ONLINE INTERACTION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN ITALIAN PILOT PROJECT ON THE COMPANION VOLUME TO THE CEFR

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The contribution focuses on online interaction as a new important dimension in the linguistic competence and repertoire of a learner, as highlighted by the Companion Volume to the CEFR. Starting from a quick overview on the theoretical framework related to the main features of the linguistic variety used in digital and multimodal environments and social networks, the paper will focus on the descriptors of online interaction presented in the Companion, referring to the initial consultation process and then to a pilot project carried out by the Italian Ministry of Education in cooperation with INDIRE, involving a school network all over Italy.
Some comments from the teachers involved in the projects will be reported and discussed and in particular, an example of project carried out in one of the schools will be highlighted.
As a general conclusion, experimenting the descriptors of online interaction turned out to be a very effective way to reflect and become aware of the

importance of digital literacy and online communication and interaction in a foreign language, for both teachers and students.

1 Introduction

Among the new descriptors introduced in the Companion Volume to the CEFR[1] published in January 2018, online interaction plays a crucial role in language learning and teaching, as our students, the so-called "screenagers" (Rushkoff, 2006) are constantly exposed to a screen during their daily activities: they share their pictures and stories on Instagram, they publish posts on Facebook, they chat through Snapchat, they can even chat in ten or twenty whatsapp groups at the same time. Therefore the 21st century learners cannot help using online interaction, on the contrary they find it absolutely common and normal. That is why online interaction in a foreign or second language should be considered as an important aspect of the language competence and repertoire of a learner and every teacher should be aware of the importance of interacting online in a foreign language as a crucial skill, together with listening, writing, reading, speaking.

2 Which variety of language for interacting online?

It is clear that communication through social networks, blogs, online communities inevitably conditions the use of the foreign language, so that the famous linguist David Crystal coined the expression "internet linguistics", by which he means the scientific study of all manifestations of language in the electronic medium. This is a very cutting edge branch of linguistics, which has been developing rapidly in recent decades.

"What I, as a linguist, see on the Internet, is a remarkable expansion of the expressive options available in a language - far exceeding the kinds of stylistic expansion that took place with the arrival of printing and broadcasting [...] such new varieties, as email, chat, texting, blogging, tweeting, instant messaging, and social networking" (Crystal, 2011, p. 12).

What is called CMC (Computer Mediated Communication), which includes forms of online communication and interaction, assumes the characteristics of a hybridization between speech and writing, changing and adopting some aspects of both. Crystal himself states that the communication mediated through the net is characterized by similarities with and at the same time differences from the written code and the oral one, borrowing some traits from one and some from the other, with the necessary adaptations: "Internet language is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties

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[1] https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989

of both. It is more than an aggregate of spoken and written features. It does things that neither of the other medium does" (Crystal, 2011, p. 21).

The different forms of network communication have been investigated by many scholars in recent decades, both internationally and nationally. Only a few of them are briefly mentioned below, without any claim to exhaustiveness.

Among the works of Baron (1984, 1998, 2000), that of 1984 is commonly considered the forerunner of subsequent linguistic research on the CMC. The scholar considers the language of the new media as a variety of pidgin that may evolve into an electronic creole in the future.

Herring (1996) examines the orthographic and grammatical aspects of network interaction, initially considered less correct, complex and coherent than the standard written language.

Orletti (2004) describes the wide range of forms that online writing can take, borrowing traits specific to speech and traits specific to oral expression.

With regard to the mimesis of online speech, for example, through iconic substitutes for the modes of communication of speech, such as emoticons, Pistolesi (1997) uses the pregnant expression "visibile parlare" ("visible speech").

The advent of these new linguistic varieties has been one of the reasons why the Council of Europe launched a consultation aimed at revising and integrating the descriptors of the Framework in the light of the new demands of the digital society and the new linguistic varieties of recent decades: online communication is also increasingly widespread in foreign languages, so digital skills and language skills can be profiled as two sides of the same coin.

3 Online interaction according to the Companion Volume

On page 96 of the Companion Volume the importance of online conversation as a multimodal phenomenon is explained as mentioned below: "Online conversation and discussion focuses on conversation and discussion online as a multimodal phenomenon, with an emphasis on how interlocutors communicate online to handle both serious issues and social exchanges in an openended way. Key concepts operationalized in the scale include the following:
- instances of simultaneous (real time) and consecutive interaction, the latter giving time to prepare a draft and/or consult aids;
- participation in sustained interaction with one or more interlocutors;
- composing posts and contributions for others to respond to;
- comments (e.g. evaluative) on posts, comments and contributions of others;
- reactions to embedded media;
- the ability to include symbols, images, and other codes for making

the message convey tone, stress and prosody, but also the affective/ emotional side, irony etc."

4 The consultation process on the online interaction descriptors: Techno-CLIL community

In 2017, during the long consultation that Brian North from Eurocentres and his research group (Tim Goodier and Enrica Piccardo) launched among a wide range of stakeholders all over Europe (universities, training centres, policy makers, research centres etc.), with the aim to collect ideas and reactions on the different new descriptors of the CEFR which were in the process of definition, the author, in collaboration with Daniela Cuccurullo, was directly involved in the consultation by Brian North, with reference to the community of practice "Techno-CLIL" made up of about 5000 participants at that time. In fact Techno-CLIL (Cinganotto, 2016a; 2016b; Cinganotto & Cuccurullo, 2016; 2019) is a free international MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) promoted by EVO (Electronic Village Online), an interest group within Tesol International, hosting a wide range of online training initiatives on languages, running between January and February every year.

The Techno-CLIL community was consulted through an online survey[2], in order to collect ideas and suggestions on the first draft of the online interaction descriptors.

1335 participants completed the survey: they were teachers from different school levels, precisely 33% from primary school, 27% from lower secondary school, 37,9% from upper secondary school and the remaining percentage from pre-primary and university.

They were asked to self-assess their competence in multimodal conversation and discussion, according to the CEFR levels, with the integration of Pre-A1, which is new.

As shown in the graph below, the majority of them identified themselves in the intermediate level (32,3% B2, 30,1% B1).

They were also asked to express their comments on the new descriptors, considering the different indicators suggested.

The majority of them found the descriptors very clear (42,5%) or quite clear (52,3%), and they posted interesting remarks which were considered useful and valuable by Brian North and his collaborators.

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[2] Techno-CLIL community and moderators (the author and Daniela Cuccurullo) have been quoted in the Companion Volume on page 181.

Multimodal conversation and discussion: how would you self-assess your competence?
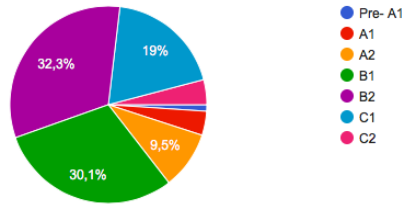
1.319 risposte

Fig. 1 - Multimodal conversation and discussion: self-assessment

Did you find the descriptors clear?
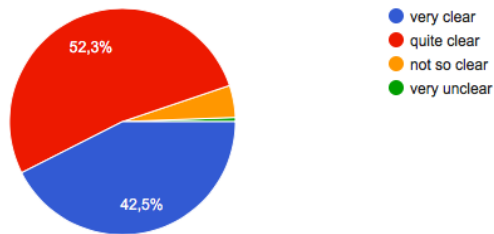
1.335 risposte

Fig. 2 - The opinions of Techno-CLIL community on the descriptors

Below some of these comments have been selected and reported, after identifying certain categories to group them, according to the Framework Analysis as a general theoretical framework (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014):

4.1 Strengths of the descriptors

The descriptors are generally considered easy and clear and respondents think they can be useful in a language class as they can help have an overall idea of the students' language skills, as the following comments highlight:

> *They are clearly defined.*
> *They are related to actions, not to theoretical concepts.*

Clear and complete.

They provide language teachers with a clear reference model for the preparation of teaching materials and for the evaluation of language skills.

The descriptors were not ambiguous but precise enough to assess clear levels of competence.

Easy and straightforward.

The descriptors are very clear and I am familiar with most of the contexts they refer to.

4.2 Weaknesses of the descriptors

Some comments highlighted certain weakness of the descriptors, such as the lack of additional examples, or the complexity of some parts of the text, especially for non native speakers and for non language teachers.

- *In my opinion, the descriptors are quite clear because each of them has detailed sentences, but it would be useful to add additional examples.*
- *In my opinion some descriptors aren't very clear.*
- *My level of English is not very good...It is very difficult for me to orient myself in such a complex text, although thanks to the indication of the pages I could focus my attention on the final pages.*
- *I had to search for the descriptors and read them all to decide my competences.*
- *I think that your level of linguistic competence is related to the situation in which you use the language. Maybe the questions of the survey and the related descriptors should be a bit different.*

4.3 Remarks about self-assessment

The survey was positively welcomed by the teachers as a self-assessment tool which offered them the opportunity to reflect on their own skills and competences, in the perspective of the teacher as a researcher and as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 2006).

In some cases, it causes embarrassment as teachers are not used to assessing themselves, but are generally focused on students' assessment.

It was also the opportunity to reflect on the importance of online interaction in language teaching and on the role of technologies within the educational process, as shown in the following comments:

- *Sometimes I read and I say myself…. I don't know anything… I'm very bad with technologies…there are too many things I don't know how to use.*

- *I usually assess students'competences by means of grids and descriptors. However I found quite embarrassing to assess myself.*
- *Self-assessment is a little difficult for me as a teacher, it is subjective.*
- *The descriptors have helped me evaluate my level of language competence.*
- *I know my level of preparation and I want to improve.*
- *I need to think about it, but sometimes in online requests I feel in confusion and I fear to be not understood.*
- *It's difficult to be objective, only someone who reads and listens to me could really tell me my level of language competence.*
- *Because it is simple for understanding what you can improve.*
- *This activity was a little difficult for me, because I think self-assessing our own level of language is very difficult for everybody.*
- *It was easy to self-assess my level of language competence because the descriptors are very clear.*

Some of these comments were taken into consideration by Brian North's team for following improvements: of course it was a great privilege to contribute to such a great project.

5 The pilot project promoted by MIUR-INDIRE

In March 2018 the Italian Ministry of Education (inspector Gisella Langé on behalf of Directorate General for School Curricula), in cooperation with INDIRE (the author, in cooperation with Fausto Benedetti) promoted a pilot project aimed at experimenting the descriptors related to online interaction among a sample of schools from all over Italy. Twenty schools were involved and were asked to analyse the descriptors and to plan a foreign language or a CLIL task to propose to one or two classes in their school, entailing online interaction and cooperation among peers. Collaboration among language teachers and subject teachers was encouraged and an online project or pathway within an international framework such as eTwinning or Erasmus Plus was recommended as well. Guidelines and instructions were provided through online synchronous meetings with the research group.

Teachers were invited to observe and assess the students' online interaction according to the criteria established by the Companion Volume.

The documentation of each school project was collected in order to analyse how the online interaction descriptors were used and interpreted by teachers and students.

In this contribution only some examples of the wide range of digital media suggested by the teachers for the online interaction among their students or with

students from other countries will be mentioned and commented on[3].

A wide range of CEFR levels was included in the pilot, as the following graph shows:

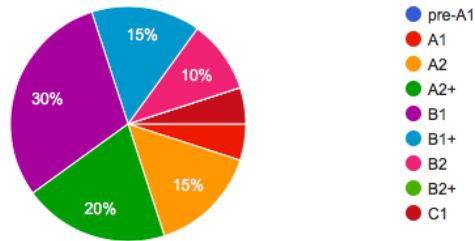## 10- CEFR level(s) in the pilot

20 risposte

Fig. 3 - CEFR levels in the pilot

The comments which follow have been selected and grouped according to the aforementioned Framework Analysis as a theoretical framework, identifying some common criteria, such as the following:

5.1 The impact on the students

- *The students were excited at trying out this new tool.*
- *They became aware of how to apply the descriptors to improve their language competence.*
- *Students can use the descriptors as a tool to self-estimate their confidence with the communication/social technologies.*
- *As regards the benefits reaped, the students learned to communicate effectively, spontaneously, cooperating and facilitating both oral and written interaction. As a result, they achieved a more relaxed and natural approach to language use, particularly in online communication. To reach this aim the descriptors contributed as a useful guideline.*

5.2 The impact on the teachers

Teachers found this activity very useful and helped them reflect both on their own and their students' online interaction competences.

- *It contributed to raise my awareness and students were impressed by the*

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[3] The volume collecting all the material produced by the schools will be published by INDIRE.

fact that somebody wanted to monitor the quality of their online activity.

• *Reading the CEFR Companion Volume I have realized that there are so many different aspects in teaching and learning a foreign language. The four traditional skills are not enough anymore in a world that is changing so rapidly; the use of new media, plurilingualism, mediation, etc. requires the teacher to consider new goals and to plan new "real" activities, more involving and motivating. These new skills must be assessed, too.*

• *Reflecting on the descriptors contributed to my own awareness in focusing on the concepts addressed in the descriptors. The students were involved in the feedback, helping each other with critical thinking and reasoning on errors correction.*

• *As the activities were being carried out, teachers and learners became more conscious of what the descriptors referred to and some adjustments were made.*

• *Once we have socialized the descriptors to the students and the teachers, we have both realized their effectiveness in the end of the project.*

• *The greatest benefit lies in the fact that the online interaction descriptors filled the void in that particular area thus giving teachers the opportunity to observe and subsequently evaluate/assess students' performances which are not language geared but also based on ICT skills. The descriptors have had an important role both in assessment and in supporting learning in the classroom. At the same time it is interesting to note how students were asked to design CLIL based activities themselves rather than only being the addressees of activities prepared by the teachers.*

• *I think that the online activities favoured spontaneous communication, most students were genuinely interested in getting to know other teenagers, in sharing recipes and information, in asking questions. The students definitely wrote in English more often and in a more natural way than they usually do. At the end of the activities all the students were able to assess their level, going from A2 to B1+, and my assessment was entirely consistent with theirs.*

The activities made learning and working 'different' from usual and were therefore motivating. The descriptors contributed to planning and to building the awareness that it was more than a game, it was real communication.

The comments reported above show the potential of this activity in terms of deeper self-awareness and metacognition of teaching and learning processes, with particular reference to assessement and self-assessment of language competences.

6 Documenting the project

Documentation is a very important aspect of a project, not only in terms of exhibition and final products, but in terms of formative, cognitive and learning processes. Collecting documentation through videos, pictures, notes, narratives etc. can help teachers and students reflect on the different steps of a learning pathway, making it "visible" (Ritchhard *et al.*, 2011).

The picture below shows an example of documentation collected by a teacher[4] involved in the project: one of the students is chatting through whatsapp and the picture captured a particular moment of the formative pathway.
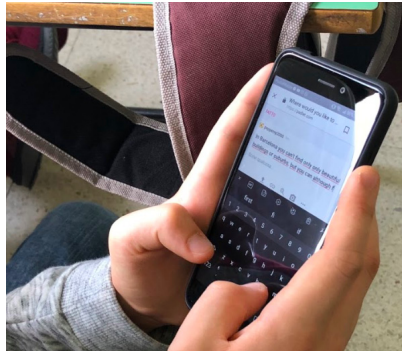

Fig. 4 - A student chatting through whatsapp

The following comments highlight the meaning of documentation as conceived and understood by the teachers:

- *I documented the project with the activities that were written down by the students. I think that all projects should be documented not only for the makers of the project but also for further similar projects and that the school could benefit from this work which is important for many reasons such as: it helps others, it deepens your understanding and it is also a good reference for future projects.*
- *The project was documented with the creation of a blog to keep track of the activities and the results achieved. Videos were made and pictures taken and added to the blog as well as the materials used (worksheets) or produced (final products).*
- *We took photos, short videos and printed the final product.*
- *I filled in an observation grid, a lesson scheme and I took some pictures. Documents, reviews, peer check, video, pictures, screenshots, webtools and other materials were used to provide a deeper documentation of the work.*

4 Patrizia Russo, teacher of English at "Manzoni Institute", Caserta, to whom the author is grateful.

7 An example of a pilot project

An example of a pilot project carried out by one of the Italian schools will be mentioned in the following paragraph. The project refers to an upper secondary school in Rome, addressing a class of fifteen-year-old students in their second year.

The English teacher[5] has been working with her French and PE colleagues on an eTwinning project with a German class and a Spanish class, named "Young European Journalists United".

The teacher selected two descriptors related to Goal-Oriented Online Transactions and Collaboration, Level B1+:

> *Learners:*
> • *Can engage in online transactions that require an extended exchange of information, provided the interlocutor(s) avoid complex language and are willing to repeat and reformulate when necessary;*
> • *Can interact online with a group that is working on a project, following straightforward instructions, seeking clarification and helping to accomplish the shared tasks.*

The class was involved in a two-month sequence of work on the eTwinning project: the topics of the project were related to the European Cultural Heritage. The students had to negotiate the contents of an online magazine. In fact, they were divided into international "editorial offices" and were supposed to realize a digital product, or e-magazine, celebrating the cultural heritage of their three countries. The students debated in class, published materials on the eTwinning platform (TwinSpace), communicated and collaborated through different media and webtools. In particular, whatsapp turned out to be an effective tool for quick interactions and helped foster intercultural empathy among classes with different work schedules and cultural background.

The teacher monitored three forms of online interaction: in class (smartphones, BYOD: Bring Your Own Device) or in the lab (PC) and from home (e-mailing and forum posting on the Twinspace, whatsapp group chat[6]).
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[5] Mariella Fasanelli, teacher of English at "Machiavelli Institute" in Rome, to whom the author is grateful.

[6] The blog of the project: https://sway.com/qFlg7HZzkEk6mLSO The e-magazine on European Cultural Heritage: https://madmagz.com/magazine/1312483

Fig. 5 - A snapshot of a whatsapp chatroom

Above a snapshot of a whatsapp chatroom (Fig. 5).

The following grid was used to observe and assess the students' online interaction during different sessions in the two months

Table 1
OBSERVATION GRID

Descriptor	Twinspace emails	Twinspace forum posts	Wa chats
Can engage in online transactions that require an extended exchange of information			
Can interact online following straightforward instructions			
Can interact online seeking clarification			
Can interact online helping to accomplish the shared taskds			

According to the comments collected, this experience helped increase the teacher's and the students' self-awareness of both language learning and online communication. Students were impressed by the fact that somebody wanted to monitor the quality of their online communication, which they found quite

spontaneous.

During the assessment phase the following descriptors were followed:

Quality of content
Degree of autonomy while working
Form of presentation
Originality / creativity
Interactivity with partners / team capacity
Documentation of the sources
Correct use of language

The following remarks have been extracted from the interview with the teacher:

- *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its Companion have been perceived by the students as something concrete and closer to them (so far they had just heard of the CEFR in connection with language certifications). Secondly, the fact that the students have been asked to reflect upon the quality of their English online communication when working on an eTwinning project has made them curious and definitely more aware of their communicative and relational competences.*
- *Both we as teachers and the students have paid more attention to the "weight" of online communication when you negotiate with somebody. I mean, online communication might be a little bit too straightforward and less "human" if you don't follow the etiquette. Being aware of that is a great achievement.*
- *Online interaction is something our students spontaneously get involved with every day. So being online is a "natural" condition to them. As a language teacher you have to transfer the competencies students already have into an international setting where the foreign language is the means to plan and do things together and express yourself in an authentic interaction with someone. If you succeed in that as a student, you get aware of how well you command that language.*

The students' feedback collected in the forum is interesting and rewarding, as shown in the following answers to the question: "Were you able to effectively interact online via e-mail, forum and whatsapp chats?"

- *I was able to interact with German students, first using the eTwinning forums, then the e-mails and then the whatsapp chats. I was also able to interact with them using the various media even when I wasn't at school. In fact, thanks to all means of communication, we were able to collaborate and to continue the work even outside the school timetable.*

- *I obviously found that using whatsapp was the most effective way of communicating with one another, mainly due to its quick and responsive interface. I preferred to only use e-mails for more formal messages, whereas the forum was a little bit better for sharing progress and ideas that everyone could see.*

Here is an excerpt[7] from an e-mail exchange between an Italian student, L. and a German one, M., discussing and looking for an agreement on the topic of the article they are supposed to write cooperatively.

Dear M.,
I've seen you have decided to talk about religious rituals. I am going to address the topic of knowledge and pratices concerning nature and universe and I was thinking we may work together. What do you think? I hope to hear from you soon.
Regards,
L.

Hi M.,
sorry for getting back to you so late, I've just seen your message. I think it would be very interesting for us to incorporate both topics in our project. I'll text you as soon as I have more to update you on.
Take care,
L.

Hey L.,
Thank you for writing back to me. I'd love to work on this topic with you, because it'd probably be great to get to know the different aspects of nature and universe of two different countries, but I think it's not exactly the kind of article I wanted to write. You mentioned the idea of talking about an astronaut, didn't you? I unfortunately want to write about religious rituals only [like praying before eating or how often Germans or Italians (or even people from Spain, to be honest, I don't really know where you come from) pray per day]. Maybe you want to write this article with me. Please don't be mad at me for not accepting your idea, I think your idea is great, but it's not what I want to write about. If

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[7] The complete documentation of the project will be published in the volume by INDIRE.

you want to join me even though it's not exactly what you thought about, it'd be very nice from you texting me back.
I'm looking forward hearing from you.
Kind regards,
M.

Hi M.,
I can confirm there are other people in our group, so I don't know whether that's still fine for you. I am really glad we can work on this article together, too. I am sure it'll turn out great!
Ps: happy Easter to you too! I hope you've spent a great time with whoever you want:)
Regards,
L.

The same students, together with other friends, continue their interaction from e-mails to a whatsapp group, which is definitely quicker. Here is an excerpt:

[8:32 AM, 4/5/2018] M.: Hey, thanks for adding me. Could all of you please write your names into this group :)
[9:12 AM, 4/5/2018] M: My name is A.
[9:16 AM, 4/5/2018] A: Hey, my name is A.
[11:05 AM, 4/5/2018] L.: Hi M.! Sorry for not answering you earlier, I am L. I hope this group will help communicate more easily☺
*[11:05 AM, 4/5/2018] L.: *help us*
[11:14 AM, 4/5/2018] F.: Hello there! I'm F. M.
[11:22 AM, 4/5/2018] M.: No problem, for sure it will:)
[1:14 PM, 4/5/2018] L.: You can find what we've done for the article so far on our Wiki Page (module 2: culture, Wiki Page 4).
[1:15 PM, 4/5/2018] L.: Feel free to tell us what you think about it.
[6:33 PM, 4/5/2018] M.: Thank you:) I'll read the article later if it's okay. It's very stressful atm sorry.
[7:19 PM, 4/5/2018] M.: I read the article and I think it's very nice. It's well-structured and also quite informative:) you did a great job and it looks like there is much effort in it☺ Are you fine with the idea of me writing my part of the article in the same structure as yours? For example, first I add a whole text which contains information about a German theoretical physicist named Albert Einstein and after that I'm going to write a detailed text about the nature in Marl (my hometown:)). What do you think about this idea?
[7:21 PM, 4/5/2018] A: I think it is a good idea.

[7:21 PM, 4/5/2018] M.: Okay, thank you:)
[7:22 PM, 4/5/2018] M.: If everyone is fine with it, I'll start writing the articles:)
[7:26 PM, 4/5/2018] A: I think everyone agrees with your idea, for me you can start writing the articles:)
[7:59 PM, 4/5/2018] L.: I think it's a great idea! Combining two different cultures as if it were one is definitely going to be of interest for the readers.
[9:29 PM, 4/5/2018] M.: Thanks:) I'll start writing the articles soon and tell you when it's completed.
[9:58 PM, 4/5/2018] F: It sounds great!

It is worth highlighting some typical features of the English language used in the students' online interactions, such as the informal register; the abundancy of emoticons and graphic symbols to express emotions and feelings (especially the smile ☺); the use of abbreviations and acronyms, which make the communication quick, smooth and vivid ("atm", which stands for "at the moment"); the use of the asterisk for self-correction or recast (*help us). The switch from e-mail to whatsapp makes the interaction quicker and the register less formal. In whatsapp the language variety is more and more similar to the hybrid form described by some of the famous linguists quoted earlier in this paper.

Conclusions

One of the most interesting outcomes for the teachers seems to be the fact that the pilot project transformed the CEFR from a mere scale of assessment for levels of competence and language certifications, to a concrete and agile tool of immediate consultation not only by teachers, but also by students. The request to reflect on the quality of their online communication in a foreign language within the framework of a ministerial project generated surprise and curiosity in the students and in some cases, even greater self-esteem in their linguistic, communicative and relational skills.

It is interesting to highlight how the project helped promote in the students not only the development of digital and linguistic skills, but also creativity, cooperation, problem solving abilities, the so-called 21st skills or soft skills. Online interaction becomes a way to help our students become European and global citizens, developing the global and transversal competences needed to face the challenges of the knowledge society.

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