

# Fostering Advanced English Oral Skills, Collaborative and Autonomous skills in Student-Teachers through an Online Peer Project



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## ABSTRACT

This action research qualitative study unfolds the findings emerged on an online peer project aimed at advanced English oral skills as well as collaboration and autonomy in a group of student-teachers at a Colombian University EFL programme. Data collection instruments included an online diagnosis, online weekly samples and feedback reports, follow-up surveys and final report. Findings revealed there was some significant development of oral skills in linguistic competence (pronunciation and lexicon), pragmatic competence, and fluency. Discursive and social competences improved as well. Collaborative work had a direct incidence over the progress learners made orally. Peer feedback facilitated metacognitive development for students gained awareness of own and peer's mistakes, repaired them appropriately, and performed as feedback providers. Autonomous skills were connected to commitment, decision-making, and accountability.

**Key words:** Autonomy, collaborative learning, online projects, oral skills, student-teacher's education

## El Desarrollo de Habilidades Orales Avanzadas, Habilidades Colaborativas y de Autonomía en Docentes en Formación en inglés mediante un Proyectos Virtual por Pares

## RESUMEN

*Este estudio cualitativo de investigación acción tuvo como objetivo principal desarrollar habilidades avanzadas de lengua inglesa, así como colaboración y autonomía en un grupo de docentes en formación de un programa de inglés como Lengua Extranjera en una universidad colombiana mediante un*

proyecto virtual por pares. Los instrumentos de recolección de datos empleados fueron un diagnóstico virtual inicial, muestras orales semanales y respectiva realimentación, encuestas de seguimiento, encuesta e informe final. Los hallazgos indicaron que hubo un desarrollo significativo de las habilidades orales de los participantes en cuanto a la competencia lingüística (principalmente pronunciación y léxico), la competencia pragmática y la fluidez. También se desarrollaron las competencias discursiva y social en cierto nivel. El trabajo colaborativo tuvo una incidencia directa en el progreso oral de los estudiantes gracias a la realimentación por pares, la cual facilitó el desarrollo metacognitivo de los estudiantes, puesto que ellos ganaron conciencia de sus errores y los de su compañero de proyecto, compensaron lingüísticamente tales errores y se desempeñaron como proveedores de realimentación. Las habilidades autónomas estuvieron relacionadas con el compromiso, la toma de decisiones y los niveles de responsabilidad.

**Palabras clave:** *Autonomía, aprendizaje colaborativo, proyectos virtuales, habilidades orales, formación de docentes*

## Desenvolvimento de habilidades orais avançadas, habilidades colaborativas e autonomia em professores de inglês através de um projeto virtual de colegas

### RESUMO

O principal objetivo deste estudo qualitativo de pesquisa-ação foi desenvolver habilidades avançadas no idioma inglês, além de colaboração e autonomia em um grupo de professores em treinamento de um programa de inglês como língua estrangeira em uma universidade colombiana por meio de um projeto virtual. Os instrumentos de coleta de dados utilizados foram diagnóstico virtual inicial, amostras orais semanais e respectivos comentários, pesquisas de acompanhamento, pesquisa e relatório final. Os resultados indicaram que houve um desenvolvimento significativo das habilidades orais dos participantes em termos de competência linguística (principalmente pronúncia e vocabulário), competência pragmática e fluência. As habilidades discursivas e sociais também foram desenvolvidas em um determinado nível. O trabalho colaborativo teve um impacto direto no progresso oral dos alunos, graças ao feedback dos colegas, o que, por sua vez, facilitou o desenvolvimento metacognitivo dos alunos, uma vez que eles tomaram conhecimento de seus erros e dos do parceiro do projeto, compensou linguisticamente esses erros e serviu como fornecedores de feedback. As habilidades autônomas estavam relacionadas ao comprometimento, tomada de decisão e níveis de responsabilidade.

**Palavras-chave:** *Autonomia, aprendizagem colaborativa, projetos virtuais, habilidades de conversação, formação de docentes*

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### 1. Introduction

It would be an understatement to say that technology as well as globalisation have really impacted the teaching and learning of languages worldwide. Nevertheless, its use concerning the benefits it brings particularly, to the development of advanced oral skills for English as a Foreign Language (henceforth

EFL) student-teachers has not been largely studied, nor have the potential benefits that an online peer project might embody in terms of collaboration and autonomy for that population been widely studied. Some of the literature reviewed in the field of technology over the last decade agrees on the idea that using technological devices in an EFL classroom might yield positive results in fostering skills that ultimately will be important for communication purposes (Sri Kuning, D, 2019; Bahadorfan, M. & Reza, O. 2014;; Lys, F.2013; McDougald, J. 2013).

In relation to technology used in several global EFL environments, Cutter (2015) stresses the fact that using computers in a classroom and I-Touch devices promotes learning in a collaborative fashion and encourages students to participate more in class. Parvin & Salam (2015) indicate that audio-visual content in primary English classrooms can foster interactive language lessons, and that the success of a bilingual project depends greatly upon how English teachers design, implement technology and their preparedness to use it. Andrade (2014) remarks the instrumental role of technology in that it contributes to augmenting students' independence and their linguistic skills improvement.

On a local level, Osorno (2015) reveals how the use of blogs, e-mails, podcasts, microblogging, and web pages can help student-teachers improve their English level, increase and find learning strategies to communicate more effectively in class. McDougald (2013) remark how the use of TICs can make English teachers feel comfortable as they evidence the development of their students' autonomy. García & Rey (2013) stress out the pertinence of using technological resources to mainly to enhance students' communicative skills, particularly reading and listening and to engage them to participate in class.

Bearing in mind the insights above, the local setting (bachelor of arts in English), students' acquaintance with technology (familiarity with mobile devices, google drive, and applications in general), the limited number of face-face sessions (four hours per week), researchers conducting this study decided to administer the target population (Oral English VI student-teachers) an oral diagnosis to determine their strengths and weaknesses. In the diagnostic online sample, student-teachers were found to have difficulties to improve under pressure; they struggled to fulfil complex oral tasks such as giving a lecture, talking about specialised topics and storytelling; they communicated most ideas with clarity but failed to render suprasegmental aspects properly, particularly intonation patterns; they had social skills issues related to the rapport, ownership and lack of confidence.

Given the outcomes derived from the diagnosis, it was decided that working online in peers to fulfil weekly oral tasks would contribute to student-teachers' communicative skills. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to identify the benefits that a group of student-teachers might obtain in terms of their English oral skills, collaboration and autonomy while working on a peer online project. In the same line of thought the research question that guided the investigation was: What might be the benefits in terms of English oral skills, collaboration and autonomy while developing a peer online project?

This research was framed within the belief that allowing participants to use English while manipulating ICTs could be a spontaneous and natural fashion which might enable them to communicate more effectively in the foreign language (McDougald, 2013, p. 248). Pedagogically speaking, this research was meant to foster some pedagogical skills in student-teachers inasmuch as they were empowered to select the most appropriate, useful or accurate tools and activities (ICTs), according to the necessities of their peer (Chamorro & Rey, 2013), as they were expected to do with their future students when performing as language educators.

This article is intended to be illuminating in that it embraces the development of an online project which targets three substantial aspects for current language student-teachers: communicative competence

reflected in the fulfilment of advanced and complex oral tasks, the use of collaborative skills and strategies to peer assess and peer monitor the language learning process and the development of autonomy skills to maximise the use of resources and time, precisely in a period where learners spend a lot of time at home and taking classes remotely.

As collaboration, autonomy and technology are viewed here as being intrinsically connected to the development of oral skills, it is vital to consider some theoretical foundations revolving around these three concepts.

### **Collaborative learning and Technology**

Several authors, as is the case of Seralidou & Douligeris (2017) agree on the idea that collaborative learning (C.L, henceforth) has been increasingly positioning as an appealing and efficient method to engage learners in their own learning process. Such popularity gained by C.L can be exploited by language educators if they use the diverse and advanced resources that technology offers them. In this respect, there is a key concept that links collaboration with technology: the notion of collaborative learning supported by technology, which in principle was known as collaborative learning supported by computers (Stahl, Koschmann & Suther, 2006; Laurillard, 2008) that in Keser & Özdamlı's words "helps individuals to work as a team to reach a common goal or fulfil a mission" (2012, p. 157). These authors mention the use of educational applications which are Internet-based, which "allow individuals who are geographically distant or separate to share information and ideas and helps us as educators to raise a constructivist, collaborative and self-learning" (2012, p. 157).

The notion of collaborative learning supported by technology was relevant in this study as it was meant to particularly assist student-teachers to develop their English advanced oral skills while they worked collaboratively in tandems over a three-month term, making use of the assorted resources that the web offered them and without having to meet on a face-to-face basis to develop it. It was sought that while learners worked on the attainment of a common purpose, developing an online peer project in this case, CL could in fact, generate a highly active learning (Van, Merriënboer & Pass, 2003; Persico & Pozzi, 2011).

The Collaborative learning supported by technology is particularly efficient if extensive use of computers, mobile phones, and the Internet is made, amongst other resources. Specially, the use of mobile phones became highly instrumental in the development of this online project because they functioned as vital devices for student-teachers to constantly record their linguistic samples, share them with their peer, send and receive prompt feedback from their peer and from their head teacher (Pachler, Seipold & Bachmair, 2012). Cloud computing became handy as well as student-teachers could use Google Doc and Google Drive to send and receive collaborative feedback in a timely and sometimes, delayed fashion, and to be able to gain access to the same material (Seralidou & Douligeris, 2017).

### **Autonomy**

Autonomy is a paramount concept for foreign language learners, particularly considering the fact that the number of face-to face-instruction hours of English the target population was taking at the moment was ostensibly reduced. Autonomy is, as claimed by Reinders & White (2016), one of the main goals of language teaching programmes around the globe (2016, p. 43). Upon searching useful autonomy theories for this study, there is a reconceptualisation given by Benson (2011), cited by Reinders & White (2016), who considers autonomy as :

a construct comprised by several dimensions evidenced by four main aspects, namely the place, referring to the physical space allocated for learning; the formality, which is the degree of independence that

learning takes regarding courses organized or structured in order to provide a certification or formal diploma; the pedagogy, referring to the type of learning or instruction; and the locus of control, which represents the individual making decisions related to learning. (p. 144)

In regard to the place, student-teachers were able to undertake this project in their homes without having to meet their peer personally (a few of them did, using their autonomy, however). The degree of formality in this case did not involve a certificate or diploma for the participants, although they were awarded a high percentage of the final score of their English VI Oral Skills Course (40%) as an incentive. In terms of the pedagogy, this study was based on self-directed learning complemented by assistance, guidance and feedback from the head teacher by means of virtual communication, or face-to-face communication as requested by students (blended assistance, in other words). Finally, the locus of control was found in the student-teachers, given that they were the ones who decided when to send each other the weekly activities, the type of activities they wanted to develop, the technological resources they required for their activities, the specific oral skills they felt needed most improvement, the dates and means to send one another feedback, and the way they would incorporate it in their speech. The only aspect 'controlled' by the head teacher was the number of activities to be developed (ten) and the time allocated to achieve them (ten weeks).

### **Foreign Languages learning and technology**

In Blake's view (2016) one of the advantages of using computers to support foreign languages learning is that it can make easier the storage in the brain of phonemic and morphological contrasts and help students to retreat lexicon. However, he clarifies that one possible disadvantage of the programs based on the use of computers when developing oral skills in L2 is that not necessarily, there is feedback. Hence, it is suggested that programmes which can offer automatic voice recognition be used, as they have a paramount role in the development of oral skills in a second language (2016). Blake provides a fundamental recommendation to maximise the use of automatic voice recognition systems, as language teachers must specify and limit those linguistic sub-domains or micro worlds where they want their learners to use a second language, for instance, in public spaces like an airport (2016). Ehsani & Knodt (1998), quoted by Blake (2016, p. 131) provide other uses of voice recognition systems such as individual practices of sounds, word recognition or repetition of short sentences.

## **2. Methodology**

### **Population and data collection instruments**

The target population in this study was a group of 20 student-teachers (11 females and 9 males), who were in their last Oral English course from a major in English philologies at a Colombian public university. These prospective teachers embarked on an online peer project for a total of twelve weeks (one for diagnoses, ten for execution and one for final appraisal). The data collection tools used are shown as follows: in the first week, students were administered a diagnostic test aimed at revealing their strengths and improvement areas in terms of their English oral skills. They recorded an oral online sample and received feedback from both, the teacher-researcher, and their peer. Based on the results, all students were expected to design a 10-week plan of action for their peer, including a weekly task, allocated time, aim(s) and resources needed. Once they developed the weekly task, they received online comments from their peer and blended feedback from their teacher (sometimes online; sometimes face-to-face). In the middle of the process, they answered a follow-up survey to doublecheck their progress. To check upon their oral development, they performed some oral samples in class and received feedback again from their peers and teacher-researcher. After they brought the ten tasks into completion, they were administered a final survey and had to submit a final report.

### **Procedures**

Steps suggested for the Grounded Approach (Freeman, 1998) were followed, namely axial coding,

selecting coding and finding relations. The analysis was initialised by highlighting commonalities in the entry samples (diagnoses), weekly oral samples, follow-up surveys, final survey, and final report. Once initial trends and patterns were found, the large number of codes was narrowed by naming them more accurately and by getting rid of the ones that did not belong to any initial code or that ended up not being relevant for the study. After this renaming and regrouping process, potential relations among categories and their respective subcategories were unveiled. Three main categories emerged: development of oral skills, collaborative work and autonomous work. An in-depth description of each one of the categories will be shown as follows:

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Development of Oral Skills

In this study oral skills were conceived as being comprised by grammatical competence which in our study referred to grammar use, pronunciation and vocabulary (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Riggenbach, 1998); discourse competence which was regarded here as the use of cohesive and coherent devices including discourse markers or linking words (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994), pragmatic competence (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001; Pohl, 2004), which in our research mainly was focused on the functional competence proposed by the latter (2004) through which student-teachers showed their ability to fulfil the communicative task taking into account the context, the register and the purpose. We also included the social competence referred to by Van Ek (1987) this category, which is reflected through motivation, attitude and self-confidence and fluency skills, perceived by Faerch, Haarstrups & Phillipson (1984) and Chambers (1997) as the outcome of blending all the competences mentioned previously.

**Grammatical Competence.** As stated earlier this competence was determined by the progress student-teachers made in terms of vocabulary, grammar use and pronunciation. Let us have a look at each one of these by means of excerpts and their corresponding analysis.

**Vocabulary.** In this study as researchers and student-teachers' educators we looked for the use of accurate words, complex and suitable lexicon for the task and level, a wide array of collocations, phrasal verbs, idiomatic expressions, amongst others. As can be evidenced in the excerpt below, Student B first, acknowledges that his peer has made some progress in terms of collocation usage and accuracy. In the same way, he displays some concern about his peer's ability to use collocations, lexical chunks, and lexical accuracy:

"You used collocations of location quite properly and your descriptions were accurate. Contrasting the way the public in each picture experiences music was a brilliant idea. Nonetheless, you could have used a wider range of lexical chunks. For comparing, the only word used was 'while'. In the same vein, you overused the verb 'look'(...)." (Student A Second Peer Work Activity).

Upon considering, Student B's feedback, it was clear that student A needed to improve his lexical skills in relation to the range of collocations and in terms of synonyms. As his peer suggested, some words were overused, and he could have used further lexical sets to be more precise and to render a more advanced use of English.

The fragment below illustrates the fact that student-teachers at this level were aware of the importance of knowing and using a wide array of lexicon to avoid redundancy, verbosity, and unnecessary repetitions. Possessing the ability to use diversified lexicon can help speakers convey messages more concretely and precisely, so they can be understood more easily:

"After we worked on some activities to decrease redundancy, she has become more aware of what she actually says. For instance, at the time she notices a repetition, she makes it clear with a deictic expression like as I said before or I already said it. This awareness raises the chances to conceal redundancy as a positive way to clarify information." (Student D. Final Report).



Grammar use. In this research, grammar use was embodied in the proper employment of tenses, use of subject-verb agreement rules and principles, application of verb patterns rules (gerunds/infinitives) and usage of syntactical rules:

“When one analyses grammar mistakes in her performance, one sees that grammar awareness can be affected by outer factors. She can have high accuracy in grammar when she is not under pressure, though it is a different story when someone is pushing her to speak.” (Student D. Final Report).

Here, the importance of a proper grammar is shown to even transcend the awareness of rules; the peer ‘pushed’ his classmate to speak not only rendering grammar use accurately, but also stressed the importance of grammar in effective communication under variable conditions. As suggested by Crystal (2004), grammar constitutes the structural backbone of the ability we possess to express ourselves clearly. Being knowledgeable of the way it functions allows monitoring how significantly and effectively all of us make use of language.

Pronunciation. In our study, pronunciation was regarded as an important oral micro-skill which was comprised of two components: segmental and suprasegmental features. The segmental features of pronunciations are the ones that can be easily divided and analysed because they correspond to the word level (phoneme realisation and allophones, diction and articulation). On the other hand, suprasegmentals, also referred to as non-segmental features, are constituted by those elements in pronunciation that are not easily noticeable to speakers, and are related to the sentence or utterance level, namely intonation, rhythm, voice, stress and tone. This is related to what Crystal (1969) named prosodic competence.

Segmental Features. The fragment below illustrates some significant progress that a student-teacher made regarding the pronunciation of one of the most problematic sounds for non-native speakers to English:

“I think you improved on the pronunciation of the phoneme /ʌ/ and now, you are more aware of the difference among that sound and other similar vowels(...).” (Student D Seventh Peer Work Activity).

Student C commended his peer’s effort to come to terms with a pronunciation problem he had been displaying before, and he stressed out that his classmate’s skill not just to utter it properly but to discriminate it auditorily from alike sounds, which validates the fact that when one improves oral skills, at the same time one enhances their listening skills and vice versa. Conveying ideas clearly is not just related to being able to argument or to using language coherently but also to phonological and phonetic aspects such as articulation and enunciation:

“I just found some small pronunciation mistake. The first two or three times you said “fan”, the phoneme /f/ sounded very much alike the phoneme /p/. You should be careful with confusing those two sounds.” (Student D Seventh Peer Work Activity).

Student C revealed some awareness about his peer’s making some progress in segmental features, yet he recognised that there was still some work to do as perfecting the pronunciation of the fricative, voiceless /f/ to avoid confusing it with the bilabial voiceless /p/.

Suprasegmental Features. As mentioned at the beginning of the section, suprasegmentals refer to those aspects that are not so easy to convey by non-natives or assess by novelty language teachers, and their mastery implies a prominent amount of time and devotion. The excerpts shown as follows evidence student-teachers’ outcomes in relation to intonation, rhythm and stress, which were the three substantial suprasegmental features worked upon in the online peer project:

“Most of the activities I suggested my peer included either explicitly or implicitly the reinforcement of the intonation aspect, as it was one of her weakest areas. And, after working with it, she is now more aware of the way she emphasises content words and deals with rhythm and stress patterns(...).” (Student C Final Report).

“Well done! You perfectly matched the types of intonations with their corresponding sentences and your intonation of the sentenced was the correct one.” (Student C Eighth Peer Work Activity).

In both cases, it is noticeable that student-teachers had been making progress in suprasegmental features as they stepped up in terms of their ability to mark intonation properly. Such progress in intonation kept an intrinsic relationship with rhythm, helping them to render the musicality that a foreign language embodies and stress, which has an incidence on the way syllables are pronounced, and ultimately words.

The fragment below highlights that student-teachers went beyond the suprasegmental factors described above and focused their attention on a topic that is not widely considered in English courses as it is developing an accent and fostering a more natural speech:

“We also worked on the definition of an accent and the refinement of supra-segmental skills related to it. Although she stated at the beginning of the course that she wanted to have a British accent, for her it was a bit difficult to adhere to it all the time. At the end, I noticed she was more into American accent (...).” (Student C. Final Report).

Thanks to the continuous and prompt online feedback, student-teachers had the opportunity to become aware of their own accent when speaking in English, which in turn contributed to raising an interest for a particular accent or improving the pre-existing one. The coaching experience exemplified in the excerpt matched some of the goals of teaching pronunciation suggested by Butler-Pascoe & Wiburg (2003), which include developing English according to the learner’s needs resulting in communicative competence, as well as a positive self-awareness regarding their own speech monitoring and adjustment as non-native speakers.

**Discourse Competence.** In our study, discourse competence comprised the organisational skills that student-teachers used to render cohesive and coherent devices, which as illustrated below, operated in partnership with transitions and discourse markers:

“The speech was well organised. You had your three standpoints on which you elaborated sufficiently. Your introduction to each topic was quite good and you did use some strategies to do transitions in the speech.” (Student C Fifth Peer Work Activity).

“Then, regarding mumbling and hesitance, as time passed by, she showed progressively a controlled use of vocabulary incorporating connectors and cohesive devices (...).” (Student C. Final Report).

As the two fragments suggest, student-teachers also advanced in terms of cohesion and coherence. It was pinpointed that discourse was arranged well, which was also connected to their increasing ability to provide better grounds through arguments and supporting ideas. All of this was complemented by a more emphatic use of transition devices or discourse markers while looking for alternative strategies to keep unity and pace.

**Fluency.** Fluency skills were measured in relation to the capacity student-teachers showed to deliver a speech at a reasonable pace, minimising the number of fillers, hesitation periods and prolonged pauses:

“(...) Such awareness helped her decrease the constant use of fillers, even though there were sometimes in which the use of them was inevitable.” (Student B. Final Report).

“Tough restarts and revisions are part of common oral strategies in speaking either a first or second language. This was identified as a difficulty because of the intrusive and disruptive presence in her speech. However, she has dropped fillers as such (...).” (Student D. Final Report).

In both settings, speaking fluently implied a gradual development of several micro-skills that exceeded the ordinary notion that one is fluent when speaking fast. Central to our study was the notion that fluency encompassed overcoming obstacles that hindered the possibility of speaking at a good pace, such as the repetitive use of clutch words or fillers, as ‘um...’, ‘em...’, ‘like...’, ‘you know...’, ‘well...’ which might make the speech disruptive as suggested in one of the fragments. Interestingly, student-teachers valued the importance of fluency for communication, as they were looking for compensatory strategies for instance, restarting, revising, and trying to fill up uneasy silences.

**Pragmatic Competence.** Most of the findings revealed that the pragmatic competence in our study had to do mainly with the capability that student-teachers displayed to accomplish or fulfil a task. For us,



as student-teachers' educators important criteria to include in such fulfilment were the time allocated to speak, the ability to provide an impromptu speech, the skills to reach the communicative purpose, the dexterity to address the audience or speaker appropriately, amongst others:

"All in all, I think you did pretty well, considering that you did not have much time to prepare what to say." (Student B. Second Peer Work Activity).

Student A highlighted his peer's capability to accomplish the task under pressure. It is also suggested that there was improvement in terms of improvising in such a short notice:

"However, I think the last part, the political standpoint, was not clear enough. What was done badly in order to favour Santos image? Additionally, transitions could have been made more interesting and appealing." (Student A. Fifth Peer Work Activity).

This excerpt implied that Student A needed to work a bit more on his capacity to render coherence as this had an incidence on the message that was being delivered. In the second part of the fragment, it seemed that Student B expected his peer to use further engaging and diversified devices to imprint his own tone (rhetoric devices), which ultimately belonged to the audience and task purpose criteria.

Reaching the task purpose was one of the priorities of student-teachers when recording their samples, as the fragment as follows shows:

"On the other hand, you came up with a good story for the purpose of the activity." (Student D. Seventh Peer Work Activity).

As seen above, aside from focusing on lexicon, grammar and pronunciation, Student C, provided feedback on discursive and rhetoric aspects and task fulfilment in terms of the purpose to bear in mind. This showed as well that this prospective teacher was aware that in his future career it would be vital to provide pupils with balanced out comments and to praise them. Similarly, it is worth saying that being able to improvise or talk under pressure became a must and a challenge for students, considering that this was the last English oral course they were to study:

"Finally, as for impro skills, she produces well-structured presentations of the topics she is related to, expanding and supporting her points of view with logical subsidiary ideas. But when it comes to posing her arguments about an unfamiliar topic, constant repetitions, hesitations and contradictions are still present in a vague way." (Student C. Final Report).

"Difficulties with vocabulary and improvisation are closely related. When an unfamiliar topic or question is posed, she is taken aback by her lack of familiarity, knowledge, and vocabulary to talk about that(....)." (Student D. Final Report).

Furthermore, for some student-teachers, following instructions carefully became as crucial to be considered by their peer as task fulfilment, since it is one common aspect in international standardised oral tests tiers:

"You did manage to fit the six problems you were asked to talk about in your recording. I think the recording was nice in terms of pronunciation, fluency and intonation." (Student F. Eighth Peer Work Activity).

To conclude this entry, it is pertinent to remark that Student E focused on the importance of bringing the task into completion, which was of the most common problems spotted by a large number of students in the diagnostic stage. This fact can be connected as well to the notion some students had on improving when talking under pressure. Let us not forget that while working online students were prompted to record their tasks nonstop, that is without editing or making further attempt. One of the priorities of most students was to improve their fluency and social skills while talking in public, and in that pursuit improvisation and speaking about complex subject matters were thought to be good strategies to reach that goal.

### ***Collaborative Work***

This second category included student-teachers' capacity and willingness to provide one another continuous

and prompt feedback, which we labelled here collaborative feedback. Additionally, collaborative selection of materials and activities emerged as part of this category as well.

***Collaborative Feedback.*** This subcategory shed some light on the way feedback was given by each student inside tandems. That feedback was characterised for being in-depth, detailed, and elaborated. Furthermore, one of the most defining features of feedback was its collaborative and thorough nature; students were giving each other quality and detailed feedback to be considered all-round the project. We strongly believe as researchers, that once a student-teacher was aware of their partner's mistakes; they became more aware of their own mistakes as well.

In the first place, as it can be seen through the fragments below, grammar, phonological and lexical aspects were mentioned and prioritised:

“On the other hand, there were some mistakes in your recording that I would like you to be aware of: Due to revenge- I think you meant ‘through revenge’ or ‘by means of revenge’; Kidnap-The stress of this word goes in the first syllable and not in the second; A lot of investments goes-Subject-verb agreement(...).” (Student F. Fifth Peer Work Activity).

“ I think some words were not properly used in terms of meaning and collocations. Firstly, a ‘near miss’ is not about missing a flight but about an aeronautical accident that almost happened. Secondly, I think you meant ‘took off’ instead of ‘take off’ (...).” (Student H. Fifth Peer Work Activity).

In general terms, student-teachers were concerned about their peer lexical skills, particularly in terms of rendering accurate meaning and using the most suitable collocations, recurring theme in the diagnostic stage. From an early start, it was evident that for them as non-natives to English, it was very tough to use lexicon as precisely and idiomatically as a native speaker would do it, being this the reason why several tandems included this as a priority in their agenda.

The enriching nature of collaborative feedback can be attested through the next fragment, which contains other areas student-teachers found relevant as the ones related to the discourse competence:

“I have some comments about the recording. Although you did not mark the beginning and the ending of each part of your recording, there was certainly an organisation of ideas and the recording felt quite cohesive overall. Additionally, I think your fluency was good.” (Student G. Eighth Peer Work Activity).

Student F provided his peer with balanced feedback because she included the negative aspects (... not having marked the beginning and ending of each part...) with the good organisational skills that her partner displayed in the sample, together with the cohesiveness and good pace that she reached in general terms. When giving feedback as language teachers, we should try to ponder that despite the struggles and obstacles that our students might experience in their English oral skills process, slight or minimal improvement should be highlighted.

Additional findings indicated that providing peer feedback was helpful in areas that exceeded the linguistic domain such as assessment skills, metacognitive strategies, motivational factors, and professional growth opportunities insights for prospective language educators. Thus, we will refer to each one of these findings by means of these excerpts:

“To conclude, we can say that this process was a positive experience. Anybody who has done this project would affirm that collaborative work helps one see what sometimes is hidden and reflect upon personal issues. For us, further you advance, further you foresee any problem. An external perspective of oneself is so much enriching as it would be a self-evaluation.” (Student C and D. Final Report).

“I think you learned from this activity and I hope we can keep on practicing this for you to apply it to your everyday speech.” (Student I. Eighth Peer Work Activity).

“Thank you very much for your comments and for letting me know about how you feel about the activities. I am glad you found this process enriching.” (Student B. Eighth Peer Work Activity)

It is crucial to understand that collaboration did not solely lead to giving and receiving linguistically-oriented feedback but socio affective and motivational factors as well as strategic investment aspects

which are related to the concept of autonomy, for one has to be able to recognize whether something has been productive, rewarding or not effective for us as learners. At the beginning of the project, it was made clear that oral skills revolving around social and emotional aspects such as confidence, rapport, ownership, amongst others would be regarded as prominent, since they belong to the social competence.

**Collaborative Material Selection.** This sub-category refers to the positive interdependence student-teachers created and developed with their peers upon choosing the materials and/or resources to be used for the development of tasks. The excerpts below, taken from the Follow-up Survey, revealed that student-teachers were highly satisfied with the collaborative attitude and professional capacity of their peers to select materials. As the fragments reveal, student-teachers considered that materials chosen were suitable for the advanced level targeted in the course. Specifically, they manifested those materials were challenging and centred on their specific needs:

“The materials provided by my peer had a high level and were challenging.” (Student A. Follow-up Survey).

“They involved an advanced use of the language, which prompted a higher development of my oral skills because of their challenging and engaging nature.” (Student F. Follow-up Survey).

“(…) they were taken from books and web pages where they made them difficult and challenging for the student or the future teacher (English File).” (Student J. Follow-up Survey).

Materials selected collaboratively were also considered to be effective because they served two purposes: the first, deals with their contribution to overcoming difficulties, problems and weaknesses, and the second, the possibility they offered student-teachers to consolidate their strengths.

“The materials provided by my peer were pretty accurate and suitable to help me overcome my difficulties.” (Student A. Follow-up Survey).

“The materials my peer gave me were thoroughly thought to improve in the area they were supposed to help with.” (Student F. Follow-up Survey).

“They were meant to improve the area of difficulty observed in the diagnostic test. They all aimed for specific purposes.” (Student J. Follow-up Survey).

“The materials were interesting. They pushed me to work on my weaknesses, accomplish the task and reinforce my strengths.” (Student M. Follow-up Survey).

**Collaborative selection of Activities.** Being collaborative while working on the online project implied that student-teachers should plan a weekly activity to be done by their peers. As tandems were supposed to work over a twelve-week-period, it was assumed that activities would not be monotonous but assorted, engaging and purposeful.

As the fragment below pinpoints, student-teachers recognised their peers' ability to select tasks that were challenging and level-appropriate, which future language teachers should always bear in mind. In the same way, it is remarked that students were really concerned with their peer's learning process, as they were encouraging them to keep working on their oral skills:

“As a dynamic process, I benefitted from the ideas that my peer utilized to give me assignments to improve my own skills, given their demanding and engaging nature; his activities undoubtedly pushed me not only to improve quite a bit myself, but also to put a greater effort into choosing productive, challenging, and fun activities aimed to work progressively on his weaknesses and even on his strengths”. (Student A. Final Report).

Activities were thought to be challenging because completing them implied a great effort in terms of oral skills, which means they were quite demanding; the challenging nature of activities was associated to the degree of encouragement that the proposed activities provoked on students, ordinarily associated with the specific purpose they advocated for:

“The activities demanded a quite a high level that encouraged me to learn more and challenge myself.”

(Student A. Follow-up Survey).

“(…) they represented a challenge for me.” (Student E. Follow-up Survey).

“Because were challenging and targeted a specific level according to my abilities.” (Student G. Follow-up Survey).

“The level aimed was advanced, input was challenging at most of the activities.” (Student I. Follow-up Survey).

“The aim of the activities was to push me to my limits in order to overcome them.” (Student M. Follow-up Survey).

Apart from being perceived as challenging and level appropriate, activities were found to be effective in the sense that they had to be designed to fulfil the essence of the online project: for student-teachers they were pertinent since they targeted a clear objective, were well structured and intended; students reported activities pertinence to be connected to the high level of demand required to fulfil communicative tasks, which compelled them to go beyond their comfort zone, using English in a more complex way, and in other settings different from the academic milieu.

“The activities had a clear aim, were well structured and clearly planned.” (Student A. Follow-up Survey).

“(…) all of the activities were well planned and structured and that allowed me to develop a process to achieve specific goals.” (Student G. Follow-up Survey).

“They were thought to be a support so I could understand the communicative purpose.” (Student L. Follow-up Survey).

“Because all of them required the use of English in different contexts. They took out of my comfort zone and were designed to meet certain needs.” (Student E. Follow-up Survey).

“Activities were interesting and fun, helped me get out of my comfort zone, and contributed to my self-confidence.” (Student F. Follow-up Survey).

### ***Autonomous work***

Autonomy is perceived as the capacity student-teachers had to regulate their own learning process by making the most adequate decisions, taking advantage of their locus of control (Benson, 2011), cited by Reinders & White (2016, p. 144). For instance, one of the most remarkable decisions taken by tandems was the place to develop the tasks and to send the collaborative feedback, which refers to the concept of place (2016, p. 144).

As illustrated below, the concept of autonomy can be depicted in two ways: first, in the willingness a student has to propose initiatives for his own learning process, which could be seen when students made suggestions to be included as part of upcoming activities. Second, the fact of giving peer recommendations made both participants be highly involved since they felt ‘obliged’ to keep up his partner’s pace:

“A peer, or furthermore a student, can provide creative ideas for their own practice. Considering these suggestions might give the peer or the student a greater sense of commitment to their learning process and improvement.” (Student A. Final Report).

Autonomy is intertwined with the development of self-regulation strategies, through which student-teachers were able to make choices that they considered would impact their own learning process. One important decision that student-teachers had to make was the level or degree of effort and commitment they wanted to distil in the online project, for example, whether giving feedback promptly, or whether incorporating comments or remarks provided by peers, as shown in the comment below. When learners are autonomous, they should develop the capacity to be critical of their own process, and become aware of it:

“I really enjoyed that each activity was relatively short but demanded the best of us: from the peer that assigned it to be creative and be the most accurate and objective as possible in the process of correcting

and giving feedback, and from the peer that develop the activity to try the hardest for improving time after time and to be realistic in the self-evaluation of her performance.” (Student G. Final Report)

Becoming aware of one’s own learning process implies being recognising when one has not reached the goals yet or has not maximised the use of resources and time, in other words individuals can assesses their own performance and commitment critically:

“(…) I believe that the process of feedback from both of us should have been richer and more punctual, that would have upgraded our command of the language even more.” (Student G. Final Report).

Besides, autonomy is linked to the notion of individual accountability, which makes participants in a group or team work hard and display a great sense of responsibility to fulfil tasks .When someone is individually accountable, he shows concern not just for his own learning process but also for his peer’s (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2007).

As can be illustrated below, student-teachers associated the concept of autonomy with the individual accountability expressed in the amount of responsibility, devotion, commitment and time availability displayed by their partner, when planning, executing tasks, providing and assimilating feedback. When asked about the factors that might have contributed to the development of the online peer project, common claims were:

“Creativity, Responsibility, Naturality, Facility to work in team.” (Student A. Final Survey).

“Good understanding between my tutor and me, Responsibility, Creativity and commitment for doing the activities.” (Student C. Final Survey).

“Commitment, Responsibility, Creativity, Solidarity to help each other improve our oral abilities, Motivation to do a good job, to follow a process to get specific results.” (Student G. Final Survey).

“Working with somebody you know and appreciate is very fun and it also makes you look forward to helping greatly each other…” (Student I. Final Survey).

Conversely, student-teachers mentioned the moments their peers and/or themselves did not comply with duties (lack of accountability), which was connected to lack of commitment, lack of devotion, lack of organization and time, the need to be pushed or pushing peer, and resources management:

“Commitment with the project itself.” (Student D. Final Survey).

“Lack of time and lack of commitment.” (Student A. Final Survey).

“Lack of commitment.” (Student B. Final Survey).

“Sometimes we had to push the other one to work and to hand the samples on time…” (Student K. Final Survey).

As seen above, individual accountability is critical in the development of autonomy: the total or temporary absence of it, exerted some pressure on either party, and compelled them to participate more actively in their own learning process (Jacobs & Tan, 2015).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The constant online peer work developed in ten-weeks contributed to student-teachers’ developing their oral skills significantly in terms of linguistic competence, namely pronunciation and lexicon, their pragmatic competence and their fluency skills. To a lower degree, there was improvement in their discursive and social competences. Surprisingly, upon giving feedback, student-teachers just mentioned several issues related to grammar use; however, they did not describe or provide information about the way those problems were overcome.

Findings related to collaborative work such as prompt and effective collaborative feedback, appropriate selection of materials and activities as well as willingness to carry out an improvement action plan, had a direct incidence over the progress learners made in oral skills. Prompt feedback fostered metacognition development in both learners since they could be more aware of own mistakes and tried to repair them. Collaborative work in most of the cases, depended upon the attitudes and disposition that learners



displayed throughout the project. Those attitudes and disposition were associated to accountability manifested in time invested to plan and execute tasks, prompt feedback, incorporation of peer's remarks, action plan execution, time and resources management (autonomous skills, in other words).

As language educators and researchers, we strongly suggest that those who decide to carry out projects of this nature assign some minimal criteria to be followed by learners so that they have some initial guidance and bear in mind minimal requirements to consider while working collaboratively. This does not mean autonomy is hindered but somehow it should be "mediated" and fostered by the teacher in charge.

To lead successful peer online projects, it is essential that apart from developing oral tasks, students provide one another quality and prompt feedback, which should be complemented by the language educator. If feedback is not provided or is given tardily, there will not be an impact on students' oral performance and there will not be awareness of own mistakes and those of peer's.

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