Chapter 11

Online Community Projects and Post–Pandemic EFL Curricula in Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

English as a foreign language is an essential secondary-school subject in many parts of the world. However, complications during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasised weaknesses in curricula and the need for attention. This study discusses the potential of online community projects in post-pandemic curricula. Analytic autoethnography is used to examine the difficulties schools faced during the lockdown and the current situation of English as a foreign language in secondary schools in Italy and other countries. It draws upon literature regarding pedagogical theory in teaching foreign languages, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and existing scholarship in the field of online community projects. The results provide insights into the advantages and drawbacks of integrating learner-centred tools, such as online community projects, into the post-pandemic curricula.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is taught in many secondary schools worldwide and is a core subject within the EU (Berns, 2019). It is broadly used for political interaction and communication globally and is an essential subject in secondary-school curricula. However, there is a lack of research into the teaching and learning of EFL in secondary education in Italy, where the author is based (Morgana & Shrestha, 2018) and in state education in general (Collins & Muñoz, 2016). This gap was highlighted during the recent COVID-19 pandemic when the situation in many state schools precipitated. In 2020 90% of the student population worldwide was forced into lockdown (Giovannella et al., 2020). Some teachers and young people overcame the challenge of using conference tools and amplified their digital mastery. Others struggled with accessing digital tools or stable Internet connections resulting in an in-
increased digital divide (Williams & Marcus, 2021). Therefore, teaching practices and curricula require attention and education systems must acknowledge rapidly changing global situations and imbalances (Williams & Marcus, 2021). This chapter aims to bridge the gap in the literature by presenting Online Community Projects (OCPs) as a learner-centred tool and discusses their value in reconstructing post-pandemic curricula.

BACKGROUND

It will be many years until the impact of the pandemic on education systems and people’s lives are fully comprehended (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Much research focused on young children but overlooked older secondary school students (Velde et al., 2021). The lack of scientific study into secondary-school EFL curricula surfaced after the lockdown when students’ levels declined on returning to school (Iyengar, 2021). When young people have long periods out of school, they struggle to catch up, mainly because of the inadequacy of the school curricula (Kaffenberger, 2021). Learning losses due to the pandemic affect students unfairly, and the underprivileged sector of society will be the worst affected because they will not be able to invest in education (Kaffenberger, 2021). Di Pietro et al. (2020) predict that consequences are long and short-term. Long-term disadvantages are that young people will lack cognitive and socio-emotional skills, achieve to a lesser extent in education and have poorer work prospects. This reduction in human capital could even lead to a drop in productivity, innovation and employment (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

In Italy

As far as the situation in Italy is concerned, there is a profound lack of data and research into the effects of the lockdown and distance learning because all data were collected from internet-using students and families, ignoring the many people without access (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). This gap in research has contributed to increasing the digital divide and inequalities (Mascheroni et al., 2021). Italy was the first country in the EU to close its schools in response to the pandemic in late February 2020. The Italian Ministry of Education set up a task force to manage the situation and coined ‘La Scuola non si ferma’ (‘School Never Stops’) to describe the rapid transition to distance learning (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). It is estimated that Italian students missed at least 65 days of schooling during the lockdown (Mascheroni et al., 2021). 6.7 million students could access distance learning, but 1.6 million young people were excluded and received no education (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). This number comprised students with disabilities, low economic status and immigrants and increased to 3 million when considering those who dropped out of school and those living in families who lacked enough devices to support their children’s needs (Mascheroni et al., 2021). Additionally, studies showed that one of the most challenging aspects of teaching English or any other subject during the lockdown was motivating students (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Duraku & Hoxha, 2021)

EFL Curricula During the Pandemic

Issues in secondary school EFL education surfaced during the lockdown in schools worldwide due to their lack of preparation, both technologically and socially. Research supporting digital learning shows
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that interaction with teachers and peers can be maintained outside of school and that digital conference tools can help students become independent and learn at their own pace (Di Pietro et al., 2021). These advantages were not always accurate during the lockdown. The following five points show the main areas of concern:

1. Experience: Many teachers and students were inexperienced in digital teaching and learning at the start of the pandemic and lacked self-discipline (Bozavlı, 2021). Some teachers focused on the tools rather than the student (Cahapay, 2020);
2. Encouragement: Some families did not value education or encourage their children to study at home during the pandemic (Di Pietro et al., 2021);
3. Space: Many students lacked a quiet place to study at home (Di Pietro et al., 2021);
4. Technology: Many low-income families did not own devices (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Also, access to digital tools and materials was not always possible (van der Velde et al., 2021).
5. Support: Schools in disadvantaged areas were less likely to provide efficient online teaching because of poor governmental support (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

These factors contributed to countless students lagging behind their usual progress in EFL, even those who had been high achievers before the pandemic (van der Velde et al., 2021). Sadly, the disadvantaged sector of society suffered the most and young people are likely to struggle after long periods away from school because of the inadequacy of curricula (Kaffenberger, 2021).

Cairns (2020) blames the inadequacy of EFL curricula on standardised final-year examinations and points out how cancelled, modified or postponed examinations during lockdown incited reflection upon the ‘centuries old model of assessment’ that are still in practice worldwide (Cairns, 2020, p. 332). Before the pandemic, scholars pointed out how grammar-based examinations compelled teachers to use unsuitable material for their learners’ social, cultural, and historical contexts (Gajek, 2018). The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) and many education systems actively encourage language teachers to depend less on teacher-led approaches and incorporate those informed by social constructivist and sociocultural theories (Council of Europe, 2020; Venzhynovych et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many teachers clung to teacher-led lessons during the lockdown because they brought comfort in a period of confusion and fear (Giovannella et al., 2020). Stress and anxiety increased, and unclear indications from education systems and governments exacerbated the situation (Hoadley, 2020). The need to update secondary school EFL curricula was evident in Italy and other countries worldwide (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). The following section will introduce the CEFR to shed light upon the current EFL curricula requirements in the EU and other countries.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The CEFR was devised in 2001 to ‘provide a common basis for elaborating language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc., across Europe’ (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). Since then, it has become an international reference for foreign languages that extends beyond the EU (Díez-Bedmar and Byram, 2018). It provides descriptors and rubrics in six levels: from the lowest at A1 to the highest at C2, encouraging movement and collaboration among cultures with different languages and evading conflict (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). The CEFR was updated in 2018 and 2020 to encourage teachers to use ‘all approaches informed by sociocultural and socio-constructivist theories’ (Council of
Europe, 2018, p. 30). It also advises avoiding curricula ‘based on a linear progression through language structures, or a pre-determined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analyses, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions’ (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 28).

The descriptors: Mediation, Plurilingual and Pluricultural competencies were introduced in the updated editions to consider learning through sociocultural and social constructive approaches. There are wide-ranging descriptors to help teachers design curricula that comprise valuation, self-assessment and skills in various domains such as online interaction, mediation and online resources. However, despite its extensive resources, research by Díez-Bedmar and Byram (2018) showed that many EFL teachers within the EU and internationally had never heard of the CEFR. More awareness of the CEFR would be useful because OCPs function on learner-centred approaches informed by sociocultural and social constructivist pedagogical ideologies (Kramsch & Narcy-Combes, 2017). The next section of this study presents OCPs as learner-centred tools that satisfy the CEFR requirements. However, due to the lack of literature, it has drawn from studies in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL) and promotional reports and scholarship regarding established OCP platforms, such as eTwinning.

**Task-Based Language Teaching and Project-Based Learning**

Before describing OCPs in detail, it is necessary to set the backdrop concerning the pedagogical theory that feeds them. OCPs can be paralleled to TBLT and PBL because they are learner-centred approaches with philosophical roots in sociocultural and social constructivist theory, as required by the CEFR (Pérez-Ibáñez, 2014). However, the main difference is that TBLT is specific to foreign and second languages, while PBL is content-neutral. Pérez-Ibáñez (2014) believes that when TBLT and PBL are combined, students will acquire the target language more quickly and effectively. They will also strengthen creativity, global awareness, critical thinking, and collaboration skills. Furthermore, both approaches require a final product, but some differences exist. TBLT is more structured than PBL, and with TBLT, the teacher determines the focus of learning before the project begins. In contrast, PBL is iterative, and the final product is often decided upon towards the end of the project, evolving from the students’ interests and abilities (Pérez-Ibáñez, 2014). Consequently, OCPs could be considered as functioning on PBL philosophy while the single activities might exploit TBLT techniques.

This study claims that OCPs feed on a similar philosophy to PBL; therefore, it is necessary to examine it in more detail. PBL is described as a ‘constructivist approach organised around projects designed to stimulate problem-solving, critical thinking, and learner autonomy using realistic problems’ and favours long-term knowledge retention in contrast to traditional approaches that support short-term retention (Randazzo et al., 2021, p. 3). It is also known as enquiry-based learning, whereby students become independent, active learners through asking questions and building understandings (Bromley, 2016). The following list specifies the points that PBL and OCPs have in common;

- Tasks simulate real-life issues and are set within the curricula requirements;
- Themes develop from the learners’ curiosity;
- Information is interpreted and discussed;
- Teachers work together to plan projects;
- Students take responsibility for their learning;
- Teachers guide students in their learning and facilitate the collecting and organising of information;
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- Technology is used for gathering information (OCPs also use technology for communication);
- Teachers embrace PBL as curriculum content and pedagogy;
- Teachers and students interact more often than in traditional lessons;
- Planning is iterative, and teachers construct and adapt it continuously;
- Assessment is continuous and is done in various forms, such as constructive feedback (This list is adapted from Bromley (2016)).

Online Community Platforms

Having examined the relationship between OCPs, PBL and TBLT, this section will define what OCPs are and what makes them unique from other teaching approaches. Firstly, in contrast to traditional PBL projects, usually devised by teachers working in the same school, OCPs need at least two teachers from different schools, cities or countries who work together to initiate an online community so their students can meet peers with different cultures and languages. Secondly, there is no limit to the number of teachers, students and schools participating in OCPs because they are online (Fearn, 2021). Thirdly, another aspect that distinguishes OCPs from PBL is the ‘online community’ or webspace where the OCP is hosted. The OCP needs a name with which participants can identify and a web space to meet and post their work. Here, administrating teachers plan and schedule the OCP tasks and objectives and are responsible for creating and maintaining the OCP website, contacting and enrolling teacher-partners, and devising, organising, and assembling activities and documents. Activities usually involve research and the creation of digital material such as videos, presentation posters, podcasts and other artefacts. In this way, single actions can be designed to focus on specific areas of language, as explained previously. Teachers can adjust the tasks to match their curricula requirements and to meet their students’ needs, ages, interests, abilities and social and cultural settings (Dooley, 2017; Terhune, 2015; Ware & Kessler, 2014). Finally, OCP tasks function around asynchronous communication, but synchronous communication activities are often carried out using conference tools such as Skype or Zoom.

Table 1 provides insight into the steps taken by teachers and students in the realisation of an OCP, *Global Warming, the Earth is Warning* (Fearn & Buyukuyusal, 2022), hosted on eTwinning from September 2021 to April 2022. It summarises the webspace, also known as Twinspace, showing the nodes or *Pages* on the left. The main body of this OCP comprises four modules, each one with a different theme and related activities that participants could organise and adapt to their curricula requirements. There was also a homepage where teachers posted news and communications. As with TBLT and PBL, OCPs usually produce a final product, which in this case was an informative video, presentation and eBook that could be used to teach in future lessons. For feedback purposes, two tick-box surveys were posted on the final *Page*: one for teachers and one for students. Evaluation is necessary for teachers to gain insight into successful or unsuccessful areas regarding the OCP for improvement purposes. They also help students reflect upon what they have done and the value of the activities. The surveys in question contained a tick-box that allowed or refused permission for the information provided to be used for educational or research purposes, including publication. Nevertheless, as an autoethnographical study, responses are not cited because autoethnography is driven by reflection and participation and does not transfer completed research activity (Richardson, 1990) (see methodology).

There are numerous specialised platforms where teachers can meet colleagues and host online projects. The most popular platform in the EU is eTwinning, and it is the platform that the author of this chapter uses the most. eTwinning also provides national and European awards recognising successful
### Online Community Projects and Post-Pandemic EFL Curricula in Secondary Schools

#### Table 1. OCP Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCP Pages</th>
<th>Student activities</th>
<th>Teachers’ activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent Consent</strong></td>
<td>Teachers uploaded consent forms in their languages for their students’ parents to sign.</td>
<td>A collaborative presentation was made of the teachers using Google Slides. 14 teachers uploaded photos and bios and shared their weekly timetable showing when their classes would be available to connect synchronously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Netiquette</strong></td>
<td>The administrators shared advice regarding how to behave using the Internet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers</strong></td>
<td>Meet the teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers’ Schedules</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Logo</strong></td>
<td>Students made logos and voted for the best one.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online Meetings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers documented their online meetings here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introductions</strong></td>
<td>Avatars</td>
<td>Students made avatars and posted introductions on a Padlet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Padlet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Module 1 (September – October)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>During all modules, students:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Module Theme: Greenhouse Effect</td>
<td>☐ Reflected and researched about the module theme and international or national days connected to it;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• International days to celebrate</td>
<td>☐ Connected with peers in other countries using synchronous conference software such as Zoom to present their work;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lesson Plans</td>
<td>☐ Made informative material;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Informative videos and presentations</td>
<td>☐ Created learning objects such as Kahoot quizzes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Posted opinions on a forum created for each module.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Module 2 (November–December)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>During all modules, teachers:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Module Theme: Global Warming</td>
<td>☐ Posted videos and photos that documented students’ work;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• International days to celebrate</td>
<td>☐ Organised synchronous communication sessions on the module theme and posted videos and photos that documented their meetings;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lesson Plans</td>
<td>☐ Shared videos and lesson plans;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Action against global warming</td>
<td>☐ Created a forum and encouraged their students to read their peers’ posts and reply to them;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Chose international and national commemoration days with their students, using polling software in theme with the project. Activities were documented and shared on eTwinning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Module 3 (January–February)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Module Theme: The Ecosystem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• International days to celebrate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lesson plans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ecosystem songs and poems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Module 4 (March–April)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Module Theme: Desertification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• International days to celebrate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lesson Plans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Global Warming, the Earth is Warning Challenge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OCP conclusion</strong></td>
<td>Final product</td>
<td>Collaborative video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acrostic poem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dissemination</strong></td>
<td>Teachers collected all work done over the project to create a collaborative and informative eBook, presentation, and video for dissemination purposes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OCP evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Teachers and students reflected upon the OCP and filled in a tick-box questionnaire evaluating the different aspects.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Network (iEARN), Connecting Classrooms, PenPal Schools and others. Otherwise, teachers can create their own space using free media such as Google Sites, WordPress, Weebly and others.

Lack of research has resulted in eTwinning becoming a geneticisation for what this study refers to as OCPs. Moreover, many promotional reports and literature on eTwinning focus on the global and digital aspects. For example, Chitanana (2012); Gajek (2018); Gilleran (2019); Kearney & Gras-Velázquez (2018) and Pateraki et al. (2020). Foreign languages are often overlooked even though more than half the teachers using eTwinning teach foreign languages (Gilleran, 2019).

Research Questions

In the light of the literature, a research question was devised: How can OCPs support the post-pandemic EFL curricula? Two sub-research questions were formulated to answer this question:

- **Question 1:** What are the advantages of using OCPs in post-pandemic secondary school EFL curricula?
- **Question 2:** What are the difficulties of using OCPs in post-pandemic secondary school EFL curricula?

**METHODOLOGY: ANALYTIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

The research questions are answered using a qualitative paradigm revealing an ontological belief that people understand reality differently because they are influenced by social, cultural and historical dynamics (Rogoff et al., 2017). The analytic autoethnographic methodology gives weight to the practitioner’s voice as a reflexive means of analysis. As noted by Wall (2016), there are various types of autoethnography, which can be broadly divided into evocative and analytic. This study can be considered the latter because it emphasises experience within an analytical and interpretive process (Wall, 2016). The five main characteristics of analytic autoethnography proposed by Anderson (2006) are (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006, p. 375).

The advantage of analytic autoethnography in terms of this study is that it allows the author to evaluate the personal experience of working with OCPs before, during and after the pandemic and build upon existing theory and literature in the field to construct a wider community of knowledge (Poulos, 2021; Wall, 2016). It investigates, explores, and shows the phenomenon from a new perspective by examining experience and epiphanies to understand better the social world (C. Ellis et al., 2011; Poulos, 2021). Data tools for analytic autoethnography can be the same as other forms of qualitative research. However, this study is an observational, participatory and reflexive-driven process that uses writing to drive inquiry instead of discussing the completed research activity (Richardson, 1990). For this reason, each section begins with epiphanies recorded from field notes and memory fed by years of experience with OCPs in the secondary school classroom and is analysed through theory and scholarship in the area.

**Context**

The context of this study is a state secondary school in the south of Italy. The epiphanies are influenced by nine years of integrating OCPs into EFL curricula. *Global Warming, the Earth is Warning* (Fearn & Buyukuysal, 2022) was the name of the OCP that participants worked on at the time of the study. It was initiated in September 2021 when many students had been vaccinated, but the threat from the pandemic
had still not passed, and new variants such as Omicron had emerged (World Health Organization, 2021). The platform was eTwinning, and the teachers used a WhatsApp group to facilitate communication. At the beginning of the OCP, the OCP had 44 registered teachers and 409 students living in numerous countries in the EU. 14 teachers were more active than others, and the WhatsApp group comprised 11 teachers who communicated and made suggestions regarding the OCP.

Data Collection

As an autoethnographical study, all data were collected from the author. Field notes were taken while working on the OCPs, patterns of cultural experience were identified, and themes were recognised as epiphanies. Epiphanies are described by C. Ellis et al. (2011) as remembered moments that profoundly impacted the researcher. Altogether, four main themes were identified and divided into the advantages and disadvantages of using OCPs in post-pandemic secondary school EFL curricula.

Analysis

This study shares Anderson’s (2006) conception that ‘the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 387). Therefore, thick descriptions were used to organise data in a bottom-up, iterative way, led by reflection and writing about the author’s experience integrating OCPs into the EFL curricula before, during and after the pandemic. Each quote is analysed by examining relevant literature to consider ways other people might understand the same experience. It also reflects on the CEFR and OCPs as cultural artefacts. Table 2 shows the four main themes identified during the analysis and the six related sub-themes. They were further analysed to answer the research sub-questions and determine the potential advantages and disadvantages of integrating OCPs in post-pandemic EFL curricula.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Procedures

Trustworthiness of the study was provided by reflexive analysis, description and extensive research into related scholarship. Although the author provides all data in this study, personal experience cannot be separated from the social context of the study where the author participates (Poulos, 2021). Therefore, consideration has been given to how this work might affect others, and ethical approval was obtained from the Open University Human Rights Ethics Committee (HREC/4242/. Date: 16/02/2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the two sub-questions are discussed under the two headings: Advantages and Disadvantages to answer the main question. The Advantages section has two themes. The first is Motivation, with the sub-themes of Meaningful and Task-oriented activities. The second is Teachers’ professional development with the Flexibility and Community of Practice sub-themes. The Disadvantages section also has two themes. Firstly, Time issues, with the sub-themes of Assessment and Organisation issues. Secondly, Technology-related issues (see table 2). Each section begins with an autoethnographical quote.
Table 2. Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of using OCPs in post-pandemic EFL curricula</th>
<th>Disadvantages of using OCPs in post-pandemic EFL curricula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Sub-theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Motivation</td>
<td>□ Meaningful activities □ Task-oriented activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers’ professional development</td>
<td>□ Flexibility □ Community of Practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

representing an epiphany about the author’s experience integrating OCPs into the EFL curriculum. The quote is then analysed and discussed through relevant scholarship and theory.

**Advantages of using OCPs**

Data showed numerous advantages of integrating OCPs into the EFL curricula. Most of them were connected to their intrinsic motivational qualities. *Teachers’ professional development* was given an individual theme because it is an essential aspect of OCPs and is vital to reconstructing EFL curricula in secondary school settings.

**Motivation**

The first advantage of using OCPs in post-pandemic EFL curricula regards their motivational qualities. The following quote describes an epiphany in the author’s career as an EFL teacher. It also reveals the motivational potential of OCPs in secondary school EFL curricula.

“I first noticed the motivational qualities of OCPs nine years ago when I was teaching in a vocational school in a socially disadvantaged rural area in the south of Italy. This school was renowned for the bad behaviour of its students. They were not interested in learning EFL, so I decided to try an eTwinning project with a challenging class of 17-year-old boys. At first, they misbehaved, but their behaviour changed when they understood what was expected of them and realised that the tasks were interesting
and within their capabilities. They won an eTwinning national and European quality label, and by the end of the year, the class that no one wanted was transformed into the class that was ‘good at English and IT’. They began to feel good about themselves, and this newfound positive identity resulted in them behaving better and obtaining improved grades in other subjects. Since then, I have done two OCPs per year, sometimes with eTwinning and other platforms. I have met many amazing teachers who have taught me so much about teaching and people in general’ (Author).

Motivation is considered a critical factor in the success of learning activities (Amin, 2017). The students mentioned in the quote were motivated intrinsically by activities set at the correct level in EFL for them. They were interesting enough to produce curiosity that encouraged them to work harder (Wigfield et al., 2012). Additionally, a change was noted in how students felt about themselves and their potential as EFL learners. These findings support eTwinning reports that show that self-esteem and identity improve through OCPs and result in better classroom relationships and motivation to learn (Besson et al., 2014; Kitade, 2014). Gilleran (2019) states that students show an overall academic improvement after working on eTwinning OCPs, especially those with socioeconomic and learning difficulties. Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that OCPs need to be carried out in the classroom as part of the EFL curricula. They should not be done as homework because, during the lockdown, research showed that learners were less motivated to participate in learning activities because of the lack of contact with peers and teachers (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

Meaningful Activities
Exciting activities are not always enough to motivate learners to study EFL. They need to be meaningful and authentic to the learner too. The following quote shows the importance of using original material that relates to young people’s cultural and historical interests (McInerney et al., 2014).

‘Textbook topics are often boring for students. Just because students in the UK are interested in music and certain bands and films, it does not mean that learners in other parts of the world are too. Students mould the OCP activities to their own interests and passions and are more motivated to learn English. They are also inclusive, so even learners with learning difficulties can participate’ (Author).

Research showed that complications arose from the prevalence of teacher-led methods during the lockdown. For example, students who had difficulties in EFL could not keep up with peers, and the lack of support and incentive from teachers and classmates left them feeling discouraged and unmotivated to learn (Werner, 2020). On the other hand, when students are the centre of knowledge, they can develop at their own pace and focus on what interests them (Stanojevic, 2015). OCPs require learner-centred approaches based on social-constructivist and sociocultural theory (Bocconi et al., 2012). Social constructivist approaches acknowledge that all human beings construct understanding differently. This concept is instrumental for post-pandemic curricula where learners are at different levels in EFL and have diverse experiences and needs.

Task-Oriented
Task-oriented activities are tasks that are completed regardless of time. The following quote suggests that some OCP activities might be task-oriented rather than time-oriented.
‘We usually spend one lesson per week working on OCPs. I have three lessons with my classes. I choose the latest hour in the day and when students are most tired because I know they will be more motivated to work on OCP activities than in normal lessons when they would probably be distracted and unable to concentrate. Students do not want to stop working (even at the end of the school day). They want to finish the task at hand. This phenomenon rarely happens in ordinary lessons’ (Author).

As mentioned earlier, OCP ideology can be considered similar to theory in TBLT and PBL. These approaches are task-oriented in contrast to most education organisations that operate on time-oriented curricula. When an activity is task-oriented, learners focus on the action at hand rather than on time (East, 2017). Contemporary society is time-based, but before industrialisation, no distinction was made between work and leisure time, and tasks were nature-based and not time-based (Solway, 2003). Experience is vital and can be adapted to foreign languages through designing activities to reach the language goals (Pérez-Ibáñez, 2014). For example, in Global Warming, the Earth is Warning, students used the imperative form to suggest sustainable ways of living and the interrogative for asking OCP peers questions. Grammar is believed to be absorbed through activities that focus on meaning gained through communication and experience rather than grammar structures (East, 2017). Learners build upon what they already know by communicating with more experienced and knowledgeable peers, which aligns with the theory of social constructivism (Allen, 2005; Daniels et al., 2007; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Thompson, 2012; Vygotsky, 2017).

Teachers’ Professional Development

The second advantage of using OCPs in post-pandemic EFL curricula is their potential for teacher development. The following epiphany introduces this theme by showing the motivational effect of integrating OCPs on the author as a teacher and researcher.

‘Working on OCPs has positively affected my teaching career, self-identity, and self-esteem as an EFL speaker, teacher, and academic. I began by joining other teachers’ OCPs until I could initiate my own. There is always something new to learn, probably because the world constantly changes. I also believe that I have gained some useful skills. Firstly, I have learned to write projects that have won Erasmus and PON (Programma Operativo Nazionale) funds for my students to travel and do EFL courses abroad. Secondly, I have learned innovative teaching approaches and techniques from other motivated teachers, and thirdly, I have better relationships with my students’ (Author).

This quote suggests that OCPs are places where teachers can meet and share expertise, ideas, and resources and create online communities for themselves and their students around an area of interest that motivates themselves and their students. The encouraging atmosphere supports learning and professional development (Germain-Rutherford, 2015). According to sociocultural theory, learning occurs when people with different social, cultural and historical contexts interact and communicate (Wertsch, 2007). On the other hand, recent research has shown that teacher training programmes provide limited exposure to technology and lack digital pedagogy (Burden & Naylor, 2020). This scarcity is also true in Italy, where drastic educational cuts have resulted in insufficient quality teacher formation, resources, and digital tools (Cantillo, 2019).
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**Flexibility**

This sub-theme describes how OCP activities can be moulded to individual social, cultural and historical contexts and interests. The following quote indicates how OCPs were used during the extreme conditions of the lockdown.

‘During the pandemic in 2020/21, I worked on an OCP called Single Voices, Global Choices (Fearn & Zielonka, 2021), that focused on International Days, so each class could choose days that interested them the most according to their levels and interests. It wasn’t easy doing OCPs at home, but my students were used to them and used WhatsApp and other social media to work collaboratively on the OCP tasks. We used Padlet the most because it was the easiest way for students to upload their work and see other people’s efforts. Some amazing work was done that year despite the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The OCP won prizes, and some teachers were invited to speak about it at international conferences’ (Author).

Teachers can devise and modify OCP activities to meet the needs of their students while satisfying national curricula requirements. Decisions regarding the curriculum should consider specific social and cultural contexts (Hoadley, 2020). Flexibility is vital because learners with dissimilar social and cultural backgrounds have individual perceptions of learning (R. Ellis, 2003).

**Community of Practice**

A community of practice is created when participants identify with and become members of social practices (Lave, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The following quote suggests how the author feels teachers are motivated to improve their practice.

‘Teachers learn from each other and become better teachers, more confident and more aware of global learning and issues. They also become more knowledgeable about what is happening in other countries regarding education and teaching. For example, they learn to use technology as motivational tools for teaching and learning and experience the advantages of using learner-centred teaching methods’ (Author).

Learners and teachers become part of a community by acquiring and adding to knowledge through social interaction (R. Ellis, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). When participants identify as members of social practices, a community of practice is formed (Lave, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991). With OCPs, the community is created online, and participants learn from more knowledgeable and experienced community members. As inexperienced group members become experts, they influence newcomers in a growing spiral of membership (Allen, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The same is true for students in secondary school contexts. However, the teacher should guide the community because students might learn from damaging input and possibly from iniquitous role models (Rogoff, 2003; Weegar & Pacis, 2012).

**Disadvantages**

Despite the many advantages of integrating OCPs in the post-pandemic EFL curricula, there are also many disadvantages deriving from difficulties. This section seeks to uncover some of the most prevalent
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disadvantages in answer to the second research sub-question: What are the difficulties of using OCPs in post-pandemic secondary school EFL curricula? There are two central themes in this section, difficulties related to *Time*, including *Assessment* and *Organisation issues* and those related to *Technology* and lack of resources. It is essential to point out that the author is an OCP user whose quotes are predominantly positive. Therefore, reflective research in literature was necessary to eradicate bias.

**Time issues**

Research has shown that teachers’ predominant difficulty using OCPs related to time (Fearn, 2021). While the author finds ways to overcome time-related issues, other teachers might prefer to use other approaches.

‘It takes time to prepare the OCP website if you are the administrator. Nevertheless, other teachers help, and I find this time well invested. Our lesson plans are already in place when we are busier during the school year. I experience a feeling of relief when I remember that I will be going to the lab with my students to work on OCPs. I don’t feel I have to motivate them to learn things that do not interest them. Motivation is rarely an issue, and my students look forward to going to the lab to do OCPs’ (Author).

Teachers working on *Global Warming, the Earth is Warning* were enthusiastic OCP users and found ways to overcome difficulties. Still, this is not true for many other teachers and could be one of the factors that they choose not to use OCPs in their lessons. The dominant factor that affects all issues related to the integration of OCPs into the EFL curricula concerns the shortage of time. Time is needed when learning new approaches or integrating new mediation tools into the curricula, and teachers are busy people (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Pressure from management to learn new strategies can be overwhelming, and education systems often set goals without evaluating whether or not they are achievable in their country’s social and cultural context (Chen-Levi, 2019). In addition, many state secondary school EFL teachers have to deal with complications such as large classes, diverse cultural backgrounds and languages, bad behaviour and lack of motivation (Abós et al., 2021).

Issues in the EFL curricula escalated during the lockdown, emphasising the need for change in how teachers are trained and how their skills are developed within their practice (Estrada-Muñoz et al., 2021). Abós et al. (2021) believe that when teachers are given the freedom to educate as they find fitting and provided with ‘opportunities to participate in interdisciplinary project-based learning’, they feel more satisfied with their profession and less likely to suffer from anxiety and tension (Abós et al., 2021 p. 3822). Therefore, integrating OCPs into the EFL curricula might help neutralise the risk of burnout and overload. However, teachers need time during their regular teaching hours to experiment with new approaches; otherwise, they could add to an already substantial workload.

**Assessment issues**

Assessment is an essential aspect of any school subject. Foreign language skills are challenging to assess and even more so when learner-centred approaches are used, such as with OCPs. The following quote reveals how teachers might question the learning value of OCPs:
‘I was worried about how much English my students were learning. It was evident that learners who lacked the enthusiasm to learn English benefited from OCPs, but I was unsure about the more ambitious and motivated learners. For this reason, I try to give importance to the OCP by assessing each student’s work using a Google Form with a tick-box rubric. The rubric is derived from the ‘can-do’ descriptors from the CEFR. Students give anonymous assessments of their own and each other’s work using OCPs. Grades are collaborative and encourage students to reflect on their achievements. It provides a quantitative mark necessary for our school system and qualitatively reflects students’ accomplishments. We also do traditional lessons assessed with conventional measures, so each student’s overall grade is derived from a mixture of methods’ (Author).

Regular assessment of student progress is a fundamental part of the secondary school teachers’ profession, but it is challenging to measure students’ language progress through OCPs. Studies show that assessing knowledge gained from learner-centred lessons is one of the most common reasons teachers use teacher-led instruction over learner-centred approaches (Duong & Nguyen, 2021). When curricula are teacher-led, the teacher is the knowledge provider making assessment easier. In contrast, with OCPs, teachers act as mediators; they regulate learning objectives and establish assessment methods rather than feed content. However, since all individuals learn differently from learner-centred activities, teachers can be confused about what they should be assessing (Duong & Nguyen, 2021).

There is little valid advice about assessing learner-centred activities realistically in secondary school contexts. Pérez-Ibáñez (2014) believe that the final assessment should evaluate the entire process but fails to explain how that can be done in busy and crowded state-school settings. Duncan & Buskirk-Cohen (2011) suggest asking students to create their way of demonstrating what they have learnt, but this suggestion presumes a level of maturity that many young people do not have. This study suggests that a solution could be drawn from the CEFR for descriptors. As mentioned earlier, the latest editions of the CEFR provide updated descriptors and guides to levels of modern foreign languages. They encourage an ‘action-oriented approach […] towards syllabuses based on needs and analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions’ (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 28). ‘Can do’ descriptors are described in competency-based rubrics founded on Reception; Production; Interaction and Mediation.

Table 3 shows an example of a skeleton descriptor resource constructed from these four descriptors. It also offers three kinds of usage adapted from the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020): 1) Communicative language competencies; 2) Communicative language activities and strategies; and 3) Plurilingual and pluricultural competencies, as mentioned in the literature section of this study. These skills are practised in OCP activities and could be formally assessed following the CEFR guidelines. The rubric could be completed by using descriptors from the complex rubrics in the original edition (Council of Europe, 2001) or by creating ones that match the skeleton competencies but are simplified so that the students can answer themselves. For example, asking students to use a linear scale to measure how much they feel they have learnt in terms of each of the descriptors necessary.

Organisation Issues
Another drawback of using OCPs is the time needed to teach learners to use the digital tools or access the platform. The following quote shows the difficulties that the author found.
Table 3. Simplified descriptor skeleton adapted from the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes</th>
<th>Communicative language competences</th>
<th>Communicative language activities and strategies</th>
<th>Plurilingual and pluricultural competences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
<td>Listening comprehension</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audio-visual comprehension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td>Spoken Production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Spoken interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation</td>
<td>Mediating a text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mediating concepts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mediating communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘It is always difficult at first with new classes. My students only usually use their digital devices for social media, gaming and watching videos, so helping them understand how to register, access, and use platforms and software can be hard work, especially with big classes. The best thing is to ask students to help each other, and this way, they become teachers themselves’ (Author).

Research has shown that teachers often spend so much time teaching students how to use the technological tools that the subject matter (EFL) is ignored (Gouseti, 2014). Although young people spend considerable time using their smartphones and digital devices, they are inexperienced in actively producing media or language (Brennan et al., 2010; Estrada-Muñoz et al., 2021). Teachers need to help their students develop dynamic digital skills to satisfy the global needs of the twenty-first century (Burden & Naylor, 2020). As noted by the United Nations, ‘the spread of information and communications technology and global interconnectedness [is necessary] to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies’ (United Nations, 2015, p. 5). Unfortunately, although the pandemic forced many teachers to use technological tools in secondary schools during the lockdown, it had little effect on how young people used them (Bozavli, 2021).

Technology

One of the main goals when using OCPs is to construct an online community, so a minimum of technology is required. The lockdown revealed that many families in Italy and other countries lacked digital devices or Internet connections, and secondary schools were often unable to reach or help their students due to a lack of experience or expertise (Duraku & Hoxha, 2021; Di Pietro et al., 2020; Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). Governments worldwide, have promised to invest in digital devices and training (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Giovannella et al., 2020; Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). The following quote shows the author’s experience on the matter.

‘Digital devices and the Internet can cause problems. It was worse before the pandemic, but our governments have since invested considerably in digital technology and the Internet. Now, using digital
technological integration in our lessons is so much easier. Unfortunately, we only have one lab. An alternative would be for students to use their mobile phones or bring in their computers. But we live in an area with many underprivileged families whose situations have worsened due to the pandemic. Many families had to borrow devices from school and ask for financial support for Internet connections during the lockdown. Therefore, I do not ask them to use their own devices, and I take them to the IT lab to work on OCPs. Luckily for me, few teachers use the lab, especially since lockdown (Author).

Current education systems push teachers to use communication tools in their curricula (Estrada-Muñoz et al., 2021). During the lockdown, conference software became normal but left teachers feeling technology-related anxiety and fatigue, and some of them rejected technological tools entirely (Estrada-Muñoz et al., 2021). Before the pandemic, research showed that teachers rejected OCPs because schools lacked digital resources, particularly those in disadvantaged contexts (Akdemir, 2017; Camilleri, 2016; Gouseti, 2014). Even when schools are equipped with modern technology such as digital devices, interactive whiteboards and a fast Internet connection, technical support can still be an issue. Teachers fear wasting time when digital tools do not work or when the Internet connection is slow (Maduabuchi, 2016; Maftoon & Shahini, 2012). Additionally, some teachers have difficulty keeping control of their classes because they become over-excited about the collaborative activities because they are not used to them (Maduabuchi, 2016).

Some scholars believe that teachers are ready for change and that blended learning is already considered the ‘new normal’ (Cahapay, 2020). However, Mahaye (2020) rightly pointed out that although blended learning helped lessen the impact of the lockdown, many students were penalised because of a lack of amenities, especially in disadvantaged areas such as rural schools in South Africa. Moreover, the pandemic revealed that teachers were not trained in digital didactics (Burden & Naylor, 2020). Inexperienced teachers often focus on the tools and not the students’ needs. Future curricula need to include digital tools and competent teachers in learner-centred instruction to meet the 2030 agenda and provide quality education for all (Giovannella et al., 2020; United Nations, 2015). Pedagogical decisions need to place the students’ realities and requirements at the learning centre. Still, to make these decisions, teachers need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the tools available to them (Harris & Hofer, 2009).

**CONCLUSION**

In answer to the main research question, the results of this study indicate that OCPs could be a valuable support to the post-pandemic EFL curricula, but there are some drawbacks. As far as the advantages are concerned, their learner-centred properties and authenticity provide the flexibility and potential to cater to diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. This factor motivates students to learn EFL and raises their confidence and self-esteem. Secondly, OCPs could offer a cost-effective means for teachers to learn new digital tools and their didactical uses. Finally, OCPs can provide teachers with the means to experiment with learner-centred approaches required for current language curricula.

On the other hand, teachers might choose not to use OCPs because they lack time to learn new approaches or technology. Also, this study found that there is some confusion regarding assessment. Grading students’ progress is essential in secondary school EFL curricula, and this study discovered little practical scholarship on the matter. Post-pandemic EFL curricula require learner-centred teaching approaches that fit students’ interests and social and cultural contexts. Investment is required in state schools in the form
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of digital tools and qualified technical support that is on hand to aid teachers and keep digital devices up to date and working in the best possible way. Moreover, the practical and active qualities of OCPs could help teachers’ professional development by integrating sociocultural learner-centred activities in their lessons. They also introduce teachers to innovative ways of using technical tools designed by other secondary school teachers dedicated to improving their practice and their students’ potential in a demanding and competitive future.

The results of this study have raised important implications for EFL teachers and research practitioners who seek to improve their practice. The findings show that the learner-centred qualities of OCPs could make them valuable additions to the post-pandemic EFL curriculum in secondary school contexts. The most important outcome is their potential to help teachers develop professionally through innovative methods and tools. Another significant finding was that the supportive atmosphere created by the learner-centred OCP activities motivated students and allowed them to work at their own pace and on activities that they found relevant and exciting. These factors helped students to become more independent in their learning. Nevertheless, many teachers lack time to learn how to use new approaches or digital tools, and assessment is particularly problematic. Furthermore, this study has found that schools’ lack of technical resources is a problem for teachers in secondary schools in Italy and other countries. These results have implications for EFL curricula in Italy and other countries with similar contexts in secondary schools.

Analytical autoethnography was a practical paradigm for this study. It holds the position that ‘insider’ perspectives of experiencing OCPs and teaching EFL in state secondary schools have benefited the study. However, it also recognises that there is a danger that values and beliefs might have influenced results. Therefore, awareness of personal theoretical perspectives and careful reflection were critical to avoid bias. This concern justified extensive research into theory and scholarship regarding post-pandemic EFL curricula, the field of OCPs and relevant approaches. It has also highlighted an urgent need for further study in assessing EFL skills in learner-centred curricula and the situation of current state secondary school exams in Italy and other countries. Finally, this study suggests that teacher training programmes provide EFL teachers with a sound knowledge of the CEFR and pedagogical theory in EFL acquisition. OCPs are a relatively new phenomenon, but this study has highlighted their potential and limitations for the post-pandemic EFL classroom and suggests they are included in teacher-training courses.

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**ADDITIONAL READING**


**KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Asynchronous Communication:** Any means of communication that does not happen in real-time. For example, texting, chatting, email, letters, and others. There is a time-lapse between when the contributor sends the message and when the receiver responds.

**Community of Practice:** A group of people with different social and cultural backgrounds linked together through a common goal or practice. Each individual brings unique experiences and skills to the rest of the community. Theoretically, the community communicates and collaborates to solve problems and create new skills and understandings.

**Intrinsic Motivation:** This term is used to describe motivation derived from personal gratification.

**Learner-Centred:** A constructivist approach to teaching whereby students are actively involved in the learning process. The teacher’s role is that of a guide, not the knowledge source.

**Online Community Projects (OCPs):** This is the name the researcher has given to projects in educational environments with at least two schools in different locations. They use the Internet and technological devices to communicate and a website as home to the project and community.

**Project-Based Learning (PBL):** A teaching method where students learn and develop skills through projects that focus on authentic and motivating topics. Learners collaborate and research the matter in order to construct an end product.

**Social Constructivism:** A pedagogical theory that regards learning as social interaction, negotiation, and evaluation processes. For this reason, social constructivist lessons are learner-centred, with the teacher acting as a facilitator rather than an instructor. Skills and understanding take precedence over content and memory.

**Synchronous Communication:** Communication that occurs in real-time. Synchronous interaction is usually face-to-face, by telephone or by online conference tools.

**Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT):** A learner-centred approach where teachers create interactive and communicative tasks for their students to complete in groups or pairs. The key to this approach is that learners must speak and communicate to complete the task at hand.

**Teacher-Led:** This approach is where the teacher is the centre of the students’ attention, feeds the lesson content and controls feedback.