all students in Italy should meet the CEFR at level B2 on leaving secondary school education at 18 years old (COE, 2020). Still, statistics taken from the *Istituto Nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione*[1] (Ajello, 2020) from before the pandemic, reveal that this level is rarely being met and levels have deteriorated even more since then (Ajello, 2021). Likewise, Swedish authorities indicate that their students should reach a minimum CEFR level of B2.1, while Norwegian schools do not mention proficiency levels, only the 'can-do' action statements (Broek & Ende, 2013; Vattøy, 2017). Swedish and Norwegian students are considered high-performers in EFL, and both countries include pre-service teacher training in the CEFR for EFL teachers (Broek & Ende, 2013; Speitz, 2004; Vattøy, 2017).

The Common European Framework for Languages. The CEFR was created in 2001 to provide teachers and learners with a universal basis for second or Foreign-Language curricula, examinations and textbooks. However, its primary purpose was to improve communication and collaboration among cultures (Council of Europe, 2001). It provided detailed rubrics assessing six competency levels: elementary (A1) to proficiency (C2). The four language skills in the 2001 edition were *speaking, listening, reading* and *writing*. It was updated in 2018 and 2020, presenting new descriptors that support a more social-constructivist approach. The later publications actively encourage teachers to encompass learner-centred activities in their curricula and 'all approaches informed by sociocultural and socio-constructivist theories' (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 30). Unfortunately, Díez-Bedmar & Byram's (2018) research indicates a general misconception and unawareness of the CEFR among teachers internationally. Moreover, Mitchell (2010) suggests that teachers disregard the CEFR because they feel pressured to focus on assessment targets that conflict with the CEFR classification. Also, lack of time can lead to teachers relying on textbooks that might not cater to the learners' social and cultural contexts. This lack of empathy leads to feelings of demotivation, inferiority and inadequacy (Wingate, 2016).

Social-constructivism. Another reason why teachers might not use social constructivist activities in their lessons could be because they do not know how to. Research has shown that although teachers are taught the theory behind learner-centred activities in their initial training programmes, they are not taught how to include them in their lessons (Dooly & Sadler, 2013). OCPs can be considered mediating tools for learner-centred activities because they combine Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). These approaches command learner-centred strategies (Farouk, 2016; Fearn, 2021; Pérez-Ibáñez, 2014. Therefore, integrating an OCP into the secondary school EFL curricula could help teachers experience the advantages of social-constructivist methods in line with CEFR requirements (Council of Europe, 2020). When the learner is the focus of learning, the traditional role of the EFL teacher as an instructor and

provider of knowledge is transformed into that of an organiser and facilitator (Bocconi et al., 2012).

Methods: Action research

AR is a form of insider research because it is done by professionals who examine their own practice rather than university academics. A disadvantage is its limited generalisability, and there are also reservations regarding whether conclusions can inform the work of other classroom contexts (Pike, 2002). Additionally, the researcher's understanding inevitably influences all qualitative observations because they are only generalisable logically and not statistically (Stake, 2006). Therefore, inside researchers need to be aware of their values and goals. On the other hand, an advantage of teacher research, such as this study, is that it can offer an understanding of the classroom and context that outsider researchers could not achieve (Pike, 2002). Moreover, data collecting becomes part of the practice rather than an addition (Anderson, 2006). Data collection, analysis, interpretation, and development of theories are fed into the teaching practice until a satisfactory answer to the research question is found (Burns, 1999).

This research observes a qualitative and collaborative AR paradigm that reflects the author's social-constructivist and sociocultural perspectives. Reality is subjective and influenced by the individual's social, cultural and historical settings. Collaborative AR is when the researcher works with a small group of like-minded teachers to share experiences and understandings (Mackay, 2016), as in this study. As far as the process is concerned, AR is generally seen as a reiterating spiral of 'planning, acting, observing and reflecting' (Altrichter et al., 2002, p. 130). However, this AR has drawn upon scholarship by Altrichter et al. (2002), Burns (1999) and Kemmis (2009) and has identified three distinct actions unique to this study: 1) Ponder and plan, 2) Collect data and 3) Analyse. These steps are repeated twice and referred to in this study as Cycle One and Cycle Two. Figure 2 describes how the processes of collecting data and analysing were pondered upon and planned throughout the study in an interrelating progression of analytic reflection.

Figure 2. Action research cycle

Trustworthiness and ethics

The reliability of this study resulted from reflective cross-case analysis. It also used description and extensive research into related fields of scholarship. Since the researcher uses OCPs and knows all the participants as colleagues, particular attention was given to how outcomes might affect them and the study's trustworthiness. All participants were invited to participate in the research randomly and indiscriminately. Before beginning data collection, the AR study was explained in detail. Participants were given information leaflets and asked to sign consent forms allowing their data to be used for research and publication purposes. Additionally, Each teacher was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Ethical approval was granted by the Open University's Human Resources Ethical Committee (HREC/2635).

Participants and site of study

Participants in the first AR cycle were four EFL teachers working on two OCPs with the researcher. To facilitate understanding, they are referred to as OCP-Users in this study. The second AR cycle comprised two EFL teachers who were not using OCPs. They worked in the same secondary school in southern Italy as the researcher and are called Non-Users to differentiate the two groups. Table 1 provides information about all six teacher participants. It also presents nationalities, gender, teaching experience, OCP experience, the type of school where the participant taught, and the tools used to collect data. Online open-question questionnaires were used for the three OCP-Users who could not be reached in person, and face-to-face interviews with the four participants who lived near the researcher. The following section will briefly introduce all participants and the schools where they were working at the time of the study.

Table 1. Participants

Identity	Pseudonyms	Nationality	Gender	Type of State (Upper Secondary) School	Data
OCP-Users	Hanne	Norwegian	Female	Vocational	Open-question questionnaires
	Nora	Swedish	Female	Vocational	Open-question questionnaires
	Giovanni	Italian (North)	Male	Technical	Open-question questionnaires
	Lia	Italian (South)	Female	Vocational	Individual face to face interview
Non-Users	Gina	Italian (South)	Female	Liceo	Individual face to face interview
	Sara	Italian (South)	Female	Liceo	Individual face to face interview

OCP-Users

Finding teachers with time to spare for interviews was not easy. Only four teachers out of 79 answered the email sent via eTwinning. They were working with the researcher on two OCPs: one focused on collaboration using raising awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the topic of conversation (Zielonka & Fearn, 2019), while the other was not content-based. It

used the subject of language skills to encourage communication. Students made videos and interactive games to explain and practice grammar structures and vocabulary (Fearn, 2019). Both OCPs were hosted on Twinspace, and the former also had a space on WordPress (Zielonka, 2019) for teachers outside of the EU. As usual with OCPs, all four OCP-Users lived in different locations.

Two OCP-Users lived outside Italy: Hanne worked in Norway, and Nora in Sweden. They were experienced EFL teachers and had been using OCPs for many years. On the other hand, Giovanni and Lia lived in Italy, but in different locations, one in the south and the other in the north, and they had a few years of experience teaching EFL and using OCPs. All teachers worked in state upper-secondary schools, but they differed. Hanne and Nora were teaching in large schools that offered an assortment of specialisations, including vocational courses; Giovanni worked in a technical school: *Istituto Tecnico Nautico,* in the north of Italy, while Lia taught in a vocational school: *Istituto Professionals Statale per l'Industria e l'Artigianato,* in the south. Technical and vocational schools in Italy offer training so students can immediately enter the workplace (INDIRE, 2014).

Non-users. In contrast to the OCP-Users, the two Non-User teachers in Cycle Two of this study were teaching in a *Liceo delle Scienze Umane* situated in a rural area in the south of Italy. In Italy, a Liceo is a state upper-secondary school where teachers must provide a theoretical and cultural curriculum (INDIRE, 2014). Although these teachers were not using OCPs, they all had some experience and knew what they were. Gina had been teaching EFL for five years and had participated in two eTwinning projects at the beginning of her career. Sara had been an EFL teacher for 15 years and had participated in two Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (KA2) mobility projects that included OCPs and eTwinning.

Results

The outcomes of this study are separated into two cycles to respect sequential order and separate the two groups of participants. Each process follows the three-step AR cycle explained previously.

Cycle One

Data collection. The first cycle of this study only included the OCP-Users. Google documents in English were used for Hanne, Nora and Giovanni. They were chosen over Google forms or other questionnaire-creating software so that follow-up questions would be an option. Figure 3 shows the questions answered. On the other hand, Lia lived in the same region as the researcher and agreed to meet in a café for a face-to-face interview in Italian (see Table five for the initial questions used in face-to-face interviews). It was recorded using the researcher's smartphone and translated and transcribed the same afternoon, so non-verbal occurrences would not be forgotten or overlooked. The following section presents the results from Cycle One.

1. How long have you been a language teacher, and how long have you been doing online community projects (OCPs)?
2. Do you usually initiate the OCPs, or do you prefer to join projects which are generally already in progress? Could you briefly tell us your reasons, please?
3. Why do you do these projects with your class, and how much extra time do you spend each week?
4. How do you usually encourage your students to use English?
5. How do you manage in the case of students who are not so good at English or have learning difficulties?
6. Which language skills do you generally aim at during these projects (i.e. speaking, listening, writing etc.)?
7. What about when your students speak to peers who have different language skills? Does it make any difference in learning EFL?
8. What about you as a teacher? Have you learnt anything by doing the projects you have done? Could you tell us about the positive and negative elements, please?
9. Do you think online community projects such as eTwinning should be taught in teacher training programmes? Why?
10. Many teachers believe that online community projects (such as eTwinning) should be part of the school curriculums. What is your position on this and why?
11. If you decide to do or not to do another online community project next school year, what will your reasons be?

Figure 3. Questions for OCP-Users

Analysis. Data from the four OCP-Users were analysed using thematic analysis, and codes were assembled into two initial themes: *Motivation* and *Difficulties*. The former provided the advantages and the latter the disadvantages of using OCPs. As noted by Cresswell (2003), although qualitative researchers reject statistical analysis, quote-counting can be helpful at the beginning of a study to identify themes and implications. Table 2 shows how data was analysed into themes, sub-themes and codes and reveals that the four OCP-Users mentioned far more advantages than disadvantages. The main benefit was *Motivation* with two sub-themes: *Professional development* and *Motivating activities*. The six codes were: *Global aspects, Social Constructivism, Identity, Authenticity, Inclusivity* and *Curriculum*. On the other hand, the disadvantages were *Difficulties*, including two sub-themes: *Fear of the unknown* and *Time*. This theme had three codes: *Technology, Extra work* and *Assessment*. The following section will discuss the outcomes of the two research questions from the OCP-Users.

Table 2. Cycle One: Themes identified from OCP-Users' data

Research questions	Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Number of quotes	Number of quotes per theme
1) What were the advantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula?	*Motivation*	Professional development	Global aspects		
			Social constructivism	17	
			Identity		41
		Motivating activities	Authenticity	24	
			Inclusivity		
			Curricula		
2) What were the disadvantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula?	*Difficulties*	Fear of unknown	Technology	3	
		Time	Extra work		9
			Assessment	6	
Total	2	4	9		50

Question one: Motivation

The first research question in this study concerns the advantages of integrating OCPs into EFL curricula. All outcomes are related to their motivational qualities. Firstly, all four teachers felt they had developed professionally. Nora noted the global attributes of OCPs and that her relationships with teachers working abroad had enriched her professional practice.

> I have gotten to know many people from different countries and formed many friendships. eTwinning led me to write my thesis on the topic of intercultural competence. I have learned to use digital tools and not be afraid of technology. The learning events and online seminars have also taught me many things that have improved my teaching, such as flipped classrooms, Inquiry-based learning etc. (Nora).

This quote supports promotional reports claiming eTwinning OCPs offer teachers pedagogical support and help, such as training initiatives and 'online environments to find partners and develop school collaboration projects' (Crawley et al., 2009, p. 1). They can also provide lifelong friendships and support 'the development of twenty-first-century skills and competencies' (Cassels et al., 2017, p. 35).

Further evidence of professional development could be found in the social constructivist qualities of OCPs. The following excerpt shows how Hanne's role as a teacher had developed into one of an expert and leader.

> I have learnt a lot by doing international projects. The most positive elements are things related to educational leadership. Instead of being a teacher only, I have become a learner, learning facilitator, instructional specialist and resource provider. My role has changed a lot. I try to share

educational resources with other teachers and lead a group of highly moti-vated and engaged teachers towards a certain goal (Hanne).

Hanne had developed into an expert because the OCP group had become a com-munity of practice. A community of practice is central to sociocultural theory. In education, it is generated when inexperienced teachers learn from others with more experience. They become increasingly independent and confident until they become authorities themselves. In turn, they share their expertise with new teachers and generations in a never-ending spiral (Lave, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is important to emphasise that in a community of practice, such as an OCP, teacher-members make choices as each one works within their strengths and specific social and cultural interests. The same is true for stu-dents, and Lia explains how working in an OCP community can help learners in EFL acquisition:

> Students were encouraged and even made to use the target language. The thing is, when you have to communicate with a project peer, you need to speak in English because they can't speak Italian. They learn something in a different way, it could be the same as what they would have learned from books, but in this way, they will remember it all better (Lia).

Sociocultural scholars also believe that language learning can be improved through negotiating language and ideas in an authentic online community of practice (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Learners adapt and reassemble social-con-structivist activities to suit their unique needs resulting from individual social, cultural and historical contexts. In contrast, textbooks presume all learners have the same interests and skills (Ur, 2011). Moreover, the content of course-books is often based on L1 speakers whose lives and interests differ from those of the class at hand (Ortega, 2012; Wingate, 2016). Social constructivist activi-ties such as those generated by OCPs mean that learners can work at their own pace and on their chosen content. Successful participation in a community of practice can also help members construct a positive identity during the collec-tive division of labour (Lave, 2012).

The third outcome in support of teachers' professional development showed the potential of OCPs in building positive identities. The following quote shows how the improvement Giovanni noted in his practice motivated him to learn more.

> I totally changed my point of view on students, methodologies, school …everything! It was a shock. I had never used anything but some YouTube videos and probably my lessons were boring and standard. Now when I prepare a lesson, I continuously ask myself "Can I teach it differently?" (Giovanni).

This extract supports the literature claiming that students' and teachers' self-esteem and identity have been seen to have improved through working on eTwinning OCPs, resulting in better classroom relationships and motivation to do well (Crişan, 2013; Kitade, 2014).

OCP activities are focused on motivating subject matter rather than on grammar exercises, as Hanne explains below:

> I think language teachers should focus both on language and content at the same time. By doing that, it will be easier to make our students interested in our projects. Students need to feel that what they learn during the project work is relevant and can be used later on in their future life (Hanne).

The motivating force behind OCPs is a combination of PBLL, TBLT and CMC. These teaching methods are set in social constructivist theory, so they are learner-centred approaches encouraged by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018). Lia explains how these activities inspired her students, who were usually uninterested in EFL.

> The students often came back in the afternoon for eTwinning, whereas they wouldn't have done that for anything else. They really worked hard and participated actively. I gave them tasks to do, and they always did them, even the difficult students (Lia).

For learner-centred activities to be successful, tasks must pose a practical challenge to encourage students to build and expand their EFL skills (Ellis, 2003). However, the learning atmosphere also needs to be relaxed and inclusive, which is key to learner-centred social-constructivist activities (Allen, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962, 2017).

Other reasons that OCP activities can be considered motivating are because they are inclusive, as noted by Nora in the following quote:

> I have noticed that some students who may not be good at writing skills may be good at technology and are given the chance to show their talent and to be appreciated by their classmates (Nora).

Nora observed how the OCP provided space where learners could share and develop their strengths. The strength of social constructivist approaches is that they see learning as a dynamic exchange of knowledge through experience, participation, collaboration and communication with peers, experts, colleagues and surroundings (Shadiev et al., 2020).

Finally, Hanne explains how the OCPs fit into her EFL curriculum:

> My curriculum consists of four main subject areas: language learning, oral communication, written communication and culture, society and literature. I feel that it is very easy to match all the competence aims with project's aims (Hanne).

As noted earlier, Norway's teacher training programmes include understanding the CEFR. This quote shows that Hanne is aware of the *can-do* descriptors that require an 'action-oriented approach' constructed from students' needs and interests (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 28).

Question two: Difficulties

In answer to the second research question, OCP-Users also mentioned several difficulties while working on OCPs but offered some solutions and justifications. For example, Lia was worried about the technical side of using OCPs:

> At first, I was scared, but thanks to friends who gave me a hand. I learnt how to do it (Lia).

This quote underlines the collaborative qualities of OCPs and suggests that teachers who were more experienced with OCPs helped inexperienced ones in a community of practice (Lave, 2012). On the other hand, Giovanni mentioned the extra work needed for planning OCPs to fit into the curricula:

> I think the hardest difficulty is the same [sic] most of the teachers have: the time. School has its own strict schedule, so OCPs should be planned accurately; otherwise, it can be difficult to manage the whole thing (Giovanni).

Hanne justifies the extra work needed to create and organise an OCP:

> I do agree that these projects require a lot of extra work, but I do believe they are worth it (Hanne).

Three of the four OCP-Users felt that OCPs should be compulsory in pre-service EFL teacher training programmes, but Hanne felt differently.

> At the moment, I do not think it is a good idea to do that as we do not know whether eTwinning projects help students achieve positive learning outcomes. We need measurable assessment tools to do that, so we do not jump to conclusions too early (Hanne).

This quote suggests that Hanne is still unsure how her students improve their language skills when using OCPs because of the difficulty in measuring EFL progress from social constructivist teaching methods. The problem of determining learner-centred approaches arises from the mediating position of the teacher. The teacher knows what to evaluate when they objectively direct and feed knowledge. In contrast, with social-constructivist activities, knowledge and learning are subjective and individual to every learner, so teachers are unsure about what to assess and how to assess it (Duong & Nguyen, 2021). Hanne's uncertainty cast doubt on the positive results from the OCP-Users. Reflective analysis revealed that these outcomes were biased and one-sided because all participants were enthusiastic OCP-Users. After careful reflection, new decisions and plans were made and explained in the next section.

Cycle Two

The one-sided results from Cycle One meant that new plans were required. Participants who could cast a contrasting viewpoint were needed. Therefore, two new EFL teachers, Gina and Sara, who were not using OCPs but had had experience in the past, were invited to join the study as Non-Users for the second cycle of this AR study (see Table 1).

Data collection. Non-User teachers were individually interviewed face-to-face during their free hours at school. Gina agreed to perform the interview in English, while Sara preferred Italian. All interviews were recorded using the researcher's smartphone, transcribed and translated on the same day as in the previous cycle. Next, two groups were created: 1) *OCP-Users* and 2) *Non-Users,* to facilitate cross-case analysis. Figure 4 reveals the primary questions used in interviews with Non-Users. The following section discusses the results of Cycle Two of this study.

1. What do you think about online community projects?
2. Could you please tell me how adding these projects to your curriculum affected your students?
3. Can you give me some examples, please?
4. Have you ever had any problems or difficulties?
5. In your opinion, what role have these projects had on your professional development?
6. Could you give me some examples of some things that you learnt?
7. What do you aim to teach your students?

Figure 4. Questions for Non-Users

Analysis.

Table 3 shows the themes derived from the Non-Users' data, and Table 4 illustrates the cross-case analysis used to compare the themes from the two multi-cases. The main advantages were related to *Motivation: Professional Development* and *Motivational Activities.* They were derived from four codes: *Community, For students, Skills* and *Confidence*. On the other hand, the disadvantages associated with *Time* were *Curriculum* and *Student Behaviour* and came from three codes: *Extra Work, Grammar* and *Waste of Time.* After identifying themes from both groups, it was possible to compare them in a cross-case analysis (Table 4). It shows that both OCP-Users and Non-Users present the same perceptions of advantages while differing in their experiences of disadvantages.

Table 3. Themes identified from Non -Users' data

Research questions	Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Number of quotes	Number of quotes per theme
1) What were the advantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula?	*Motivation*	Professional development	Community	24	
		Motivating activities	For students	10	34
			Skills		
			Confidence		
2) What were the disadvantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula?	*Time*	Curricula	Extra work	13	
			Grammar		18
		Student behaviour	Waste time	5	
Total	2	4	7		52

Table 4. A cross-case analysis

Research Question	OCP-Users			Non-Users		
	Themes	Sub-themes	Numbers	Themes	Sub-themes	Numbers
1) What were the advantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula?	Motivation	Professional development	41	Motivation	Professional development	34
		Motivating activities			Motivating activities	
2) What were the disadvantages of using OCPs in the EFL curricula?	Difficulties	Fear of unknown	9	Time	Curricula	18
		Time			Student behaviour	
Total	2	4	50	2	4	52

Question one: Motivation

The findings of the first research question showed that Non-User teachers appreciated the motivational qualities of OCPs in a similar way to the OCP-Users. Both Non-Users felt that OCPs could help them develop professionally.

> It's a way of growing also because you share your experience with your colleagues, both good and bad experiences. For example, I might think I'm doing something well, but then I see a colleague, and I can learn from them, or they can learn from me too (Sara).

This quote suggests that Sara had learnt new perspectives from her online colleagues and that she had taught them new ideas too. This concept is also in line with sociocultural theory and social constructivism. As Oleson & Hora (2013) point out, they might believe their students learn the same way as they did unless they are allowed to socialise with colleagues with different social

and cultural backgrounds (Oleson & Hora, 2013). The above excerpt suggests that OCPs can provide occasions for teachers to meet, socialise and create a community of practice.

Likewise, although Gina found socialising on OCPs challenging, she found she could develop new skills.

> It was a challenge for me because I didn't realise that it's not that simple to run a situation like this one [...]. I acquired some soft skills, for example, how to mediate in complicated situations (Gina).

Soft skills is a term used to describe interpersonal skills such as those needed to communicate and collaborate. They are linked to global skills and are fundamental to understanding other cultures (Bourn, 2018). The supportive atmosphere on international networks such as OCPs can encourage intercultural and global awareness (Germain-Rutherford, 2015). Furthermore, global institutions such as the United Nations (UN) urge education systems to invest in information and communications technology to increase worldwide interconnectedness and competencies (United Nations, 2015).

The following quote from Sara shows how she felt the activities were suitable for a wide range of individuals.

> The good students test what they know and show off how good they are and can improve and reach a high level of English. Instead, for the student with more difficulties, it can be like a language gymnasium where they can practice (Sara).

This comment indicates that students of all levels and backgrounds can be involved in the learning process. Learners who are intrinsically motivated to learn a language will continue learning outside the classroom (Wigfield et al., 2012).

In contrast to social constructivist viewpoints, Gina found OCPs to be effective with classes that had high levels of English:

> I tried to start a new project with a weaker class, but it was a total mess because probably they had no abilities to use [...]. It was very effective with good classes but only with good classes (Gina).

Unlike Sara, Gina felt that unless students had good language skills, they would be unable to do the OCP activities. As Vygotsky (2017) noted, learning activities will be ineffective if they are too easy or too difficult. Unless students feel the tasks are valid, they will not take them seriously (Ellis, 2003). Therefore, teachers must prepare OCP activities at an EFL level that presents a challenge, so students can work independently and at their own pace (Ellis, 2003). Additionally, students need to be given enough time to become autonomous learners because each individual learns differently (Dooly & Sadler, 2013).

Both Non-Users felt their students had developed in practical ways regarding language skills. Gina observed an increase in her students' motivation through using OCPs.

They had a project about traditions and legends, and so they had to enrich their vocabulary, but that was a brilliant class […]. This kind of project can really increase motivation, and if they increase their motivation, then they will even increase their learning skills, even grammar (Gina).

Gina felt that when a class were motivated, they could improve their vocabulary and grammar skills. Linear grammar learning is not possible with learner-centred OCP activities. However, when learners are provided with communication practice, they will learn rules in grammar when they are ready (Shrestha, 2012; Ur, 2011). Likewise, Sara noticed how her students practised their speaking skills when given the freedom and occasion to speak to peers:

I think that's because they speak to their peers and not adults. Not only that, but among peers, they understand each other better (Sara).

These quotes suggest that a community of practice was generated as students constructed a positive identity with increasing participation. They became confident EFL users (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and built upon previously learnt knowledge unique to each individual (Rob & Rob, 2018).

Question two: Time

In answer to the second research question, all perceptions of disadvantages from Non-Users were related to the lack of time. Sara points out the extra work needed by the teachers:

They take a lot of organisation, preparation and work, even outside work hours. Instead, for the students, they are wonderful because they broaden their horizons. Even if it seems as though they don't learn much, they are projects that stay with them for a long time (Sara).

However, she still feels that OCPs are advantageous for students. She perceived an increase in students' knowledge and experiences and recognised that the learning was being done dynamically by the students and not despatched by the teachers (Hung, 2001). For this reason, Sara could not control or understand how and what her students were learning.

I love innovation and change, but I am also a bit lazy. Instead, it's fun, and you can enjoy seeing and learning new things (Sara).

The fact that Non-User teachers appreciate OCPs but do not use them confirms that teachers do not have time to prepare OCP activities or experiment with new methods (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Gina reinforces this concept:

If I devoted one hour a week to these projects, that time was [sic] actually stolen from another activity which was important for the English syllabus (Gina).

This quote suggests that Gina did not believe that OCP activities could meet her curriculum requirements. Although education systems and the CEFR promote

social constructivist and learner-centred methods, end-of-school assessments and international certifications are directed at individual performance (Asterhan & Bouton, 2017). Bruce & Hamp-Lyons (2015) suggest that the main problem in secondary school EFL curricula is not the tests in themselves but that EFL curricula are designed around them without considering the CEFR.

Undesirable behaviour was another disadvantage mentioned by both Non-Users:

> I also noticed they were wasting time because the good students were working, but the lazy ones weren't (Sara).

> In some classes, it is just a mess. It's just a way of having an hour break (Gina).

These issues show scepticism towards OCP activities. Non-Users felt their students took advantage of the freedom provided by OCP activities. As explained earlier, students will not take learner-centred tasks seriously unless they present an exciting and worthwhile challenge (Allen, 2005). But preparing for these activities requires experience and, above all, time.

Conclusion

These outcomes show that all teachers in this study perceived that working on OCPs could help them develop professionally. They also felt their students had strengthened their language skills and were more motivated to learn EFL. Advantages were related to the learner-centred qualities of the OCP activities and the sharing of expertise, corresponding to a community of practice. The main difference between the two groups was that OCP-Users had integrated OCPs into their curriculum, but Non-Users had not. The reasons were predominantly a lack of time and difficulty justifying their presence in EFL curricula and measuring improvement and progress.

Overall, this study contributes to the research body in the field of OCPs in secondary school EFL education by providing evidence for the value of OCPs in the EFL classroom. Integrating an OCP into the EFL curricula has shown that it can offer numerous benefits to teachers and their students. Furthermore, education systems could benefit from having OCPs in teacher training programmes. It has provided OCPs with a name and has begun to address the need to understand their potential to support language teachers in secondary school settings. It has uncovered some of the difficulties teachers might find when working on OCPs and why the two teachers in this study did not use them. These findings may contribute to developing strategies to encourage a broader interest in OCPs.

This study did not aim at generalisations and involved a small number of teachers and contexts. Nevertheless, the results are significant because they provide insights into using OCPs in secondary school EFL settings. Additionally, the researcher's position as an OCP user might have influenced the findings. Still, adding two Non-Users and careful reflection served to counteract any bias

and make the results as impartial as possible. Despite these limitations, this study has provided some valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of OCPs in EFL curricula and why teachers choose to use or not to use them. In light of these results, this study suggests that pre-service teacher development programmes include OCPs and that in-service teachers be given more time to experiment with new approaches.

This study has implications for secondary school teachers of foreign languages hoping to improve their practices. Although it involved EFL teachers, the findings should also be helpful to teachers of other foreign languages in secondary schools or even other subjects. A natural progression would be to expand the research to include more schools and teachers who run OCPs. Additionally, it has uncovered a lack of enquiry into the assessment and means of measuring EFL progress in social constructivist activities. Therefore, this study suggests more research in that area. Finally, it has shown that more scholarship is needed in teaching EFL in secondary education, with or without OCPs.

Notes

1. INVALSI – translated into English as the Italian National Institute for the Evaluation of Education Systems

References

Ajello, A. M. (2020). I risultati delle prove invalsi 2019 acolpo d'occhio. *Prove INVALSI 2019*. https://invalsi-areaprove.cineca.it/docs/2021/Rilevazioni_Nazionali/Rapporto/14_07_2021/Sintesi_Primi_Risultati_Prove_INVALSI_2019.pdf

Ajello, A. M. (2021). *Rilevazioni nazionali degli apprendimenti 2020-21* (pp. 1–4). Prove INVALSI 2021. https://invalsi-areaprove.cineca.it/docs/2021/Rilevazioni_Nazionali/Rapporto/14_07_2021/Sintesi_Primi_Risultati_Prove_INVALSI_2021.pdf

Allen, K. (2005). Online learning: Constructivism and conversation as an approach to learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 42*(3), 247–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910500167985

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 35*(4), 373–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449

Asterhan, C. S. C., & Bouton, E. (2017). Teenage peer-to-peer knowledge sharing through social network sites in secondary schools. *Computers & Education, 110*, 16–34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2017.03.007

Berns, M. (2019). Expanding on the expanding Englishes of the expanding circle. *World Englishes, 38*(1–2), 8–17. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12361

Bocconi, S., Punie, Y., & Kampylis, P. (2012). Innovating teaching and learning practices: Key elements for developing creative classrooms in Europe. *eLearning Papers, 30*, 1–13.

Bourn, D. (2018). *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97655-6

Broek, S., & Ende, I. van den. (2013). *The implementation of the Common European Framework for Languages in European education systems*. The European Commission. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/495871/IPOL-CULT_ET(2013)495871_EN.pdf

Bruce, E., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (2015). Opposing tensions of local and international standards for EAP writing programmes: Who are we assessing for? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *18*, 64–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.03.003

Burns, A. (1999). Collaborative action research for English teachers. Cambridge University Press.

Cinganotto, L. (2017). Experiential learning for teacher training: A case example on language, content and technologies in a learning event by eTwinning. *Journal of E-Learning and Knowledge Society*.

COE. (2020). *Italy educational guidelines*. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/italy/educational-guidelines_en

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97

Council of Europe. (2018). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. https://doi.org/10.14217/9781848596436-1-en

Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4

Cresswell, J. W. (2003). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (Vol. 2). Sage.

Crişan, G. (2013). The impact of teachers' participation in eTwinning on their teaching and training. Acta Didactica Napocensia, 6(4), 19–28.

Díez-Bedmar, M. B., & Byram, M. (2018). The current influence of the CEFR in secondary education: teachers' perceptions. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *32*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2018.1493492

Dooly, M. (2017). Telecollaboration. In Carol A. Chapelle & S. Sauro (Eds.), *The handbook of technology and second language teaching and learning* (pp. 169–183). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118914069.ch12

Dooly, M., & Sadler, R. (2013). Filling in the gaps: Linking theory and practice through telecollaboration in teacher education. *ReCALL, 25*, 4–29.

Duong, T. M., & Nguyen, H. T. H. (2021). Implementing task-based language teaching in Vietnamese secondary schools. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*, *25*(2), 1–15.

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press. https://books.google.it/books?id=coO0bxnBeRgC

European Parliament. (2021). *Sweden organisation and governance*. Eurydice. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice

Farouk, I. (2016). A project-based language learning model for improving the willingness to communicate of EFL students. *Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics, 14*(2), 1–8.

Fearn, L. J. (2019). *Teach to learn: Strengthening language competencies.* https://twinspace.etwinning.net/71818/home

Fearn, L. J. (2021). An enquiry into English as a foreign language and online community projects in secondary school education. The Open University.

Gajek, E. (2018). Curriculum integration in distance learning at primary and secondary educational levels on the example of eTwinning projects. *Education Sciences*, *8*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8010001

Germain-Rutherford, A. (2015). Online communities of practice: A professional development tool for language educators. In H. R. & S. U. (Eds.), *Developing online language teaching. New language learning and teaching environments.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137412263_8

Hung, D. (2001). Theories of learning and computer-mediated instructional technologies. *Educational Media International*, *38*(4), 281–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/09523980110105114

Hunter, W. J., & Austin, R. (2020). *Blended and online learning for global citizenship: New technologies and opportunities for intercultural education.* Taylor & Francis. https://books.google.it/books?id=WhAHEAAAQBAJ

INDIRE. (2014). *The Italian education system: I quaderni di eurydice N. 30.* http://www.indire.it/eurydice/eurypedia/

Kitade, K. (2014). Second language teachers' identity development through online collaboration with L2 learners. *CALICO Journal*, *31*(1), 57–77. https://doi.org/10.11139/cj.31.1.57-77

Lantolf, J., & Thorne, S. (2007). Sociocultural theory and second language learning. In B. van Patten & J. Williams (Eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition* (pp. 201-224). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lave, J. (2012). Changing practice. *Mind, culture, and activity*, *19*(2), 156–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2012.666317

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/2804509

Mackay, M. (2016). Making sense of critical participatory action research. Reflections on the action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research. *International Practice Development Journal*, *6*(2), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.62.013

Ministry of Education and Research. (2019). *Core curriculum–values and principles for primary and secondary education.* https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/verdier-og-prinsipper-for-grunnopplaringen---overordnet-del-av-lareplanverket/id2570003/

Mitchell, R. (2010). Policy and practice in foreign language education: Case studies in three European settings. *European Journal of Language Policy*, *2*(2), 151–180. https://doi.org/10.3828/ejlp.2010.11

Mouratoglou, N., Gilleran, A., & Scimeca, S. (2021). *Embedding eTwinning in national educational policies from practice to policy* (pp. 1–86). The European Commission.

Oleson, A., & Hora, M. T. (2013). Teaching the way they were taught? Revisiting the sources of teaching knowledge and the role of prior experience in shaping faculty teaching practices. *Higher Education*, *68*(1), 29–45. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9678-9

Ortega, L. (2012). Epilogue: Exploring L2 writing–SLA interfaces. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *21*(4), 404–415. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2012.09.002

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace*. Jossey-Bass.

Papadakis, S. (2016). Creativity and innovation in European education. Ten years eTwinning. Past, present and the future. *International Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning*, *8*(3/4), 279–296.

Pérez-Ibáñez, I. (2014). Addressing our students' needs: Combined task-based and project-based methodology in second language and CLIL courses. In *Integration of Theory and Practice in CLI* (pp. 97–110). BRILL.

Pike, M. A. (2002). Action research for English teaching: Ideology, pedagogy and personal growth. *Educational Action Research*, *10*(1), 27–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790200200176

Rob, M., & Rob, F. (2018). Dilemma between constructivism and constructionism. *Journal of International Education in Business*, *11*(2), 273–290. https://doi.org/10.1108/jieb-01-2018-0002

Shadiev, R., Liu, T., & Hwang, W. (2020). Review of research on mobile-assisted language learning in familiar, authentic environments. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *51*(3), 709–720. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12839

Shrestha, P. (2012). Teacher professional development using mobile technologies in a large-scale project: Lessons learned from Bangladesh. *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching (IJCALLT)*, *2*(4), 34–49. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijcallt.2012100103

Speitz, H. (2004). *Country report Norway*. Ministry of Education and Research. https://rm.coe.int/language-education-policy-profile-norway-country-report/16807b3b42

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. The Guilford Press.

Terhune, N. M. (2015). Language learning going global: linking teachers and learners via commercial Skype-based CMC. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *29*(6), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2015.1061020

United Nations. (2015). *World Education Forum 2015: Final Report*. http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

Ur, P. (2011). Teaching grammar: Research, theory and practice. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 507–523).

Vattøy, K.-D. (2017). Learning English in Norway. *Language Issues: The ESOL Journal*, *28*(2), 51–53.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language.* 119–153. https://doi.org/10.1037/11193-007

Vygotsky, L. S. (2017). The problem of teaching and mental development at school age [Problema obuchenija i umstvennogo razvitija v shkol'nom vozraste]. *Changing English, 24*(4), 359–371. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684x.2017.1395165

Ware, P., & Kessler, G. (2014). Telecollaboration in the secondary language classroom: case study of adolescent interaction and pedagogical integration. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 29*(3), 427–450. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2014.961481

Wigfield, A., Cambria, J., & Eccles, J. S. (2012). Motivation in education. In R. Ryan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of human motivation* (pp. 462–478). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195399820.013.0026

Wingate, U. (2016). Lots of games and little challenge – a snapshot of modern foreign language teaching in English secondary schools. *The Language Learning Journal, 46*(4), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2016.1161061

Zielonka, B. A. (2019). *Be the change, take the challenge 1819*. https://bethechangetakethechallenge1819.wordpress.com

Zielonka, B. A., & Fearn, L. J. (2019). *Be the change, take the challenge 1819* [Online]. https://twinspace.etwinning.net/70576