

## Foreign Language Exposure in Knowledge-Building Forums Using English as a Foreign Language

### L'exposition aux langues étrangères dans les forums de développement des connaissances utilisant l'anglais comme langue étrangère

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#### Abstract

This study investigates how previous exposure to a foreign language and culture influences student performance in online knowledge-building tasks. As knowledge-building tasks allow students to share and distribute their knowledge; this study examines whether foreign language and culture knowledge is also distributed amongst the group. The study was conducted in the Catalan region of Spain where the participating grade nine students were learning English as a foreign language and they were all bilingual speakers of Catalan and Spanish. The students were assessed to determine their previous exposure to the English language and culture, and they were divided into low-, medium-, and high-levels of English language exposure. The students wrote both a pre-test and a post-test before and after the study, and a one-way ANOVA was used to determine whether exposure to English influenced the performances on the tests. The analysis shows that the student scores increased at the same rate across the groups. This indicates that the students did not share their knowledge of the English language and culture with their peers in this online writing task; however, the students generally showed an increase in their comprehension and production of the foreign language. A further analysis of the posts in the forum indicates there were issues with pragmatic variability, which was likely due to the absence of participating native speakers of English.

*Keywords:* Knowledge-building forums; second language acquisition; collaborative learning; intercultural competence; culture exposure; knowledge-building; online collaborative learning.

#### Résumé

Cette étude examine comment l'exposition préalable à une langue et à une culture étrangères influence les performances des étudiants dans les tâches de construction de connaissances en ligne. Comme les tâches de construction de connaissances permettent aux étudiants de partager et de diffuser leurs connaissances, cette étude examine si les connaissances en langues et cultures étrangères sont également diffusées au sein du groupe. L'étude a été menée dans la région Catalane d'Espagne, où les élèves de neuvième année qui ont participé à l'étude apprenaient l'anglais comme

langue étrangère et étaient tous bilingues (catalan et espagnol). Les élèves ont été évalués afin de déterminer leur exposition antérieure à la langue et à la culture anglaises, et ils ont été divisés en niveaux d'exposition faible, moyen et élevé à la langue anglaise. Les étudiants ont passé un pré-test et un post-test avant et après l'étude, et une ANOVA à sens unique a été utilisée pour déterminer si l'exposition à l'anglais avait influencé les performances aux tests. L'analyse montre que les scores des élèves ont augmenté au même rythme dans tous les groupes. Cela indique que les étudiants n'ont pas partagé leurs connaissances de la langue et de la culture anglaises avec leurs pairs dans cette tâche d'écriture en ligne; cependant, les étudiants ont généralement montré une augmentation de leur compréhension et de leur production de la langue étrangère. Une analyse plus approfondie des messages du forum indique qu'il y a eu des problèmes de variabilité pragmatique, ce qui est probablement dû à l'absence de participants dont la langue maternelle est l'anglais.

**Mots-clés :** Forums de développement des connaissances; acquisition d'une deuxième langue; apprentissage collaboratif; compétence interculturelle; exposition à la culture; développement des connaissances; apprentissage collaboratif en ligne.

### Introduction

Foreign language classes are often taught to master the skills of a foreign language, but not all language learners are taught how to respond in various social settings (Lanteigne, 2007). While students are typically taught the appropriate responses to common questions, it can be challenging to teach what is socially appropriate when social interactions are spontaneous. Pragmatic variability is necessary to understand the proper use of a foreign language (Abrams, 2014); however, authentic sources that can teach pragmatic abilities are often not used by foreign language teachers. Additionally, pragmatic awareness is essential to know and use a language for intercultural communication (McConachy, 2019).

Intercultural competence (IC) has recently become a primary focus in foreign language education due to recent increases in globalization (Kramer Moeller & Nugent, 2014). Foreign language teachers now must spend more time preparing students for an interconnected world, especially since foreign language proficiency may be required for current students to be competitive in their future employment opportunities (Gladushina, 2020). Thus, IC is necessary for students to embrace diversified cultures, and it is the responsibility of the foreign language teacher to ensure that IC is integrated into the foreign language classroom (Hong, Sandaran, & Fang, 2020). IC is typically defined as the preparation of individuals to effectively and appropriately engage with and interact with those from foreign cultural backgrounds (Arasaratnam, 2016; Sinecrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2007). In foreign language instruction, it is easier to teach the grammar rules and vocabulary than it is to teach IC and pragmatics; however, even when the framework of the foreign language is understood, if the understanding of what is appropriate is lacking, miscommunications can easily occur. When foreign language teachers integrate IC and pragmatics in their lessons, the language learners not only develop an understanding of the general use of the language, but they also learn how to establish a rapport with others across cultures (Hong, Sandaran, & Fang, 2020; Kramer Moeller & Nugent, 2014). In addition, learning about pragmatics and IC enables people from different cultural backgrounds to interact with each other, which allows them to connect their

knowledge about the world and effectively negotiate meanings (Alvarez Valencia & Fernandez Benavides, 2018).

Over the past two decades, the *context of culture* and the *context of situation* have caused a dramatic shift in the focus of IC and pragmatics in foreign language teaching (Furstenberg, 2010). While it is easy to understand *why* this is necessary, the challenge is determining the effective teaching methods that introduce pragmatics and IC into the curriculum. One of the most prominent methods involves sharing viewpoints with others from a foreign culture through an online exchange, such as telecollaboration. Even though telecollaboration has been employed to introduce IC and pragmatics into classrooms, studies of telecollaboration have shown that language and cultural exchanges in these environments are not automatic and the format of the telecollaborative exchanges need to be set up appropriately to elicit the right type of effective dialogue (Godwin-Jones, 2019). An example of this is the M.I.T. *Cultura* Project (Bauer, de Benedette, Furstenberg, Levet, & Waryn, 2006), which was originally set up to allow intermediate French students in the United States to engage in online discussions with intermediate English students in France. The students connected through discussions in online forums while sharing both French and American materials. They were encouraged to ask questions, make hypotheses, and revisit the issues to better understand other viewpoints. Through this process, the students not only learned about the foreign culture, but they also developed a better understanding of their own culture (Bauer, de Benedette, Furstenberg, Levet, & Waryn, 2006; Furstenberg, 2010). Online forum discussions not only allow for the opportunities for students to share their beliefs, but these discussions also facilitate in developing a greater understanding of the students' cultural identities formed within their own cultures. When students engage in online discussions, through the sharing of information and explaining their perceptions, they develop a stronger sense of self-awareness along with IC throughout the discussion process (Alvarez Valencia & Fernandez Benavides, 2018).

A knowledge-building class allows students to share their ideas and understanding of the world with their peers. While knowledge-building tends to focus on the discussion of big questions and the pursuit to find answers, this study examines whether students with different backgrounds in IC obtained outside the classroom shared their knowledge of IC in a knowledge-building writing task using English as a lingua franca. More specifically, this study investigates whether exposure to the English language and English culture outside the classroom impacts the performance of the students in a knowledge-building task conducted in a secondary school classroom in the Catalan region of Spain. The research questions for this study are as follows. The first research question asks whether the students' background knowledge of the foreign language and the associated cultures influence their overall performance in the knowledge-building writing task, since they are writing in the foreign language. The second question asks whether the students with higher-level knowledge of the foreign language and cultures share that knowledge with their peers at lower levels, since the sharing of knowledge and building knowledge collectively is the general goal of a knowledge-building writing task. Finally, the third research question asks how knowledge forums should be used in foreign language classrooms to enhance foreign language instruction.

## Constructivism

Constructivism is the idea that learners can construct their own knowledge (Kanselaar, 2002; Scardamalia, 2002), and this concept contrasts with the idea of *passive transmission* from a teacher or an expert to others (Kanselaar, 2002). Constructivism is considered essential to multicultural education theories, where the students are encouraged to share their ideas, and their past experiences are valued (Banks & Banks, 2010). Classes employing the constructivist theory are student-centric, and the students' skills are emphasized, as opposed to teacher-centric approaches that focus on the passive transmission of information (Benediktsson & Ragnarsdottir, 2019). Student-centric approaches allow students to be critical thinkers (Brown, 2003), which, like multi-cultural group work, students become empowered and their academic performance increases (Kimmel & Volet, 2010). While constructivism is crucial for use in multicultural classrooms due to the ability to construct and share knowledge, it differs from knowledge-building. The concept of knowledge-building is based on not just the sharing of ideas, but also reaching a collective understanding.

## The Knowledge Building International Project

The Knowledge Building International Project (KBIP) is a project between several different schools internationally. KBIP was created on the notion similar to constructivism, that students can work together to create knowledge, but also that the students can better understand the knowledge they have created (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2010). This is done through the use of *knowledge forums*, which is an educational tool allowing students to collaborate and share ideas. Participating students communicate through these structured forums with the purpose of answering questions and gaining a better understanding of the topic being discussed. Because this is an international project, a lingua franca is used in the collaboration tasks, which is most often English.

The KBIP method is consistent among the participating classes (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2010), and it uses scaffolding to organize the web of ideas and classify the posts. An example of the scaffolds with actual posts from the students in the forum from this study can be seen in Table 1 below. The KBIP method is as follows. First, the students collectively identify a problem that they find interesting. They do this by discussing the issues of a theme, and they identify the main questions they have about this theme that they want to find the answers to. They then post the question in the forum with the scaffold *I need to understand*. Second, the students reflect on the questions, and they share their ideas and opinions using the scaffold, *My theory*. They may also respond to other opinions or theories with the same scaffold or contradict the theory using either the scaffold, *This theory cannot explain, or A better theory*. Once the opinions are discussed, the students research the information in texts and online, and they discuss their findings and references using the scaffold, *New information*. When they have finally reached an agreement on the answer to the question, they summarize all the information using the scaffold, *Putting our knowledge together*.

Table 1

*Example of Forum Scaffolds and Posts*

Scaffold	Purpose	Example
I need to understand	To pose a question in need of an answer	How does climate change affect animals?
My theory	To give an opinion	Climate action is affecting animals in some respects. One of them, is that polar bears are dying because of the increase in the temperature. This type of problems affects other animals, and we must solve it.
This theory cannot explain	To contradict a theory	This theory is not the most important because the first is the natural disaster and pollution
New Information	To present factual information after the students have researched in texts and online	Climate change is having negative effects on animals. The ones that live in the artic are dying because the temperature is rising and the artic is melting, also the animals that live in temperate zones have to emigrate to north to find a better climate and that is a problem for non-migratory species. source: <a href="https://www.climateandweather.net/global-warming/climate-change-and-animals.html">https://www.climateandweather.net/global-warming/climate-change-and-animals.html</a>
Putting our knowledge together	To summarize the forum discussion	The pollution provokes the increasing of the global temperatures, this produce extreme droughts, floods, mega storms, the destruction of many natural habitats, the melting of Artic and Antarctic zones and the rising of the oceans level and temperature. And that affects to all type of animals because they can't resist extreme temperatures, so they catch illness and diseases and they die, it difficulty the growth of plants too. That can affect to our ecosystem, destroying biodiversity because animals die or must migrate to another habitat. And if this disease affects farm animals that we eat, we can be intoxicated. We can solve the problem reducing the pollution and the destruction of natural habitats using fewer chemical products and more public transport. It is important to reduce the pollution in the oceans because the ocean contains 97% of the earth's water and the 99% of living space, contain more than 200.000 identified species. And also absorb about 30% of carbon dioxide produced by human."

During this construction process, the teachers act as guides or mentors who moderate in the forum and act as leaders through this process (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2010). The goal of the teacher is to provide a motivating framework for the students as this would assist student engagement in learning (Chen-Chung, Pin-Ching, & Shu-Ju, 2016).

## Method

### Instructional Design

The current study follows the KBIP method, as outlined above. The class connected with another participating class in Colombia through the KBIP portal to work together in the KBIP forum. The researcher was present in the class throughout the semester for observation of the process and took the role of an observer. The teacher took the role of leader and guided the students as they worked in groups to discuss the information and post in the forum. Both the researcher and the teacher had access to the KBIP analytics, and they could monitor the volume of posts and all activities in the forum throughout the process.

At the onset of the knowledge-building process, the students were presented with a forum theme. To understand the theme better, on the second day of instruction, they were shown a short documentary relating to the theme. Afterwards, they worked in groups to determine a list of questions they wanted to be answered. Each group posted their questions on the board, and collectively the class decided on the six best questions to post in the forum. Each group then posted a question in the forum, which initiated the forum discussions. Over the next few weeks, the students were required to share their ideas and research for new information as part of the discussion process.

All the writing in the forums was done in English, which is a foreign language for the students, and the common lingua franca used in KBIP. The students were also instructed by their teacher not to copy information from websites and to use their own words when writing in the forum. The posts were checked in Google and then in a plagiarism checker to verify the students were creating novel posts. The classes were also monitored by the researcher and teacher, and the classroom activities were recorded.

While the study focused primarily on the writing of the Catalan students, it should be noted that the Colombian students did not post in the forums and did not engage in conversation with the Catalan students throughout the semester. This limited the conversations so that the Catalan students, while still collaborating, were only collaborating with others from their community, and they did not have exposure to any insights from any international students in their discussions.

### Course Content

All the participating classes in KBIP in the 2018/19 school year were asked to choose one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as the topic for discussion. The sustainable development goals were created as a blueprint to form a better future for citizens globally. The participating students in this study chose to discuss the thirteenth goal of *Climate Action*. The questions they wanted to find the answers to can be seen in Table 2 below. These questions in the table are formatted using the words of the students and appear exactly as they were written in the forum.

Table 2

*Climate Action Questions*

Question 1.	How can we reduce the greenhouse effect?
Question 2.	How many problems can cause the increase of the level of the water all over the world?
Question 3.	How can we stop deforestation?
Question 4.	How does climate change affect animals?
Question 5.	How are hurricanes formed?
Question 6.	How do we stop pollution from factories in the 3rd world countries?

**Research Design*****Participants***

The sample for this study consisted of two classes of secondary students in a Spanish school who are bilingual in both Spanish and Catalan. All the students were 14 years old at the time of the study. There were 67 students enrolled in the study; however, the results of five of the students were eliminated from the study, as these students were classified as “special needs” by the local school board. And the teacher requested that their results not be included. The results from two other students were also eliminated because they were absent for the initial pre-test. The remaining students (n = 60) would be in similar developmental stages, and they participated throughout the study.

***Testing Procedures***

At the onset of the study, the students received a questionnaire that outlined their exposure to English culture and language outside the classroom. The questionnaire was created through a digital platform (Survey Monkey), and the students were sent the link to the questionnaire by the teacher. The students were then given a pre-test, which was conducted on the first day of class. The students were also given a post-test on the final day of class, as a comparison of what was learned throughout the semester. The details of these tests are outlined in the following sub-sections.

***Questionnaire and English Language Exposure Scores.***

The questionnaire provided details of the students’ exposure to English outside school. Each participant was assigned an English Language Exposure (ELE) score based on their responses. The points were based on the level of exposure the students had to the English language and culture outside class, such as whether they were exchange students to an English speaking country, whether they study at a private English school in the evenings, whether they travel abroad to locations that require the use of English, and whether they speak English with friends or family outside school. Once the scores were tabulated, the students were assigned to one of three groups based on their English Language Exposure (ELE): *Low ELE*, *Medium ELE*, and *High ELE* (see Table 3). The students in the Low ELE group received 3 or fewer points, the students in the Medium ELE group received 4 – 6 points, and the students in the High ELE group received greater than 7 points.

Table 3

*ELE Groups*

Group	Low ELE	Medium ELE	High ELE
Number of Students	12	30	18

**Pre-Test and Post-Test**

The design of the pretests was constructed using the subject matter the students would be discussing and writing about, which was based a B1 English text on this topic. The students were assessed by their teacher and were all between levels A2 and B1 in English based on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The purpose of the pre-test was to create a baseline of their English language production on their writing task topic, specifically, do they understand the associated vocabulary and the content for discussion in the foreign language. At the end of the study, the students took the post-test, which was designed to be identical to the pre-test in order to analyze the difference in production and comprehension.

The tests included four sections: *modal verbs and grammar, free answer, fixed-choice vocabulary, and multiple-choice*. The different sections were included to eliminate a *testwise bias* (Millman, Bishop, & Ebel, 1965) and to assess the students’ knowledge and overall comprehension of the topic, including their English language proficiency.

**Results**

The initial comparison of the ELE scores to the pre-test results shows what appeared to be a strong positive correlation between the ELE score and the pre-test (see Figure 1). Because of this, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with the three groups (*low-, medium-, and high-ELE*) as an independent variable and the pre-test results as the dependent variable.

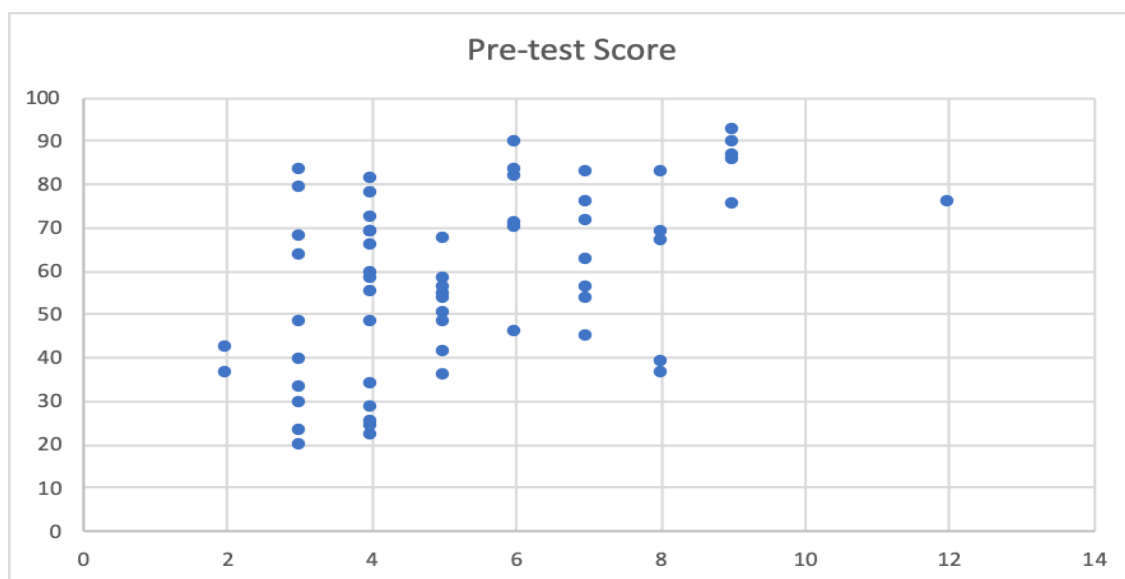


Figure 1. Pre-Test Performance and ELE Scores.



According to the analysis, the null hypothesis is that the means of the three ELE groups are equal, and the alternative hypothesis is that the means of the three ELE groups are not equal.  $F(2,57) = 5.17$ ,  $p = .05$  therefore the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis (see Table 3).

Table 4

*ANOVA Pre-Test Scores and ELE Scores*

	df	Sum of Squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2	1873.97	5.17	.05
Within Groups	57	362.69		

Once the post-test scores were calculated, they were also compared to the ELE scores with a one-way ANOVA. For the post-test, the  $F(2, 57) = 4.47$ ,  $p = 0.5$ , the null hypothesis has been rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis for the post-test results and after the KBIP process, ELE exposure did not equalize across the groups (see Table 4).

Table 5

*ANOVA Post-Test Scores and ELE Scores*

	df	Sum of Squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2	1646.27	4.47	.05
Within Groups	57	368.12		

Each of the ELE groups showed an increase from the pre-test to the post-test, and each of the groups showed an increase in their English language proficiency, which ranged from 5.4% for the High ELE group to 7.87% to the Medium ELE group (see Table 5).

Table 6

*Differences in Means by ELE Group*

Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Difference
Low ELE	47.09	53.37	6.28
Med ELE	55.78	63.65	7.87
High ELE	69.17	74.57	5.4

In addition to the analysis of the test results, the posts in the forums were also observed and several posts may be considered rude when used in a discussion in English, although they are considered to be proper or acceptable in both Catalan and Spanish. These phrases often appeared with the scaffold *This theory cannot explain*, as the students were writing contradictory posts to other

posts in the forum. Rudeness tends to be based on culture (Lanteigne, 2007) and, while some English-speaking regions would find these posts rude when used as a rebuttal in a written assignment, it is possible that other dialects of English may find these acceptable. Examples of these phrases can be seen in Table 7 below.

Table 7

*Examples of socially unacceptable English phrases*

Scaffold	Phrase
This theory cannot explain	Not true
My theory	Bad idea
This theory cannot explain	It's not true
My theory	YOU'RE WRONG
A better theory	No we can't

### Discussion

The analysis of the pre-test data, when compared to the ELE scores, determined that the exposure a student has to additional language and culture resources outside school influences their knowledge of that foreign language and overall performance on the baseline pre-test  $F(2, 57) = 5.17$ ,  $p = .05$ . This should be expected, as when children have enriched environments, they have a head start in education compared to their peers (Ball, Mercado, & Orduña, 2019). These results answer our first research question. The students' background knowledge of the foreign language and culture outside of school did impact their performance on the pre-test. Additionally, as the ELE levels each improved throughout the study from a group mean of 5.4% to 7.87%, the language and cultural advantages that some students had at the onset of the study remained advantageous throughout the study.

In KBIP studies, when students work together, the students with the most knowledge pass the knowledge to their classmates, and the students teach each other (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2010). Further, the knowledge is created collectively, allowing for the students to become empowered and think critically, and they share this knowledge amongst the group so that students with less information prior to the study benefit from their peers. This causes the students to be at similar levels of knowledge in the content at the end of the project. The second research question asked whether the students with higher-level knowledge of the foreign language and culture would distribute this information to their peers. Because knowledge-building allows for the distribution of information, and it creates an environment that increases multi-cultural awareness, the distribution of linguistic and cultural knowledge should be possible. However, the results of this study do not support this. The ANOVA results,  $F(2, 57) = 4.47$ ,  $p = 0.5$ , show that the ELE information did not equalize across

the groups on the post-test and the group with greater knowledge in language and culture at the onset of this study did not share this information with their peers.

The final research question was in regard to using knowledge forums for foreign language instruction. While the students with increased exposure to the foreign language and culture prior to the study generally outperformed their peers on this task, all three of the groups showed increases in their writing abilities and comprehension of a topic using the foreign language at the end of this study. While the knowledge of outside exposure was not shared nor distributed evenly amongst the students, each group of students showed increases in their comprehension level and writing abilities in the foreign language at the same rate. Thus, while it would not be an effective tool to allow students to have an equal level in foreign language production, it is an effective tool to increase foreign language comprehension and production where the students' progress at their own pace.

The KBIP is designed to bring classrooms together around the globe, and since the students are writing in a foreign language, ideally, they should increase their IC while participating in the project. However, in this study, the other classes of students outside of the Catalan region of Spain did not end up participating and posting in the forum. This limits the possibility of developing further IC in the project when the students who are collaborating are all from the same city and within the same school. Should the students have been able to collaborate with other students who are native speakers of English, it may have been possible for them to expand their IC and understand the appropriateness of word selection when writing in the foreign language (Alvarez Valencia & Fernandez Benavides, 2018). However, without exposure to native speakers of English, the students did not learn in this project that some phrases, such as "Not true" or "You're wrong" are acceptable in one language but may not be socially acceptable in another. As stated by Lantaigne (2007), "rudeness is defined and contrasted with differing conventions of politeness and unintentional pragma linguistic and sociopragmatic failure" (pp. 89). Therefore, it would be beneficial for students to collaborate with native speakers in a foreign language to enhance IC.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The KBIP is designed to be an international communicative tool. The main limitation of this study was that the students did not get the opportunity to collaborate with other students from another country. While the design of the study involved the collaboration from foreign students, their decision to not participate was unavoidable. This limited the discussion to students from the same school and the same region, and it also limited the discussion where the students did not have access to possible alternate viewpoints from students of another culture.

Additionally, as the pre-test and post-test are similar, it is possible that there was a performance bias in the results of the post-test. However, the tests were kept the same in order to measure the improvement of performance accurately.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined whether exposure to the foreign language and English-speaking cultures outside of the classroom environment influenced the students' performance within the classroom in a

knowledge-building task. While additional exposure to English outside the classroom influenced the pre-test scores because knowledge-building involves the distribution of knowledge, whether the students distribute their linguistic and cultural knowledge amongst their peers was investigated. This study shows that students with more enriched backgrounds relating to outside exposure of English language and culture have an advantage when using English as a lingua franca in a knowledge-building task, not just at the onset of the project, but throughout the project. While content knowledge tends to get equally distributed in KBIP tasks, linguistic knowledge does not show the same means of transferring amongst the students. However, the students generally showed gains in their L2 knowledge at the end of this study, showing that using a foreign language in a knowledge-building task will facilitate in increasing the comprehension and production of that foreign language. The students generally increased in writing ability and comprehension of the subject matter, but at the same approximate rate.

In addition, there is evidence from some of the posts that the students would have benefited if they were corresponding with native speakers of English in the forum. Some of the posts, which are considered appropriate in the students' L1 are not considered appropriate in the L2. Without having access to native speakers in this student-centric environment, there was no correction provided. The students are required to teach each other while the teacher acts as a leader and mediator. When the researcher questioned whether these statements were considered acceptable or polite in Catalan or Spanish, the teacher felt they were fine. Thus, teachers as mediators without the inclusion of native speakers may also not be aware the appropriate social contexts, or pragmatics, for these statements or more effective ways to politely word a rebuttal to a peer in a discussion in the L2.

*Authors' Note:*

*This study was conducted in accordance with the standards of research in Catalonia, Spain. All the participants volunteered for the study, and they had the option to withdraw. Additionally, the parents were informed of the testing procedures, and they agreed to their child's participation. The experimental design of this study caused neither stress nor harm to the participants. The participant information has been kept confidential. Funding was not provided for this study, and there are no conflicts of interest. This article, neither in whole nor in part, is not in publication elsewhere.*

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