

Online Collaboration for English Learners: Implementing an International Project with Edmodo

***** On the Internet *****

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Introduction

Since the global emergence of the Internet in the late 80s, the world has changed. Communication, business, relationships, work and ways of socializing have been greatly influenced by this change and so has education (Kongchan, 2013). Twenty-first century students have been referred to as digital natives (Prensky, 2001; Warschauer, 2011), as they were born to a world where the Internet and its associated technological tools are abundant, sometimes almost taken for granted, and regarded as commonplace. Prensky (2001) suggested that these learners are seen as “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet. For this reason, these learners acquire knowledge in ways which cannot be compared with the non-digital era learning styles. Therefore, there is an urgent need for educators to adapt their teaching approaches and resources to the new digital natives (Guth & Helm, 2010).

Digital tools and collaborative projects have been widely used in language learning contexts, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (Cummins & Early, 2010; Darvin & Norton, 2014; Galante, 2014; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Toohey, Dagenais & Schulze, 2012). In a study conducted by the British Council, 69% of learners all over the world seem to believe that they learn better when “socializing informally” (Kongchan, 2013, p. 2). Given that digital tools offer extensive opportunities for social interactions, as well as relationships between people (Jones & Hafner, 2012), integrating digital tools in a language learning environment has great potential to facilitate language development, as well as address digital natives’ needs. In addition, considering the crucial role of language in social interactions (Guth & Helm, 2010),

digital tools seem to provide ESL learners an opportunity to explore linguistic and cultural diversity by interacting with ESL students in other geographical locations using English as the language for communication.

In this article, we explain the rationale for choosing Edmodo for our international online collaboration project. We also describe how it aligns well with sociocultural theory (henceforth SCT) to promote language learning through social interactions. We then outline three practical steps to implement the project. Examples of the role of the teacher and students as well as samples of interactions are also provided.

Suitable tool for our learning contexts

Each of the authors teaches English in a university in a different geographical location — the United Arab Emirates, Canada, and Portugal — so we were particularly interested in using digital tools to facilitate authentic social interactions among our diversified language learners. Our aim was to promote both English language practice and intercultural awareness. Given that online collaborative learning can be used as an educational approach that fosters interaction and promotes authentic language practice (Guth & Helm, 2010), as well as develops learners' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), we decided to experiment with it.

Several free collaborative online platforms — VoiceThread, Facebook, GoogleDrive, Vimeo, YouTube, among others — are available, and selecting a suitable one can be challenging. Prior to choosing a platform, we discussed the following shared needs: the platform should 1) be sheltered, that is, available to our students only due to privacy reasons; 2) offer different types of literacy for collaboration which include text, visual and sounds; 3) be user-friendly; and 4) be suitable for an academic setting in higher education. After experimenting with several tools, we decided the Edmodo platform would best suit our needs.

SCT and Social networking for online collaboration

In broad terms, collaborative learning means learning with others. It stems from Vygotskyian SCT, which, in general terms, suggests that a person learns better by interacting and cooperating with others (Bruner, 1983; Choi, 2008; Vygotsky, 1991). In an educational setting, for instance, teachers who use collaborative learning are likely to create a learning environment which generates interactional and cooperative synergies that require the students' constant exchange of ideas as well as involvement in helping their peers learn from one another. SCT includes key dimensions that are integral to language learning: collaborative dialogue, and social interaction, as well as the interrelation of cognition and emotion (Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2015). It is through the process of mediation that learners develop language by participating in interaction and social activities that require active engagement and critical inquiry (Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015). In other words, the value of SCT resides in its potential to enhance language learning and development via active social participation. In this sense, online collaborative learning includes ample opportunities to develop the dimensions integral to SCT, with an advantage of conveniently taking place online.

There are many online resources, tools, websites and Internet uses that can promote collaborative learning, one of them being social networking. Social networking is

probably the pinnacle of modern-day interaction, especially for digital natives. In language education, the interaction that social networking provides enables the use of the target language in a meaningful way, allowing learners to express themselves in an authentic context and interact with each other for a real-life purpose. This can be highly motivational (Chartrand, 2012), particularly if done online (Figure 1).

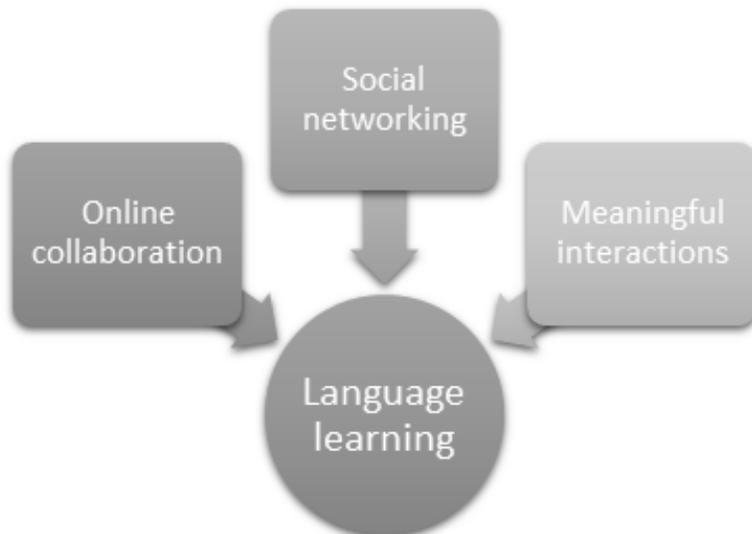


Figure 1. Components of online collaborative learning for language learners

Chartrand (2012) states that “it is the emphasis on using the target language as a resource for building interpersonal relationships that differentiates it from traditional approaches to language learning pedagogy and provides an opportunity for success.” (p. 97), and social networking tools seem to provide a suitable venue for this.

Among the many online tools for social networking in learning communities, Edmodo has been gaining popularity. In fact, in only seven years, Edmodo was able to gather 50 million users worldwide, offering to provide “students a safe, protected educational experience, a place to safely practice the digital-age social networking and learning skills they will need in their increasingly connected personal, academic, and later professional lives” (Carlson & Raphael, 2015, p. 6).

As previously stated, given that we needed a tool with educational features which would suit our learners’ needs, we chose Edmodo to set up our online collaboration. In the next sections, we explain how to use Edmodo to implement an online collaborative project with English language learners, based on our experience as moderators of an online collaborative learning project which included students from three different countries.

Implementation of an international online collaborative project with Edmodo

Edmodo was first created in 2008 as a global educational platform (Kongchan, 2013; Mohamed, 2015). It is accessible at www.edmodo.com and is completely free for any user. It has been extensively compared to Facebook –often called “Facebook for schools” (Carlson & Raphael, 2015; Kongchan, 2013)–but it is considered to have more educational features than the world’s largest social network.



Figure 2. Edmodo's logo

One main goal of Edmodo is to bring learning communities together in a secure and protected educational platform that connects students and teachers online (Kongchan, 2013). In the field of language education, it can become a powerful social networking tool to promote collaborative learning through meaningful interactions for language learners.

Edmodo's main features

For teachers

The following are some of the main features of Edmodo for teachers.

- Teachers have full control over the creation and management of accounts and groups of students (Figure 3). Once teachers create a group, their students receive a code to be able to register and join the group (Kongchan, 2013). The group is strictly private and can even be blocked from access after a certain period of time.

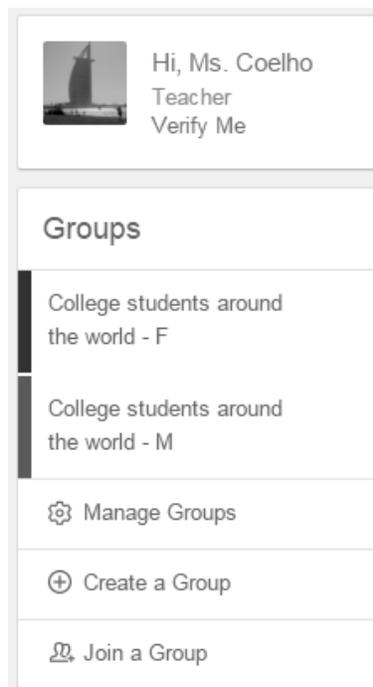


Figure 3. Examples of student groups on Edmodo

- Teachers moderate the students' interactions and control content. For example, they can choose to monitor comments and contributions before they are posted to the group.
- Teachers can create a variety of online activities that foster interaction; e.g. notes, assignments, quizzes and polls (Figure 4). Both students and teachers can upload videos, pictures, PDF and audio files, as well as links to web pages.

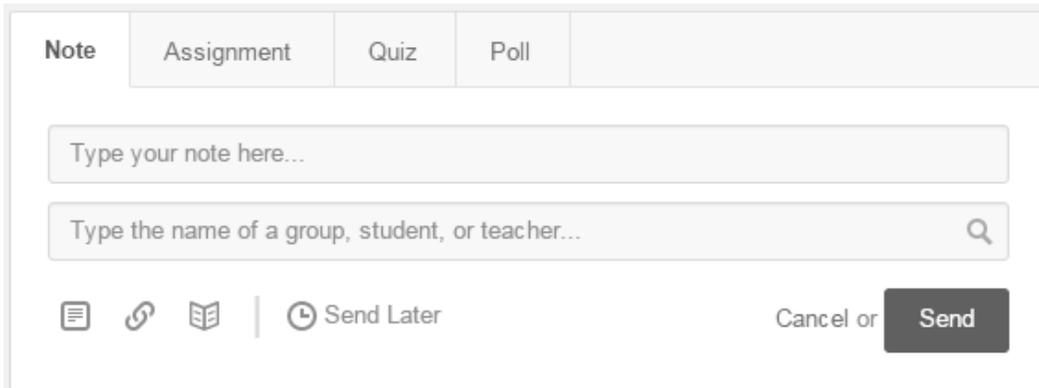


Figure 4. Different types of activities available on Edmodo

- Teachers can receive assignments, mark them, and keep a record of students' progress. They may also choose to give feedback to students individually or in groups and award badges (Figure 5).

Grades		Badges		
Add a Badge to this Group				
Student	Total	Profile Complete	Well done!	
 [Redacted]	2/2	✓	✓	
 [Redacted]	1/2	✓		
 [Redacted]	1/2	✓		
 [Redacted]	1/2	✓		
 [Redacted]	1/2	✓		
 [Redacted]	0/2			
 [Redacted]	1/2	✓		
 [Redacted]	1/2	✓		
 [Redacted]	1/2	✓		
 [Redacted]	2/2	✓	✓	

Figure 5. Screenshot of sample progress page on Edmodo

- Teachers can keep a class calendar where all assignments and activities will be featured (Figure 6).

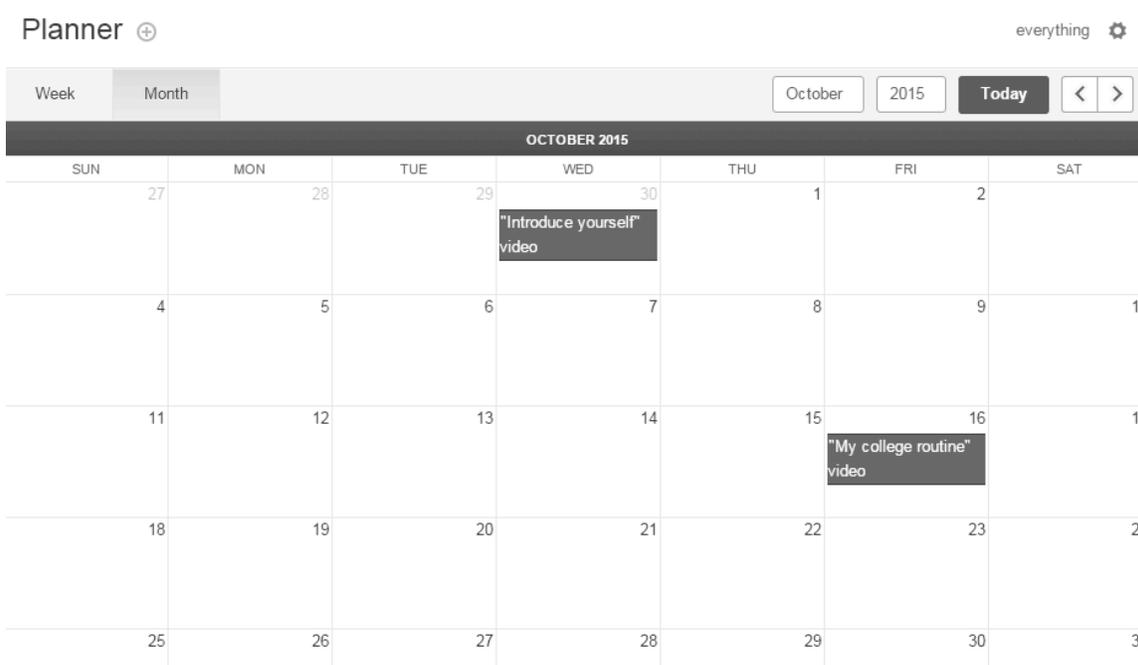


Figure 6. Screenshot of sample planner/calendar on Edmodo

- Finally, teachers can also add activities from other websites as well as other apps, and embed them in Edmodo.

For students

Edmodo also has great features for students. These include:

- Students can submit a variety of assignments (written texts, videos, audio files and pictures), complete tasks, and post notes at their own convenience.
- They can keep track of submission dates by using the class calendar and checking alerts and notifications.
- They can work collaboratively by reading other students' posts, interacting with classmates, and sharing ideas in the platform. The fact that the teacher and other classmates will read their posts contributes to students trying their best, which can be very motivational: "students who might say anything on paper to 'just get the job done' suddenly bring out their best game knowing that their words immediately go live into the marketplace of ideas" (Carlson & Raphael, 2015, p. 9). Students become more aware that they are part of a dynamic, collaborative community in which learning happens cooperatively and interactively and knowledge is co-constructed.
- Under the teacher's control, groups of students can interact with students from other parts of the world in online collaborative projects developed and sustained by teachers.

Steps to the implementation of a collaborative project with Edmodo

Step 1 – Find instructors for collaboration

Prior to setting up an online collaborative project, important considerations need to be taken into account. The instructors involved need to:

- share similar interests in language pedagogy and intercultural collaborations;
- be culturally and linguistically sensitive and inclusive;
- be equally committed during the process;
- have students with similar goals (e.g., improve language skills and intercultural competence);
- have similar class schedules (e.g., start and end date of the programs).

Although it can be challenging to find instructors whose goals and interests are similar, the considerations above will contribute to the success of the project. In our case, even though this was our first joint project, we already knew that our motivations and interests as English language teachers were similar, which made things easier in terms of planning and commitment.

In addition, Edmodo itself can be very helpful in finding instructors for collaborative projects. All you have to do is look for a “community” that matches your interests (Figure 7) and publish a post showing your desire to work with other teachers around the world (Figure 8).

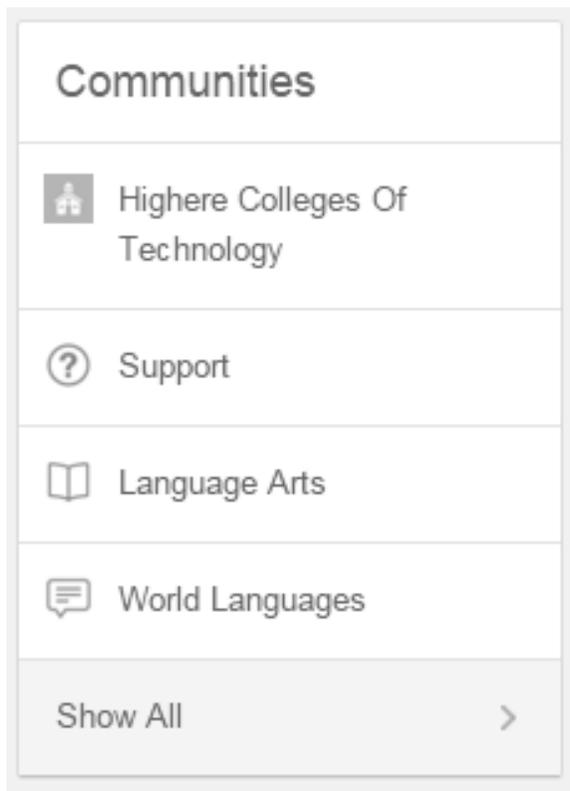


Figure 7. Screenshot of possible communities related to language education

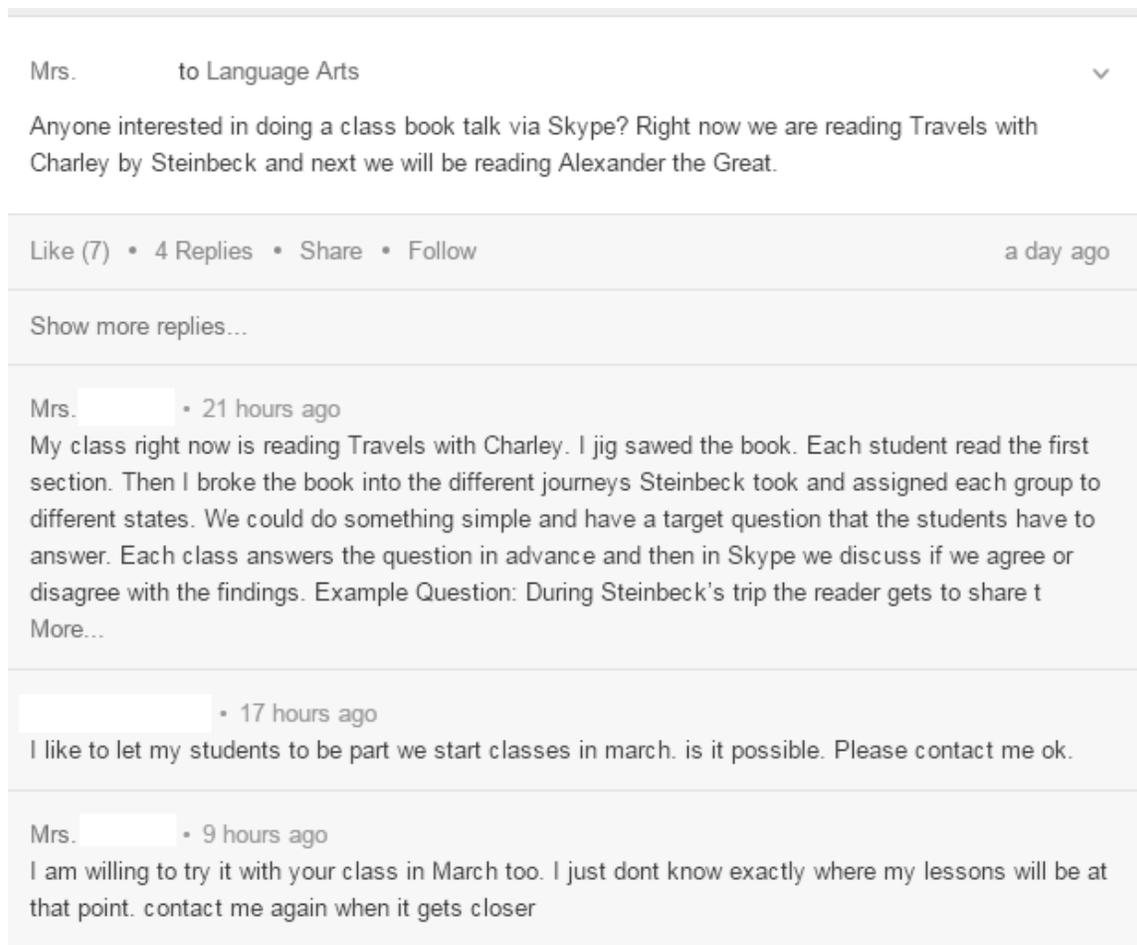


Figure 8. Screenshot of posts where teachers arrange potential collaborative projects

Step 2 – Set clear goals and select tasks

Clear and realistic goals need to be set before the project is introduced to the students. All the teachers involved should agree on a common topic or set of topics as well as activities to be carried out by the students. Given that online collaborative projects may involve students from different countries — as it was in our case — both topics and activities must be appropriate for the student participants' cultural background and age. Furthermore, the activities planned should be conceived so as to enable students to attain the goals of the project. For instance, considering that one of the main goals of our collaborative project was to promote intercultural dialogues and develop students' English language skills through social interaction and peer collaboration, we created monthly tasks that would encourage the students to use the English language in its many forms: speaking, writing, reading and listening. Examples of activities in our project included a reflection on what college life is like in different countries, namely the ones involved in the project, and a description of their own college life, routines and challenges.

Step 3 – Selection of students

Prior to setting up a group on Edmodo, teachers need to consider the number of participants in a group. In our experience, we divided students from five classes into two Edmodo groups, with approximately 35 participants in each group. However, we found some students felt overwhelmed by the number of posts and chose to engage in conversation with few participants. In an international collaborative project such as the one we describe here, a relatively small number of participants can be more effective. For example, if there are three teachers involved with a class of 15 students each, then we suggest creating three different groups on Edmodo with a random selection of 5 students from each class. This way, there will be 5 participants from each class, with a group having a total of 15 participants. This has the potential of maximizing interactions with all participants in the group.

When creating an online collaborative project for English learners, ideally, teachers should try to set up the project with colleagues working in different countries — or at least different cities — as this will allow a more enriching experience for the students to get in touch with different cultural, social, and even educational contexts. As previously noted, the fact that they will use the target language as a resource to communicate and socialize might become quite motivating (Chartrand, 2012). Being able to share their experiences with an audience that is interested in learning about them is also really important. In our case, despite being in three different continents, the students were all learning English. It may be possible, however, to carry out a similar project with students who use English as their first language. Finally, although most students can be motivated to work collaboratively, it is crucial that they have a fair command of English and digital literacies, and are highly motivated to learn from others and to work outside the classroom hours.

Teachers' roles

In our project, the teachers worked mostly as facilitators and moderators. We explained the project to the students and motivated them to participate by engaging them in discussions in the platform. It was also part of our role to produce our own video and audio files so we could contribute to the topics proposed for discussion. On certain occasions, the videos recorded by the teachers eventually triggered interesting discussions and inspired students to produce their own videos.

The teachers were also responsible for proposing a set of tasks that would, somehow, prompt intercultural dialogues among students. Having students write on discussion boards, speak in recorded audios and videos, read other students' texts, or listen to other students' audio files, were crucial tasks for the development of both English language skills and intercultural awareness.

Students' roles

Students play the most important role in projects like these. As producers of content, it was required that they had good command of the language and digital literacies, as well as the ability to reflect on intercultural aspects. In our project in particular, students also had to resort to self-reflection and analyze what changes college life had brought to their

personal contexts, as in the case of the video and audio files about their lives as college students.

As previously stated, students involved in online projects of this kind will certainly benefit from the chance to use language intensively in the constant exchange of ideas that derive from the tasks promoted by the teachers and the students themselves. In addition, they will develop awareness of how “public” their discussions are, which might contribute to a tendency to try their best to impress and represent well their institution.

Main goal of our project: Cultural awareness

One main goal of our project was to allow our students to learn about each other’s cultural understandings through online collaborations. The three groups of students involved in the project were studying English in different countries which naturally contributed to the multicultural nature of our project. All of the students were locals with respect to their countries, with the exception of Canada, where all the students were from China. Many students also had extensive travel experience in other countries, which contributed to cultural awareness among participants. In our project, students shared cultural information related to their countries of origin, countries they had been to or lived in, and differences and similarities among cities, among others.

This collaboration required students to:

1. post a video or audio about themselves (Figure. 9)
2. watch or listen to each other’s videos/audios
3. post a written comment to at least two other students (Figure 10)
4. reply to the comments received (Figure 11)

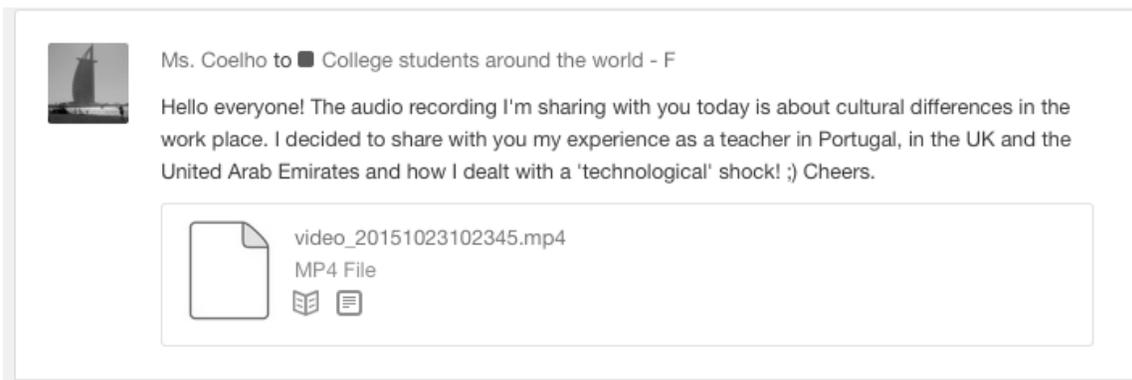




Figure 9. Screenshot of a video post

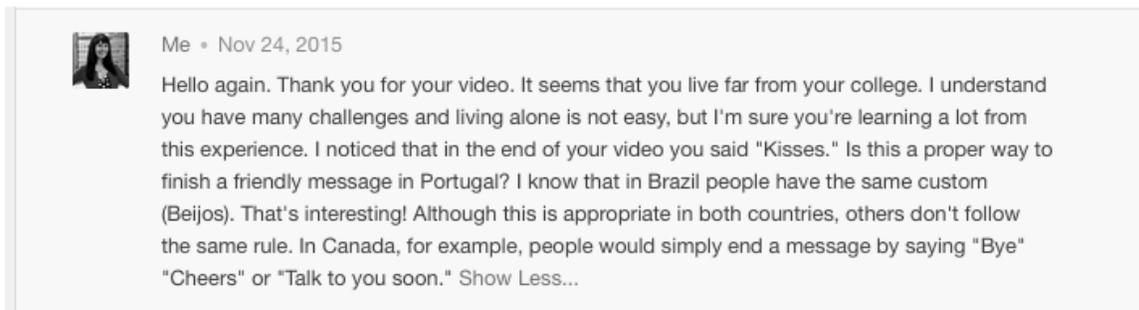


Figure 10. Screenshot of a written comment

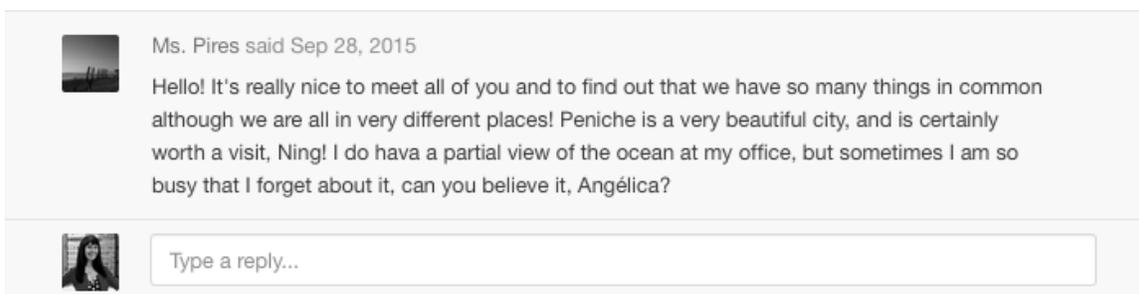
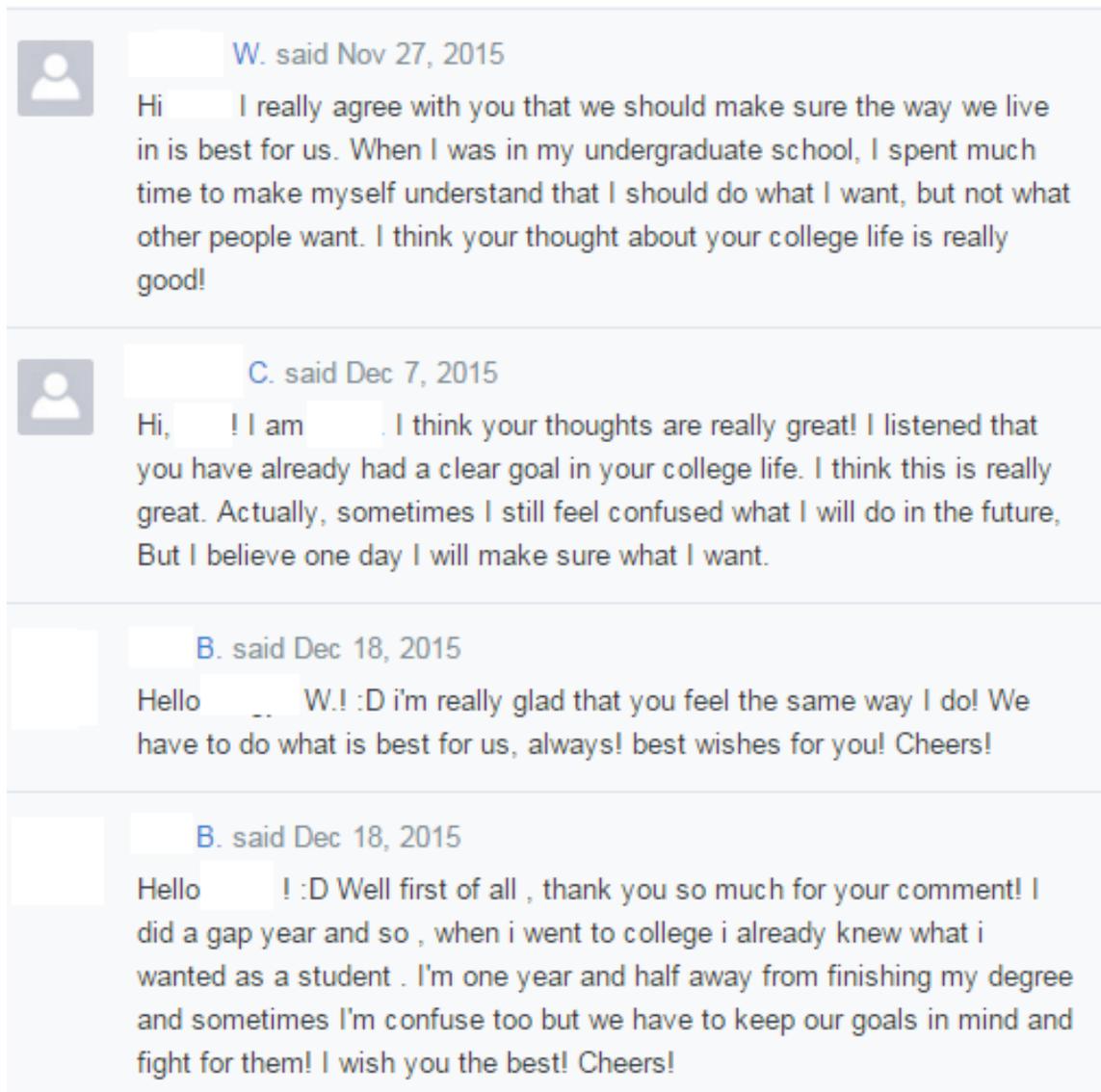


Figure 11. Screenshot of a reply to a comment

Although these were the minimum steps to be followed, we noticed that certain students had extended collaborations. For example, they would reply to each other several times to explain and provide further information about the topic discussed. Interestingly, some students continued to use Edmodo even after the end of the project.

Samples of interactions

As previously noted, Edmodo can be used in many types of online collaborative projects. It is important that the teachers involved in the collaboration decide whether they wish to simply facilitate the interactions among students or be active members of the discussions. In our case, we chose to be active members of the community. Considering that our project intended to develop English through online social interactions, we tried to motivate students to expand on some of the topics of conversation proposed by them so they could maximize English use. Figures 12 and 13 below show samples of these interactions.



The screenshot displays four separate messages in a light blue chat interface. Each message includes a small grey profile icon on the left, a name and date in blue text, and the message content in black text. The messages are as follows:

- Message 1:** From 'W.' on Nov 27, 2015. Content: "Hi [redacted] I really agree with you that we should make sure the way we live in is best for us. When I was in my undergraduate school, I spent much time to make myself understand that I should do what I want, but not what other people want. I think your thought about your college life is really good!"
- Message 2:** From 'C.' on Dec 7, 2015. Content: "Hi, [redacted] ! I am [redacted] . I think your thoughts are really great! I listened that you have already had a clear goal in your college life. I think this is really great. Actually, sometimes I still feel confused what I will do in the future, But I believe one day I will make sure what I want."
- Message 3:** From 'B.' on Dec 18, 2015. Content: "Hello [redacted] W.! :D i'm really glad that you feel the same way I do! We have to do what is best for us, always! best wishes for you! Cheers!"
- Message 4:** From 'B.' on Dec 18, 2015. Content: "Hello [redacted] ! :D Well first of all , thank you so much for your comment! I did a gap year and so , when i went to college i already knew what i wanted as a student . I'm one year and half away from finishing my degree and sometimes I'm confuse too but we have to keep our goals in mind and fight for them! I wish you the best! Cheers!"

Figure 12. Screenshot of interactions between students

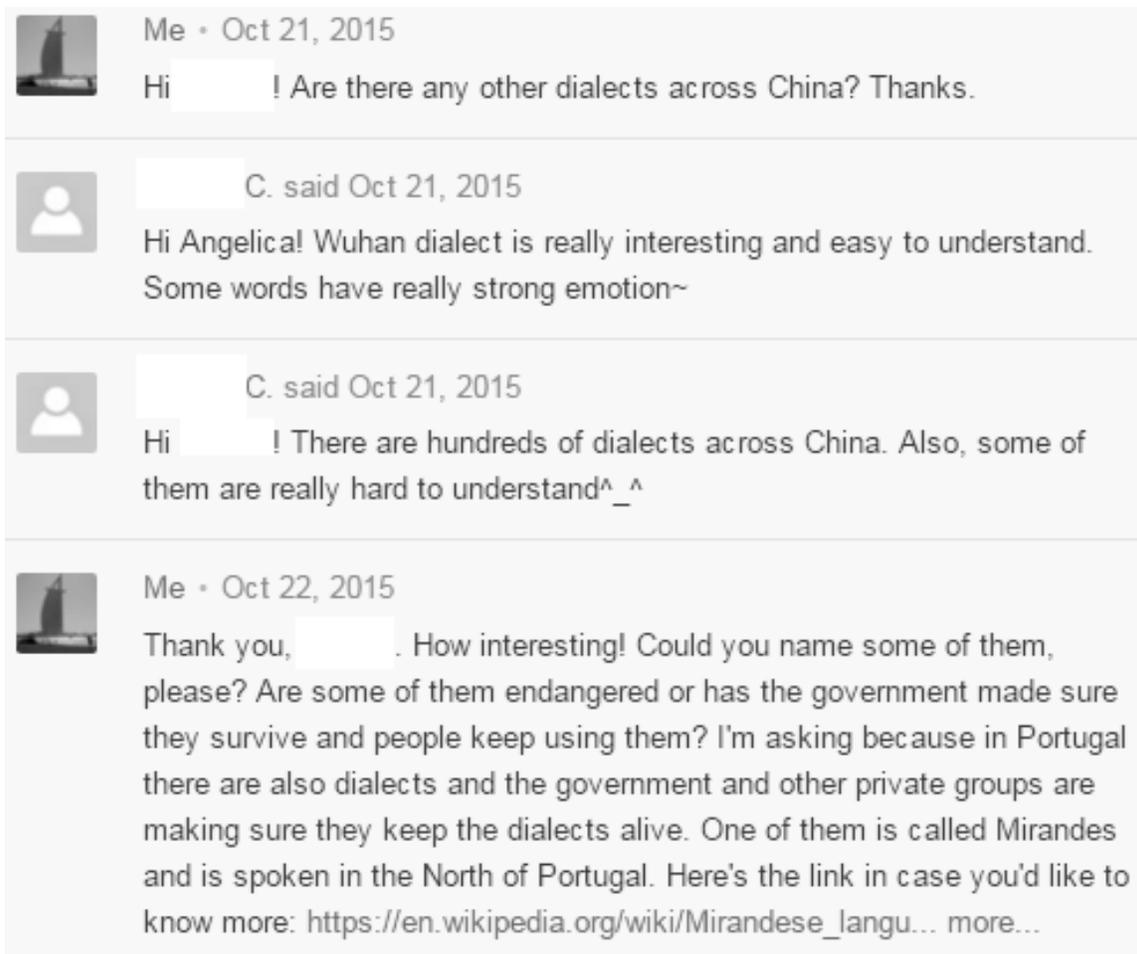


Figure 13. Screenshot of interactions facilitated by the teachers.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the complexities of today's world communication, online collaborative projects such as the one we have described in this article have great potential to respond to the needs of digitally-oriented language learners, as such projects promote the development of essential language skills through authentic social interactions, as well as cultural awareness (Guth & Helm, 2010). Following SCT, digital tools such as Edmodo can be used to mediate social interactions among learners and enhance language learning. Furthermore, considering the remarkable presence of technologies in today's schools, it would be expected that an increasing number of teachers start using them as a powerful educational tool. They are easy to use, inexpensive, and allow users to readily utilize a myriad of social networking educational tools (Chartrand, 2012).

Online collaborative projects can offer great benefits to the learning environment, but setting clear goals as well as finding topics and tasks that are attractive for students are important elements for consideration. Besides being digitally literate, many digital natives are also quite aware of their needs and learning styles. For this reason, teachers may wish to discuss with their students what they would like to explore in a collaborative project so as to maximize their participation.

All in all, in this paper we have supported the notion that online collaboration in language learning can be beneficial for today's learners and we therefore recommend that English language teachers experiment with online collaboration. As Chartrand (2012) states, "motivational, pedagogical, and affective factors are persuasive arguments for making an effort to experiment with this technology, and ESOL teachers can contribute significantly to their learners' progress in learning English." (p. 101). Ultimately, although online collaborative projects can be time-consuming, the rewards for both students and teachers outweigh the challenges.

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