

# Web Videoconferencing, a Tool to Motivate Primary School Children Learning a Foreign Language

## Two Case Studies

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**Abstract** This paper first provides a brief survey of the main aspects to take into account in order to design and carry out an effective collaborative learning experience with a class in another country, integrating the lesson with web Videoconferencing. Secondly, it presents two case studies of telecollaboration projects in which Italian primary school pupils share common tasks with peers in the United Kingdom through Skype sessions. Finally, it analyses the motivational impact on the Italian pupils due to the emotional involvement experienced through such an innovative learning programme. All the information provided in this paper is based on data collected through the researcher's observation of the Italian pupils and lessons, focus group discussions with the pupils, administration of a semi-structured questionnaire to the two Italian teachers involved and other self-report tools (pupils and teachers).

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## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss some communicative opportunities currently offered by Information and Communication Technologies and their implications for language teaching and learning. In particular, we examine the use of web videoconferencing and its motivational impact on primary school learners of a foreign language (from now on FL).

Primary teachers often express their difficulty in promoting a real communicative approach with pupils sharing their own mother tongue. The lack of an authentic communicative context and the necessity to find artificial ways of promoting spoken language and interaction has, of course, serious implications in terms of motivation. Today's technologies offer language teachers many instruments to provide their learners with opportunities for real communicational exchanges. The purpose of this study is to observe if

motivation in oral interaction is raised when talking to a native speaker of the target language through Information and Communication Technology.

## 2 Web videoconferencing in foreign language education

Web videoconferencing (via Skype or other web applications) allows for communication with real people in real time and the language teacher who integrates it into his/her practice can engage students in learning experiences where they can feel strongly motivated to communicate. The two-way video and audio transmission faculty makes it possible to arrange a collaborative project in which pupils work at a distance with peers in a different country, sharing information and tasks on a specific topic, thus providing a meaningful context for learning to take place.

For such a project to be effective, the two partner teachers need to plan and organize all the children's activities with great care and to ensure that the videoconference sessions run smoothly. Experiences of this kind require that a fully-fledged **teaching collaboration project** be designed, where organisational, technological, and educational aspects are taken into account. To design and implement an effective collaborative learning experience with a class in another country integrating videoconferencing, the main features to consider are: the search for a reliable partner teacher, the availability of the necessary technological equipment, the choice of an interesting topic for the pupils, the setting of clear educational goals and language learning objectives, the definition of a suitable timetable and the design of task-based activities capable of eliciting long verbal exchanges.

## 3 Technologies, motivation and emotions

It is now a commonplace to say that motivation, engagement and interest are enhanced by technology and that the youth of today enjoy learning through it more than in the traditional way, that is through lectures and textbooks. Many researchers and practitioners seem to be more cautious in this regard, asserting that technology in and of itself does not increase motivation and that the real critical factor is the way the teacher uses it to organize the learning experience (Jonassen, Howland, Marra, Crismond 2008, p. 10). It is not our intention to enter into this debate here, and our point is simply to investigate if a particular technological application, that is web videoconferencing, can effectively be used by teachers to provide an authentic communicative context that makes language learning more meaningful and emotionally involving for their students.

Motivation is a key issue in foreign language learning (from now on FLL) since, as Dörnyei points out, it determines «the rate and success of foreign

language attainment: it provides the primary impetus to initiate the foreign language and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process» (1998, p. 203).

With primary school children, motivation to learn a FL is generally not the result of a deliberate choice. If we consider Balboni's idea to apply to language learning the marketing model that ascribes all human behaviours to three main forces (duty, pleasure and need) (2006, p. 38), in any primary class we can find a few pupils who will learn English out of a sense of duty, a few who may be intrinsically motivated because they like the school subject and enjoy studying it, but in all probability we will not find anyone who feels the **need** to learn it. According to Balboni, for stable acquisition to take place, both with adults and children, the language teacher should promote **pleasure**, not just in the limited sense of promoting pleasant feelings, but also as a gratification of a desire for participation, as the pleasure of experiencing new things, etc. (for a more complete description see Caon 2006).

We agree that, to motivate pupils in the formal context of primary school, it is important to focus on pleasure and enjoyment, with particular reference to the pleasure children experience when they can relate and socialize with their peers. Sociability is, in fact, a strong, natural psychological component common to all children and peer interaction strongly contributes to identity and self-esteem formation (Shaffer 2009). At this age, social emotions play an extremely important role in children's lives and the teacher in charge of the FL lessons should take advantage of tools that can motivate children providing emotionally and socially engaging learning experiences.

The current tendency in motivational psychology is prevalingly cognitively-oriented. As Dörnyei (2001, p. 11) points out:

Cognitive approaches place the focus on the individual's thoughts, beliefs, and interpretational processes that are transformed into action. At the same time, no researcher would question the fact that emotional experiences (e.g. anger, pride, gratitude, shame or anxiety) play a very important role in shaping human behaviour.

Recently, there has been a growing base of literature dealing with the role of emotions and affect in motivation in general and in motivation to learn. On the contrary, as indicated by MacIntyre, emotion has not been given sufficient attention in language learning motivation literature, with the exception of studies about language anxiety (2002, p. 45).

An important attempt to give scientific validity to theories on the motivational impact of emotion has been made by Schumann (1997) who described the neurobiology of affect applied to the second language learning experience. In his *Stimulus Appraisal Theory*, he argues that when a person receives environmental stimuli s/he evaluates them with his/her brain, but

this leads subsequently to an emotional appraisal and only after this assessment the behavioural response takes place.

In his work MacIntyre suggests that emotions might be «the fundamental basis of motivation» (2002, p. 63) also in the language learning domain, given their pervasiveness, their capacity to energize behaviour and their flexibility over time. He claims (p. 54) that what distinguishes language learning motivation from motivation to learn other subjects is:

the emphasis on culture, psychology identification with a specific cultural group, and changes in identity.

This means that both the brain and the ‘heart’ of a human being are involved in the learning of a FL and that social emotions play a vital role in the process. MacIntyre’s observations are consistent with the social-psychological approach and the definition of ‘integrative motive’ proposed by Robert Gardner, the founder of the second language motivation field. He defined the latter as a «motivation to learn a second language because of positive feelings toward the community that speaks that language» (1985, pp. 82-83) and opposed it to ‘instrumental’ orientation, that is a utilitarian view of the FL, whose proficiency may lead to pragmatic gains, such as getting a good job or a higher salary. Applying his model and collecting data through his famous Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), Gardner demonstrated that a student who has positive attitudes toward an L2 and appreciates the target language community tends to have higher achievements than a student who does not (MacIntyre 2002, p. 54). MacIntyre fully recognizes the validity of Gardner’s findings, but claims that «a more explicit focus on emotion must be worked out» (p. 54), because attitudes are strongly influenced by emotions and viceversa (p. 63):

the attitudes toward language leaning tapped by Gardner’s AMBT and represented in the socio-educational model have strong reciprocal links to emotion. Indeed, items such as «I love learning French», «I find the study of French very boring», «I really like learning French», and others tap directly into emotional reactions.

MacIntyre draws, as a logical conclusion, that «attitudes alone are not likely to be sufficient to support motivation» and he proposes that «the difference between the engaged and unengaged learner [...] lies in the emotions experienced during language learning» (p. 63).

Our main interest in this study is exactly the motivational impact of the emotions felt by children in a specific learning context, that is the classroom setting, due to the provision by the teacher of an emotionally involving experience. The theoretical model we have chosen to adopt in

this study is Poggi and Bergagnin's (2008, p. 22). Although this model does not refer specifically to FL learning, it is relevant to our research as it applies to classroom environments and takes into account the impact of teachers' strategies on pupils' emotional responses and behaviours. This model includes the following variables:

- **intrinsic motivation:** the student is emotionally involved because s/he enjoys the subject;
- **emotion from the process:** the student learns a subject because the teacher provides learning experiences that are emotionally engaging;
- **emotion for the teacher:** this is also called 'emotional transfer' and the student is driven to study a subject by the positive emotions s/he feels for the teacher (affection, admiration, occasionally love, etc.);
- **emotion of the teacher:** this is also called 'emotional contagion' and the student develops a positive attitude to the subject as s/he perceives the teacher's passion for the subject.

In our research, we focused our attention on two of these variables: **emotion from the process** and **emotion of the teacher**.

## 4 The Research

What follows is a qualitative research based on two case studies of telecollaboration projects in which primary school pupils in Italy shared common tasks with peers in the United Kingdom through Skype sessions. It is a classroom-based investigation carried out over a three-month period in the spring of 2011, with the aim of obtaining data on motivational behaviours and attitudes from two Italian primary classrooms of English as a foreign language learners.

### 4.1 Two case studies

The two case studies were based in Bassano del Grappa (northern Italy) and in Castelfidardo (central Italy), where a similar telecollaboration project using Skype was organized in partnership with two teachers in the UK (respectively based in Northwich and in Dover).

Only three features differentiated the two experiences:

1. **the language of interaction:** whereas in the Bassano/Northwich project the pupils talked through Skype alternately in English and in Italian, since the Northwich children were learners of Italian (bilingual exchange), in the Castelfidardo/Dover project the pupils talked through

Skype in English only, since the Dover children were not learners of Italian (monolingual exchange);

- b. **the exchange modality**: whereas in the Bassano/Northwich project one Italian child talked through Skype to one English child (one-to-one modality), in the Castelfidardo/Dover project a group of four/five Italian children talked to one English pupil (many-to one modality);
- c. **the topic**: whereas in the Bassano/Northwich project the children were asked to compare the different types of food served in Italian and English school canteens, in the Castelfidardo/Dover project the children were asked to compare Italian and English children's favourite freetime activities.

The teaching strategies adopted by the two Italian teachers were very similar: the children were asked to work together on the selected topic, sharing information and tasks and collecting data from the pupils in the UK through a class survey during the Skype sessions. Offline, after the sessions, both Italian classes were asked to make bar charts using Excel software, to compare Italian and English habits concerning, as already mentioned, food served in the school canteens or freetime activities.

#### 4.2 Method

The study we have carried out belongs to the interpretative tradition of educational research. Our principal hypothesis is that the possibility of carrying out authentic communication with other peers through videoconferencing sessions might have a positive motivational impact on FLL, since, through it, learners are given the opportunity to live a genuine emotionally involving social experience.

Motivation is a highly complex concept, because of the extensive number of potential factors driving it and because of the fact that these factors are often intertwined. The complexity is such that Dörnyei raises the question of its **researchability** (2001, p. 183). He claims that anyone wishing to pursue research on motivation must make initial decisions about the specific aspects of motivation s/he will focus on, about the research method he will employ and about the research instruments s/he will use (p. 186).

The specific aspects we focus on in this study are whether motivation to learn and use the FL in primary school is enhanced (1) by the emotions produced by a social experience with peers through videoconferencing sessions (Variable: *Emotion from the process*) and (2) by the influence of the teacher's 'contagious' attitude (Variable: *Emotion of the teacher*). Our specific target behavioural domains are the pupils' degree of **participation** and degree of **attention** and, concurrently, we try to investigate whether the children perceived the teacher's 'contagious' commitment to the project.

The research method adopted is qualitative and the main purpose was to collect enough data to draw inferences about the behaviours and the perceptions of the two groups of Italian children involved in the two case studies.

The instruments used to collect data were many (see below) and three different perspectives were adopted: the teacher's, the pupils' and the researcher's accounts.

#### 4.3 Participants

Thirty-six Italian primary school children aged 9-11 (18 males, 18 females) took part in the research project. A background survey supplied by the two teachers and the information gathered by the researcher through pre-project focus group discussions revealed that all the children had a good degree of familiarity with technology. More than half of them already possessed a personal mobile phone, 94% of them had access to a pc connected to the Internet at home, 92% knew what an e-mail is (6 children had their own e-mail address) and 67% knew about Skype. One of the children even referred having a personal Facebook account, in spite of the social network's age restriction (no less than 13).

The great majority of the children expressed a positive attitude to learning English that often revealed an instrumental orientation presumably deriving from their parents' (see Gardner, Lambert 1972, p. 128).

#### 4.4 Research questions

Four research questions guided this study, examining children's attitude and perceptions about learning a FL in a new learning context that promoted emotionally involving interactions with peers through Information and Communication Technology (from now on ICT). Three of these questions aimed specifically at investigating if the new learning context actually generated positive emotions and at analysing the impact on FLL motivation (Variable: *Emotion from the process*), while the last question aimed at testing the children's perception of the two teachers' commitment to the project (Variable: *Emotion of the teacher*).

Here are the four main research questions:

1. Did the children feel emotionally involved in the experience?
- b. Was the children's degree of **participation** heightened by the experience?
- c. Was the children's degree of **attention** enhanced by the experience?
- d. Were the children aware of their teachers' commitment to the project?

In this study with the term ‘participation’ we mean the active involvement of the children in the lesson, their willingness to take part in the activity proposed by the teacher, their commitment in carrying out a task in class and in making their homework. With the term ‘attention’ we mean the children’s willingness to listen to teachers’ instructions and to focus on the activities and tasks proposed and on the language used.

#### 4.5 Instruments

In considerations of the research questions, different introspective instruments have been chosen to collect relevant data. These tools aimed at eliciting both the teachers’ accounts of what they had observed and the pupils’ accounts of the feelings and perceptions they had experienced during the projects. Some instruments were used in both case studies, whilst others were not, due to the teachers’ different possibilities to adopt self-report tools:

- Pupils’ accounts:
  - a. **Pre-project and post-project focus group discussions:** before the beginning of the project, groups of 4/5 children discussed their expectations; at the end of the project groups of 4/5 children talked about the motivational impact on them of the experience. All the focus group discussions were videotaped by the researcher. This instrument was adopted to collect data on all the research questions.
  - b. **The ‘box of thoughts’:** the Bassano pupils had at their disposal a coloured box prepared by their teacher, where they could insert notes about their expectations and feelings before and during the project. This instrument provided data on the individual and social emotions experienced by the children (research question nr. 1);
  - c. **Post-project compositions:** at the end of the project, the Bassano teacher asked her pupils to write a composition about their impressions concerning the learning experience. This instrument proved to be very effective in collecting information for all the research questions.
- Teachers’ account:
  - d. **Diary:** the Castelfidardo teacher kept a first person-account of the teaching process, documenting psychological and introspective aspects experienced. Through this tool, data emerged about the teacher’s commitment and enthusiasm for the project (research question nr. 4) and about the pupils’ emotional involvement (research question nr. 1).
  - e. **Field notes:** both teachers kept a record of the pupils’ reactions and



- statements spontaneously emerging during the lessons. This instrument provided useful information about the children's emotional state (research question nr. 1);
- f. **Post-project questionnaire:** at the end of the projects, both teachers answered a written questionnaire with open-ended questions. This tool provided precious data for all the research questions.
- Researcher's account:
    - g. **Field notes:** a record of the researcher's observations of the pupils' reactions and of the statements spontaneously produced during the Skype connections with the English children was kept; field notes were also kept during a lesson in which the children watched some videorecordings of the Skype sessions and their spoken reactions were written down.

#### 4.6 Procedures

The videorecordings of the focus groups were watched and partially transcribed. All the transcriptions were analysed using Content Analysis procedures to identify pupils' beliefs and perceptions relevant to the research questions. The transcription of the post-project focus groups were also processed through an online text analysis tool to perform a frequency survey of the words used by the children to describe their emotional involvement.

All the other research tools were analyzed using Content Analysis procedures to identify significant events and recurring patterns to be interpreted and discussed when relevant to our research questions. Children's and teachers' quotations have been used to illustrate the results of the research investigations. The results, described in the next section, refer only to the Italian pupils.

### 5 Results

The data collected indicate that the learning experience produced a strong emotional involvement of the children, that the level of motivation was higher than in the traditional lessons both in terms of **participation** and of **attention** and that the children clearly perceived the strong commitment and enthusiasm of their teachers.

## 5.1 The emotional involvement

**Did children feel emotionally involved in the experience?** Overall, data collected through some of the research instruments proved that the learning experience produced a strong, positive impact on the children.

To understand the nature of the children's emotional involvement we adopted Poggi and Bergagnin's distinctions (2008, p. 25) between **individual emotions** (joy, excitement, fear, anxiety, etc.), **cognitive emotions** (interest, curiosity, surprise, etc.) and **social emotions** (liking, fondness, affection, etc.). Using Content Analysis procedures, we found that the emotions expressed by the children and observed by the teachers could be categorized into these three distinctions. To quantify the different weight of these three categories of emotional responses, we processed the transcription of the pupils' post-project focus group discussions through an online text analysis tool ([www.lex Tutor.ca](http://www.lex Tutor.ca)). The original transcription (made up of all the children's contributions) was composed of a total of 1.826 words. Only 946 of these were **content words** (nouns, adjectives, main verbs) that carried the meaning of the sentences, while the residual 880 were 'empty', **functional words** (articles, prepositions, pronouns and auxiliary verbs). We processed only the former (content words) and the result was a frequency list of words that we have analysed to detect the ones that referred to emotional involvement. In Table 1 we sum up the general results obtained:

Table 1. Number of words connected to emotional states in post-project focus group transcriptions.

Type of emotion	Number of content words used	Percentage of the transcription composed of 946 content words
Individual emotions	101	11%
Cognitive emotions	32	3%
Social emotions	123	13 %
Total content words used to express emotional states	256	27%

As reported in Table 1 above, in the post-project focus group discussions the children used 101 content words to express individual emotions, 32 content words to express cognitive emotions and 123 content words to express social emotions, for a total of 256 that compose the 27% of the total amount of content words used (946). This may be considered a general indicator of the high emotional impact of the projects. In the next sections we give a more detailed description of the three categories of emotions.

### 5.1.1 Individual emotions

With reference to the first category (**individual emotions**), both before and during the project the pupils described their participation in the video-conferencing sessions profusely, emphasizing their emotional involvement.

Table 2. Frequency of content words connected to individual emotions in post-project focus group transcriptions.

Type of emotion	Frequency of content words used	Percentage of the transcription composed of 946 content words
Individual emotions (positive)	84	9%
Individual emotions (negative)	17	2%
Total content words used to express individual emotions	101	11%

The following are some of the children's quotations concerning their individual emotions:

RADA I was very excited, I felt enthusiasm and when I held the microphone I was a little worried to say a wrong word... but in these moments you feel fear and courage at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

GRETA I felt happiness, joy... I was very happy. I also felt a little shy, but after a while it was over.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.1.2 Cognitive emotions

Our second category (**cognitive emotions**) was the least present in the pupils' comments and only a few children expressed their positive feelings of interest or curiosity or negative feelings of difficulty or boredom.

1 Our translation. Original: «Ero emozionatissima, sentivo entusiasmo e quando ho avuto il microfono in mano avevo anche un po' di paura che uscisse la parola sbagliata... però hai paura e coraggio insieme».

2 Our translation. Original: «Ho provato felicità, gioia... ero contentissima, anch'io mi vergognavo un po', ma poi mi è passata».

Table 3. Frequency of content words connected to cognitive emotions in post-project focus group transcriptions.

<b>Type of emotion</b>	<b>Frequency of content words used</b>	<b>Percentage of the transcription composed of 946 content words</b>
Cognitive emotions (positive)	28	3%
Cognitive emotions (negative)	4	0%
Total content words used to express cognitive emotions	32	3%

The following are some of the children's quotations concerning their cognitive emotions:

ALBERTO Yes, I liked it. It was very interesting.<sup>3</sup>

GRETA It was also a little difficult and sometimes we had to ask the teacher for a hand.<sup>4</sup>

### 5.1.3 Social emotions

As we had expected, our third category ('social emotions') was the prevalent one.

Table 4. Frequency of content words connected to social emotions in post-project focus group transcriptions.

<b>Type of emotion</b>	<b>Frequency of content words used</b>	<b>Percentage of the transcription composed of 946 content words</b>
Social emotions (positive)	111	12%
Social emotions (negative)	12	1%
Total content words used to express social emotions	123	13%

The teachers' accounts, the Bassano 'box of thoughts' notes and the pre-

3 Our translation. Original: «Sì, mi è piaciuto, interessante».

4 Our translation. Original: «È stato anche un po' difficile e a volte abbiamo dovuto chiedere delle cose alla maestra».

project focus groups revealed that before the outset of the project all the children of both the Italian classes expressed great expectations about the possibility of making friends with the English children. Here are some of the most representative answers they provided in the pre-project focus groups, when asked about the exchange they would soon take part in:

FEDERICA I feel enthusiasm and emotion when I think I will meet and know the English children.<sup>5</sup>

FILIPPO If we make friends with the English children, we can visit them in England.<sup>6</sup>

In some cases, the idea of talking with the English children made them immediately aware of the possibility to practice the FL:

GIULIO CIRO I feel excited... Skype is the best, because we can meet new children and speak English.<sup>7</sup>

LUISA It's nice, because speaking with the English children makes you grow a little... the words you say will fix in your mind.<sup>8</sup>

During the project, both the Italian teachers pointed out in their accounts the pupils' remarkable excitement, also observing that many of the children showed their desire to improve their FL competence **in order to** be able to make new friends:

CASTELFIDARDO TEACHER The children have pointed out on different occasions that the English children could speak faster than them and knew many more words. But what my pupils put first were not the considerations about the possibility to practice the foreign language, but to 'make new friends' and the English language was a tool to obtain this.<sup>9</sup>

5 Our translation. Original: «Sento entusiasmo e emozione per conoscere e vedere i bambini inglesi».

6 Our translation. Original: «Se facciamo dei nuovi amici li possiamo andare a incontrare in Inghilterra».

7 Our translation. Original: «Sono emozionato... Con Skype è la cosa migliore, perché conosciamo nuovi bambini e parliamo l'inglese».

8 Our translation. Original: «È una bella cosa, perché parlando con i bambini inglesi un po' ti sviluppa... te le tieni in testa alcune parole».

9 Our translation. Original: «I bambini in varie occasioni hanno fatto notare che i bambini inglesi parlavano molto più velocemente di loro e conoscevano molte più parole. Ma più che fare considerazioni sull'apprendimento della lingua straniera i miei alunni hanno sempre

Data from the focus group discussions held the day after the first Skype connection (in which the children of the two countries simply introduced themselves to one another) indicate that almost all the Italian children could recall the name of the English child s/he had talked to for a very short amount of time and expressed their desire to get to know that particular child better.

It is worth noting that the experience of speaking to their foreign peers prompted a few children to make comments about the use of the language and the most commonly cited positive effect was a sense of ‘freedom’:

RADA I liked it so much... much better than in classroom with the teacher... we can express ourselves more with these children. I felt like I could speak English just like Italian, all I have studied came to my mind...<sup>10</sup>

GRETA It was also a little difficult... but you felt more free, words came to your mind.<sup>11</sup>

VIRGINIA I enjoyed it... especially when we started to ask questions that were not planned... different questions to know them better.<sup>12</sup>

Virginia, in the last excerpt above, was referring to an interesting event that happened during the second Skype session of the Bassano/Northwich project. The Bassano class was filling in a grid to collect data about the types of food served in the English school canteen, when, unexpectedly, the Bassano teacher had to leave the room. After a few moments of uncertainty, a group of children started to take the matters into their hands and shifted the conversation with the English children to personal issues, asking questions on preferences about music, sports, animals, etc. As clearly expressed by Rada in the following excerpt, the intention was to get to know the English children more deeply on a personal basis and see whether they shared common interests:

RADA It came instinctively to me to ask them things like «What’s your

evidenziato il fatto di ‘conoscere altri amici’ e come saper parlare l’inglese li avrebbe potuti aiutare in questo».

10 Our translation. Original: «Mi è piaciuto tanto... non come in classe con la maestra... possiamo esprimerci di più con questi bambini. A me sembrava di parlare come se parlassi italiano, mi veniva in mente tutto quello che ho studiato...».

11 Our translation. Original: «È stato anche un po’ difficile... però è stato più libero, ti venivano delle parole».

12 Our translation. Original: «Mi è piaciuto... soprattutto quando abbiamo fatto le domande oltre quelle base... domande diverse per conoscerli meglio».

favourite singer?». It came naturally, because when you look at and listen to a person, you feel so much like knowing her that you could start speaking any language!

It would be nice to do it many times with the same children because, even if you speak to them through a screen, the urge to know them is so strong... you don't know them but you feel that you want to find out things about them. When I asked them what was their favourite singer it came naturally, it was like saying «Do you like the same things I like?». <sup>13</sup>

This experience of authentic autonomous exchange made other children reflect on the new speaking context:

VIRGINIA It was different because I spoke much more English than usual... It was not like now [in the traditional lesson] that the teacher asks you a question... it was your turn to decide which questions to ask... you decided. <sup>14</sup>

ELISABETTA The happiness I felt was 'a million' and I honestly enjoyed more speaking English through Skype because I felt at ease and it was nicer and more exciting. <sup>15</sup>

Some children made some interesting comments on this special learning context where social relations were the driving force:

LUISA For me [speaking in English] was different because, for example, when at home for homework you must write «Do you like swimming?» and you have to answer to it by yourself... it is nothing special. On the contrary, when somebody makes you the same question, you answer because you are interested, so it is nicer. <sup>16</sup>

13 Our translation. Original: «Mi veniva spontaneo chiedere loro cose del tipo 'qual è il tuo cantante preferito?'. Mi è venuto normalmente, perché quando tu guardi e senti una persona hai così voglia di conoscerla che potresti parlare anche in tutte le lingue! Sarebbe bello farlo tante volte con gli stessi bambini perché anche se li vediamo su uno schermo la voglia di conoscerli è tanta... tu non li conosci ma senti che qualcosa in loro la vorresti scoprire. Quando gli ho chiesto qual era il loro cantante preferito mi è venuto spontaneo, come per dirgli 'ma tu hai i miei stessi gusti?'».

14 Our translation. Original: «È stato diverso perché ho parlato più in inglese... non era come qui [nella lezione tradizionale] che la maestra ti fa una domanda... eri tu che facevi delle domande a scelta... eri tu che decidevi».

15 Our translation. Original: «La felicità che provavo era un milione e sinceramente mi piaceva di più parlare inglese attraverso Skype perché mi sentivo a mio agio e era più bello e emozionante».

16 Our translation. Original: «Per me [parlare in inglese] è stato diverso perché tu, per

## 5.1.4 Positive and negative emotions

The figures indicated in Tables 2, 3 and 4, the children's assertions and the teachers' observations reported above show that positive emotions were definitely prevalent, but in some cases also negative emotional responses emerged (e.g., fear of facing a new experience in the individual emotions category, anxiety about difficult tasks in the cognitive emotions category and embarrassment when speaking to the English children in the social emotions category). Summing up data retrieved through the frequency survey of the post-project focus group transcription, we find a confirmation of the prevalence of positive emotions:

Table 5. Frequency of content words used to express positive or negative emotional states in post-project focus group discussions.

Type of emotion expressed	Number of content words used
Positive emotions (individual, cognitive and social)	223 (87%)
Negative emotions (individual, cognitive and social)	33 (13%)
Total content words used to express emotions	256 (100%)

As mentioned in section 3, MacIntyre asserts that the only emotion that has been studied in depth in the language learning domain is **anxiety**. This type of negative emotional response usually «creates disruption in cognitive activity» (2002, p. 65), may cause imperfect language performance and affects motivation. He also explains that anxiety may have both **social** and **personal effects**. The most negative social effect of language anxiety is «a reluctance to communicate» (p. 66). Personal effects are due to the fact that a low FL competence does not allow for expressing «sophisticated thoughts and emotions» (p. 67). In the pre-project focus groups many children expressed a sense of anxiety prior to the first Skype connection. Afterwards, however, only one child ended up not taking part in the project, so **social effects**, in our case, were very limited. With regard to **personal effects**, data collected by the researcher comparing the two case studies corroborates MacIntyre's conclusions. The degree of general anxiety was definitely higher in the Castelfidardo project, since the monolingual (English) exchange made the Italian children feel lacking in their ability to express themselves. A revealing event in this sense was that these pupils proposed to organize a lesson of Italian and to sing

esempio, sul quaderno per i compiti per casa devi scrivere "Do you like swimming?" e ti devi rispondere da solo... non è un granché. Invece quando te lo chiede qualcuno, lo fai anche per interesse personale, quindi è più bello».



the Italian national anthem for the English children in one of the final Skype sessions.

CASTELFIDARDO TEACHER This Skype session registered a particularly high degree of participation on an emotional level. The children immediately reacted with great enthusiasm, both because they could display their singing skills, and because they saw themselves as protagonists on this occasion. They felt that they were ‘exporters’ of their national culture and not simply the receivers of the culture of somebody else.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, we would like to quote an interesting observation made by the Castelfidardo teacher about the possibility to interpret ‘negative’ emotions in a different way in this particular learning context:

CASTELFIDARDO TEACHER The children have reported a wide range of positive emotions, such as joy, enthusiasm... but also emotions usually considered negative, such as anxiety and sadness. In our case also these emotions should be considered as positive, since they were indicators of their interest for an approaching or postponed activity. For sure, this experience didn’t simply ‘brush’ my pupils but ‘overwhelmed’ them in a positive sense.<sup>18</sup>

## 5.2 The degree of participation

**Was the children’s degree of participation heightened by the experience?** Overall, data collected indicated that children manifested a higher degree of participation than in the traditional lessons. This was especially true for the activities proposed at school, while the project had a lower impact on children’s commitment in carrying out a task at home.

Data that helped us draw these conclusions came from the children’s accounts (especially focus group discussions and post-project compositions)

17 Our translation. Original: «Questa sessione di videoconferenza ha registrato un alto livello di partecipazione a livello emotivo. I bambini si sono mostrati subito entusiasti, sia perché hanno potuto mostrare le loro abilità canore, ma anche perché si sono sentiti ancora più protagonisti, in quanto ‘esportatori’ della loro cultura nazionale e non solo più riceventi della cultura altrui».

18 Our translation. Original: «I bambini hanno verbalizzato tutta una serie di emozioni positive, quali gioia, entusiasmo ma anche emozioni normalmente ritenute negative, come ansia e tristezza ma, in questo caso, da considerare comunque positivamente in quanto indice di interesse per l’esperienza che si doveva ancora fare o che non si poteva svolgere per una qualche ragione. Di sicuro non è stata un’esperienza che ha unicamente ‘sfiorato’ i bambini ma, piuttosto, li ha ‘travolti’ positivamente».

and from the teachers' accounts (especially field notes and post-project questionnaire). In the post-project focus group discussions, two questions about the children's perception of their degree of participation at school and at home were introduced.

Table 6. Perception of level of participation at school expressed in focus groups.

<b>Pupils</b>	<b>Higher than traditional lesson</b>	<b>Same as traditional lesson</b>
Castelfidardo (tot. 20)	17	3
Bassano (tot. 16)	14	2
Total (36)	31 (86%)	5 (14%)

Table 7. Perception of level of participation at home expressed in focus groups.

<b>Pupils</b>	<b>Higher than usual</b>	<b>Same as usual</b>
Castelfidardo (tot. 20)	12	8
Bassano (tot. 16)	10	6
Total (36)	22 (61%)	14 (39%)

The majority of children replied that this experience helped them to be more engaged both at school and at home, but with different percentages (86% versus 61%). The pupils' comments on participation included the following ones:

GRETA You apply yourself more when you speak to them. When you speak to the teacher you think «It doesn't matter if what I say is wrong...». <sup>19</sup>

ELISABETTA Speaking to the English children I felt more adult, I realized I would apply myself more and I tried to speak in a more adult way. <sup>20</sup>

LETIZIA It was different, also because we didn't realize that to train for the Skype sessions we started to learn English more than usual.

<sup>19</sup> Our translation. Original: «Ti impegni di più parlando con loro. Invece con la maestra pensi 'anche se sbaglio non importa...».

<sup>20</sup> Our translation. Original: «Parlando con i bambini inglesi mi sono sentita un po' più adulta, avevo capito che mi sarei impegnata di più e ho cercato di parlare in modo più adulto».

When I have English for homework, it's the last thing I study because usually we have to write just a few sentences... now on the contrary it's the first subject I study.<sup>21</sup>

Both Italian teachers reported that their pupils immediately expressed a strong interest in the project, displaying a high level of participation. The Bassano teacher indicated that after the first two Skype sessions the pupils autonomously started to propose new topics and questions to address to the English children. This, for her, was a clear sign of the children's participation.

What is interesting is that both teachers indicate also that the level of participation was especially high of children who used to be less active and less involved in the traditional English lessons, either out of shyness or lack of interest in the school subject. Another very interesting aspect is related to the presence in both classes of a disabled child. These two children had the most extraordinary reactions during this learning experience:

CASTELFIDARDO TEACHER Also the disabled child who, usually, follows the lessons and the activities with great difficulty seemed to enjoy the contact with the English children, even if it was limited in her case. After an initial uneasiness due to the novelty of the situation and the high emotivity of the child, she started to enjoy the videoconferencing sessions and to join in, in her particular way. When the project was over, also her attitude to English had changed: from a complete refusal to pronounce any English words she started to try to produce some expressions of greeting with a certain continuity.<sup>22</sup>

### 5.3 The degree of attention

#### **Was the children's degree of attention enhanced by the experience?**

From the data that we have been able to collect and from the analysis that

21 Our translation. Original: «È stato diverso, anche perché preparandoci per la videoconferenza abbiamo iniziato a studiare di più senza rendercene conto. Di solito a casa l'inglese lo faccio per ultimo perché è una materia per cui bisogna fare soltanto qualche frase... invece ora la prendo come prima cosa».

22 Our translation. Original: «Anche la bambina diversamente abile che, di norma, riesce a seguire poco delle lezioni e delle attività proposte, ha mostrato di apprezzare il contatto, anche se per lei limitato, con i bambini di un altro paese. Dopo un primo momento di disagio determinato dalla novità e dall'emotività della bambina, questa ha accolto con piacere le videochiamate e ha iniziato anche ad intervenire, seppure a suo modo. Dopo l'esperienza anche il suo atteggiamento nei confronti dell'inglese è cambiato, in quanto da un totale rifiuto a pronunciare parole in lingua si è passati a tentativi, quasi costanti, di produrre alcune parole di saluto».

we have carried out, we can confidently say that the children's degree of attention was higher than in the traditional lesson.

Data that corroborate the conclusions that we have reached have been drawn from the children's accounts (especially post-project focus group discussions and post-project compositions) and from the teachers' accounts (especially post-project semi-structured questionnaire). In the post-project focus group discussions a specific question about the children's perception of their degree of attention was introduced.

Table 8. Perception of degree of attention expressed in post-project focus groups.

Pupils	Higher than traditional lesson	Same as traditional lesson
Castelfidardo (tot. 20)	16	4
Bassano (tot. 16)	12	4
Total (36)	28 (78%)	8 (22%)

The majority of children (78%) answered to this question that this experience helped them to be more focused. The following is an example of the children's comments:

ANNA It was different, I felt more concentrated and I tried to express what I had to say in the right way.<sup>23</sup>

The analysis of the answers of the teachers in the post-project questionnaires indicates that the attention of the children during the Skype sessions was partly conditioned by the teachers' organizational choices. The Bassano teacher decided to move to the computer lab and this new environment determined some kind of nervous excitement in some children:

BASSANO TEACHER It is difficult to establish [the degree of attention], because in the computer lab the children were restless. What I can definitely say is that the children were completely **immersed** in the communication when they spoke with the English children through Skype.<sup>24</sup>

In the Castelfidardo lessons the teacher also observed in her pupils a

23 Our translation. Original: «È stato diverso, perché mi sono un po' concentrata e cercavo di dire le cose nel modo più giusto».

24 Our translation. Original: «Questo [il livello di attenzione] è difficile da stabilire perché in aula di informatica erano molto agitati. Posso però dire che i bambini che parlavano erano completamente **immersi** nella comunicazione».

greater degree of attention than in the traditional lesson. Nevertheless during the Skype connections the researcher noted that the Castelfidardo teacher's choice of having groups of four Italian children interviewing one English child had negative implications in terms of attention, especially for the rest of the class, since the pace of the exchange was much slower. This aspect also emerged during the focus groups:

LUISA I enjoyed it very much, but sometimes it was boring, especially when you had to wait for the other groups.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5.4 The teachers' emotional contagion

**Were the children aware of their teachers' commitment to the project?** Data collected through focus group discussions and post-project compositions showed that the pupils were definitely aware that the two Italian teachers undertook this innovative learning experience with passion and commitment. Some of the children spontaneously expressed a feeling of gratitude that could be interpreted as an emotional contagion:

RADA [Our teacher] wants us to understand how many things we have been learning and to use more what we have been studying in the last five years, she is so good... when she told us [about the project] she was also so happy to start it.<sup>26</sup>

LETIZIA At the end of the Skype session I asked my classmates to give our teacher a round of applause. If she had continued with the [traditional] lessons, we wouldn't have lived such a beautiful experience... She gave us a special gift.<sup>27</sup>

These findings corroborate conclusions from other researchers that a positive emotional link with the teacher may account for the development of a positive attitude toward the foreign language and foreign language learning (Vilke 1988, p. 118).

25 Our translation. Original: «A me è piaciuto moltissimo, ma c'erano dei momenti in cui ti annoiavi, quando dovevi aspettare gli altri gruppi».

26 Our translation. Original: «[La maestra] ha voglia di farci conoscere quello che noi stiamo studiando, farci interpretare di più quello che abbiamo studiato in cinque anni, è stata brava... quando lei ci ha detto (del progetto) anche lei era contenta di farlo».

27 Our translation. Original: «Alla fine della videoconferenza ho chiesto a tutti di fare un applauso alla maestra. Se lei continuava a fare la lezione [nel modo tradizionale] non avremmo avuto questa esperienza da poter vivere... Ci ha fatto una specie di regalo».

## 6 Discussion

This study indicates that projects based on well-designed videoconferencing exchanges can have important motivational implications for the FL classroom. The provision of an authentic communicative context and of an emotionally involving learning experience produced, in both case studies, positive effects convincingly summarized by the two teachers in the post-project semi-structured questionnaires as follows:

BASSANO TEACHER The level of motivation displayed [by the children] during the videoconference sessions was unique.<sup>28</sup>

CASTELFIDARDO TEACHER Honestly, I didn't expect such reactions and such an enthusiastic appreciation.<sup>29</sup>

They recognized that the authenticity of the context captured the children's attention and highly stimulated their communicative efforts:

BASSANO TEACHER During this experience (the children) have strived to use all the things they had studied. Furthermore, they felt a **real** need to learn new lexicon and new grammar structures.<sup>30</sup>

The high emotional involvement produced by this learning experience had a clear positive impact on the two behavioural domains (participation and attention) we had chosen to investigate as possible indicators of motivation. Also the researcher, who was present during most of the Skype connections, could easily detect evidence of the pupils' involvement in their external behaviour. Their emotional state was tangible: they talked to their English counterparts watching the interactive whiteboard screen with an intense involvement and with glittering eyes. A special event that happened in the Bassano/Northwich Project was testimony to this emotional involvement: after the second Skype connection, a group of pupils autonomously decided to speak to the school's principal and to write a letter to the teacher, requesting that the planning of a journey to the UK to meet their new friends be considered.

28 Our translation. Original: «La motivazione che [i bambini] avevano durante le videocomunicazioni era impareggiabile».

29 Our translation. Original: «In tutta onestà, non mi aspettavo di certo simili reazioni e espressioni di apprezzamento».

30 Our translation. Original: «Durante la sperimentazione [i bambini] hanno cercato di mettere in campo tutto ciò che sapevano. Inoltre hanno avuto un bisogno **reale** di apprendere nuovo lessico e nuove strutture morfosintattiche».

As demonstrated by this event and by many of the children's comments reported above, a few interesting characteristics such as a growing sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-esteem emerged as by-products of the investigation.

As already mentioned, before the outset of the project the majority of the children's displayed an instrumental orientation to study English, conditioned by the parents' positive attitude («it will be useful for my future», «it is useful when you travel abroad», etc.). As demonstrated above (see 5.1 and 5.4), during this special experience most of the pupils developed significantly their own attitude toward English and FLL, thanks to the emotional involvement offered by the learning context (Variable: *Emotion from the process*) and the emotional link with the teacher (Variable: *Emotion of the teacher*). The children, as we have seen, found out that knowing another language could lead to interaction and the development of social relations. The following excerpt from the final questionnaire of the Castelfidardo teacher perfectly captured this feature:

CASTELFIDARDO TEACHER This experience has been too short to claim that there has been an actual development of the communicative competence of my pupils. What has changed, for sure, is their attitude. Now the children have started to understand that learning English is not simply something you must do, but it can be something you may **want** to do, because it allows interaction with other people speaking a different mother tongue.<sup>31</sup>

These findings confirm the importance ascribed by Dörnyei to the 'learning situation level' in his three-level framework of motivation. In the 1990's Dörnyei contributed to the shift of L2 motivation research from the dominant social-psychological approach initially proposed by Gardner to a classroom-centred approach. In his famous article *Ten commandments for motivating language learners* (1998) he suggests a set of motivational macro-strategies for direct application in the FL teaching. Two of these 'commandments' are particularly relevant to our study:

1. **Set a personal example with your behaviour.** Role models in general have been found to be very influential on student motivation [...] and the most prominent model in the classroom is the teacher: student attitudes and orientations towards learning are, to a large extent, modelled

31 Our translation. Original: «L'esperienza è stata troppo breve per ritenere che ci sia stato un effettivo sviluppo della competenza comunicativa dei miei alunni. L'atteggiamento è, di sicuro, cambiato. Ora i bambini hanno cominciato a capire che studiare l'inglese non è solo una cosa che si deve fare, ma che si **vuole** fare, in quanto permette di interagire con altre persone, anche quando queste non parlano la nostra stessa lingua».

after their teachers both in terms of effort expenditure and orientation of interest in the subject [p. 215].

This first strategy clearly concerns the variable *Emotion of the teacher*, whose effects we have tried to investigate in this study. Poggi and Bergagnin (2008), whose theoretical model we have chosen to adopt, present the results of an empirical survey aimed at obtaining data on the teacher's motivational influence (emotional transfer and emotional contagion, see 3). Emotional contagion proved to be the most powerful factor that came into play (p. 36). The students developed a positive attitude to the subject mostly because they perceived the teacher's passion for the subject. Teachers who enjoy teaching their subjects express their state of mind through facial expressions, body language, gesticulations and their positive emotions can be easily transferred to their students (p. 30).

The second commandment indicated by Dörnyei that is relevant to our study is nr. 8:

**8. Personalize the learning process.** This commandment concerns the need that the L2 course should be **personally relevant** to the students. In an earlier set of commandments there was a similar item, «Make the course relevant by doing a needs analysis and adjusting the syllabus accordingly». The current version of the commandment is broader in that it extends relevance to the personal content of tasks as well (e.g. sharing personal information, interpersonal awareness-raising) [1998, p. 217].

The eighth commandment is relevant to our variable *Emotion from the process*, whose effects we have tried to investigate in this study (see above 5.1).

## 7 Conclusion

The results of this study clearly show that the presence of positive emotions in the language learning context has a positive influence on motivation and that web videoconferencing represents a potentially powerful resource in this sense.

Children's engagement increased not only during the online sessions, but also in the offline preparatory lessons. One of the questions in the post-project questionnaire aimed at finding out the two teachers' opinion about this issue and they reported a perception of higher engagement in both situations. For this reason, they claimed they were determined to propose the project again the following year, but with a different schedule:

Bassano teacher I would definitely like to repeat this experience again in



the future, but I would plan the Skype sessions differently, with regular appointments all school year round, for example once a month.<sup>32</sup>

Castelfidardo teacher I would definitely like to repeat this experience again in the future (my pupils have already asked if they can do it again next year) but I would definitely distribute the Skype sessions all school year round, no longer as weekly appointments, but as fortnightly (or monthly) appointments. This would allow the maintenance of the pupils' level of interest and curiosity all school year round.<sup>33</sup>

The teachers' considerations are in line with indications offered by many researchers. Collaborative projects based on technology should, in fact, be integrated into the annual curricular program, rather than be stand-alone activities (O'Dowd 2010, p. 8). Equally interested partner institutions (e.g., an Italian class learning English and an English class learning Italian) could design a whole school year project, alternating exchanges in the two languages on a regular basis. This would allow for the creation of a language community and for a stronger opportunity to motivate the children in the offline phases, since they would know that the language they learn and practise will have a concrete application all the school year round (Favaro 2011, p. 335). This would also be in line with what is suggested in a European Commission report by a group of experts polled about the future use of Information and Communication Technologies in FL teaching:

Although increasing use is being made of ICT for content research and immediate communication needs in foreign languages, at present, not enough attention is being devoted to questions of how the new media can systematically aid language acquisition and learning [2003, p. 5].

Despite the rapid increase of technology use in our daily life, as pointed out by O'Dowd, telecollaboration projects are still «the reserve of highly motivated pioneer teachers» (2010, p. 10). This happens because:

There is [...] a need for greater awareness raising among the foreign language teaching community and a greater focus on training teachers in the pedagogical applications of new technologies rather than on technical aspects [p. 11].

32 Our translation. Original: «Rifarei senz'altro questa esperienza in futuro, ma programerei degli incontri con cadenza regolare durante tutto l'anno (ad es., una volta al mese)».

33 Our translation. Original: «Rifarei di sicuro questa esperienza (i miei alunni già prima di finire questa mi chiedevano per il prossimo anno) ma, di sicuro, la distribuirei durante il corso dell'anno, non a cadenza settimanale ma quindicinale (o mensile) per mantenere l'interesse e la curiosità dei bambini per tutto l'anno scolastico».

Finally, we would like to conclude this study with two quotations. The first, expressed by the Castelfidardo teacher refers to the powerful potentialities of videoconferencing to provide the learners with an authentic communicative experience:

CASTELFIDARDO TEACHER The principal added value of using videoconferencing for language teaching at the primary school level is the opportunity it offers to convert a school subject into something **real and alive**. Otherwise English as a school subject risks becoming something arid and without any contact with the real world of the pupils.<sup>34</sup>

The second quotation is by Earl Stevick, who in 1980 expressed as follows his conviction that affective factors strongly influence the acquisition of a FL:

Success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analysis, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom [1980, p. 4].

In our view, web videoconferencing, extending communication to children with whom the use of the foreign language becomes something **real and alive**, allows affective factors to blossom and spread in the FL classroom.

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34 Our translation. Original: «Il principale valore aggiunto dell'uso del videoconferencing nella classe di lingue della scuola primaria è la capacità di rendere 'reale' e viva una materia scolastica che, come tutte le altre, rischia di diventare arida e priva di contatto con il mondo del bambino che la affronta».

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