

eTwinning Ambassadors' Perceptions about the Use of eTwinning as a Collaborative Platform to Improve English as a Foreign Language Skills

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Article information	Abstract
Article history:	<i>This qualitative study aims to explore the role of eTwinning ambassadors regarding the use of eTwinning to improve students' English as a Foreign Language learning process. The main objective is thus to examine the advantages and drawbacks of using eTwinning in the educational practice related to English teaching from the point of view of eTwinning ambassadors.</i>
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Keywords: <i>Collaborative online international learning</i> <i>Digital competence</i> <i>English as a foreign language</i> <i>eTwinning</i> <i>eTwinning ambassadors</i>	<i>Although previous research has demonstrated the importance of telecollaboration and collaborative online international learning, research about eTwinning is still limited, especially regarding the perceptions of eTwinning ambassadors, educators responsible for disseminating eTwinning among compulsory education teachers. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were validated and used as the research instrument, and Spanish eTwinning ambassadors ($n = 8$) took part in it. To analyse the data obtained from the interviews, ATLAS.ti version 9 for Windows was employed. Findings show that using eTwinning in the classroom has more advantages than disadvantages according to ambassadors, being the main assets the internationalization of the teaching and learning process, given by the use of the foreign language in real and collaborative contexts with communicative purposes. This favourable aspect promotes the relationship between language and culture, which are inseparable aspects when teaching and learning a foreign language, and the creation of significant knowledge. Ultimately, this research intends to expand reflection and research about eTwinning and the changes in education to respond to the necessities of the citizens of tomorrow.</i>

INTRODUCTION

Today, we are immersed in a globalized society where the improvements in telecommunications, as well as the development of transport, have allowed us to eliminate the geographic barriers that a few decades ago would maintain the world isolated (Ramírez & Falcón, 2010). In this

context, the English language is one of the main axes when referring to communication among different cultures, as it is the 21st-century lingua franca (Suzina, 2021). Thus, the process of teaching and learning is nowadays focused on enhancing the English communicative competence so that the integral development of students is promoted.

Despite the importance of exploring and researching emerging methodologies and tools to develop English language skills as well as intercultural competence, literature remains limited regarding the use of the official platform for telecollaboration of the European Commission: eTwinning. eTwinning is a digital platform which favours this objective of education, since it makes use of telecollaboration for developing the English linguistic competence among students from different countries (European Schoolnet, 2022). This research brings together relationships among telecollaboration, educational technology, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and eTwinning.

COIL represents an innovative approach to language education that transcends geographical boundaries and fosters intercultural understanding (Collett et al., 2024). By taking advantage of digital technologies, COIL connects students from different cultural backgrounds in collaborative language learning experiences, thus fostering cross-cultural collaboration and intercultural learning from students' homes (Gokcora, 2021). This approach has certainly acquired relevance in today's educational scene due to globalization, the advancements in technology, and, undoubtedly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education (Beelen, 2022).

COIL offers a multitude of benefits, such as the enhancement of students' learning experience by equipping them with the necessary skills to collaborate internationally (SUNY COIL Center, 2023), and the facilitation of learners' access to educational resources (Huertas-Abril & Palacios-Hidalgo, 2023b). Additionally, COIL serves as a catalyst for social justice (Slapac et al., 2023) and prepares students for success in an ever-evolving, globalized society.

Among different COIL options developed in the European context, eTwinning has become significantly important at schools, high schools and universities as a way to facilitate the design and implementation of collaborative projects and involve students in COIL experiences (European Schoolnet, 2022).

Among different COIL options developed in the European context, eTwinning has become significantly important at schools, high schools, and universities as a way to facilitate the design and implementation of collaborative projects and involve students in COIL experiences (European Schoolnet, 2022). Indeed, its relevance in European education has been translated into a growing body of research particularly involved with the study of teachers' perceptions on the usefulness of eTwinning (Huertas-Abril & Palacios-Hidalgo, 2023a; Izgi-Onbasili & Şeker, 2023; Leproni, 2023) and its benefits for learners (Martín & Barrio, 2021; Paz-Albo & Hervás, 2017).

Considering all the aforementioned, this qualitative study aims to explore the role of eTwinning ambassadors regarding the use of eTwinning as an initiative to improve students' foreign language learning process. More specifically, the main objective of this research is to examine

the perceptions of eTwinning ambassadors regarding the use of eTwinning in foreign language educational practice.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

COIL and the eTwinning initiative

In today's educational scene, COIL has acquired significant relevance as globalization, international mobility, technological advances, and the effects of the COVID-19 health emergency have proven the need to implement learning opportunities for students to engage in international collaboration and exchanges (Beelen, 2022; Borger, 2022). According to Huertas-Abril and Palacios-Hidalgo (2023b), COIL is a form of telecollaboration, an innovative approach to education based on collaborative learning that utilizes technology to connect students and teachers from different countries, to foster cross-cultural understanding among participants, and to enhance global citizenship skills. COIL takes advantage of digital platforms and tools so that learners can engage in online international joint projects and interactions that would be difficult to organise in onsite settings.

Among its different benefits, this form of "globally networked learning and virtual exchange [...] promotes the development of intercultural competence across shared multicultural learning environments" (SUNY COIL Center, 2015, p. 4), thus providing educational stakeholders with a cost-effective and innovative way to increase international learning opportunities (Ottoson, 2022). Moreover, the collaborative learning offered by COIL experiences transcends traditional classroom boundaries, allowing participants to benefit from diverse perspectives and cultural insights (Knipp-Silva & Bozhidar-Scarlota, 2021). In this sense, COIL seems to be an effective initiative to foster teamwork, communication skills, and a global mindset among students, as through shared online experiences, students not only learn about the subject matter but also gain intercultural abilities that will be crucial for their future.

An interesting COIL platform is eTwinning, which emerged in 2005 as "the most important initiative of the European Commission's eLearning Learning Programme" (European Schoolnet, 2022, para. 4). This platform aims at the development of the digital competence of participating teachers (as it will be explained below) and students (generally referred to as eTwinners), facilitating the creation of collaborative projects that involve learners in an atmosphere of active methodologies, enhancing motivation (European Schoolnet, 2022). In addition, it should be noted that eTwinning not only benefits the digitization of education but also the development of pedagogical innovation through creativity, collaboration, interaction, and communication in an international framework.

In order to connect students at an international level, eTwinning proposes telecollaboration or, in other words, COIL, as a means for communication. On the one hand, the term telecollaboration is defined by Guth and Helm (2010) as the medium which makes possible virtual exchanges among groups of people who are geographically distant but that share a common language. On the other hand, COIL, which is basically a form of telecollaboration, can

be understood as a specific pedagogy that promotes a teaching and learning process focused on the development of the communicative and intercultural competences of learners by using a vehicular language, which is generally English (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020). Thanks to telecollaboration and COIL, students taking part in eTwinning are provided with a favourable tool not only for their academic lives, but also for their professional and personal development.

eTwinning in foreign language teaching

The inclusion of technology in the field of education, specifically of the eTwinning platform, has improved the competence learning on which the current educational system bets. In this sense, Marchal-López et al. (2018) establish a relationship between language and technology, since the latter provides the teaching and learning process with a wide range of knowledge and skills that enhance comprehension and expression, both oral and written. There are indeed several studies on teachers' perceptions of eTwinning. For instance, Huertas-Abril and Palacios-Hidalgo (2023a) study how eTwinning can improve pre-service language teachers' digital skills by comparing two European universities and show that educators feel positive regarding how eTwinning can help develop their digital literacy. Within the framework of sustainable environmental education, Izgi-Onbasili and Şeker (2023) examine how eTwinning may enhance future primary school educators' awareness of the causes and consequences of climate change, demonstrating that this European initiative can have extensive benefits in the initial training of teachers. Leproni (2023) analyses whether eTwinning helps pre-service language teachers develop their professional competences, proving the role of eTwinning in fostering the development of teaching professional abilities and awareness among student-teachers.

It is necessary to highlight that eTwinning not only supports the process of teaching and learning of students, but it can also serve as a program through which teachers' digital competences are fostered (eTwinning, 2020). In fact, the study developed by Huertas-Abril and Palacios-Hidalgo (2022, 2023a) shows both advantages and limitations of the use of eTwinning in the training process of pre-service EFL and bilingual education teachers. Regarding the benefits, the authors point out the possibility of international telecollaboration and/or COIL, the development of competences, and the application of eTwinning for EFL and bilingual education classrooms. In relation to the disadvantages of eTwinning, this study finds problems mainly derived from the technical use of technology.

Another study developed by Huertas-Abril and Muszyńska (2022) provides evidence of the usefulness of eTwinning as a tool for promoting multimodal communication. The purpose of this research was to "involve students in different locations using Internet tools and resources to work together on TwinSpace (eTwinning online platform), exchange ideas, experiences, and resources connected to English language learning, language acquisition, self-study, teaching methods, and approaches" (p. 65). The authors find that the eTwinning initiative facilitates "the development of linguistic skills via the improvement of multimodal communication and digital literacy" (Huertas-Abril & Muszyńska, 2022, p. 72).

Similarly, Mateo-Guillen and Camarasa-Macián (2022) carried out an eTwinning project which bets on the use of virtual escape room as a tool for improving sociocultural and communicative

competences in the EFL classroom. The main conclusion that these authors point out is that thanks to eTwinning students are able to communicate in an intercultural framework, developing a series of competences such as sociocultural, intercultural, and linguistic competences. Furthermore, abilities for autonomous learning and problem solving are fostered. In this sense, these authors bet on the use of eTwinning for achieving the goals related to language and culture.

eTwinning ambassadors

An eTwinning ambassador can be defined, according to (eTwinning, 2015), as a teacher with previous experience using this platform and who mentors new users and helps them to navigate the eTwinning platform and its tools, while providing practical advice, share best practices, and offer support. eTwinning ambassadors arise from the need of other teachers to be able to create their own eTwinning projects. This way, they can solve questions and difficulties that may appear when dealing with new technologies (eTwinning, 2015). The main functions of eTwinning ambassadors are:

- To help other teachers with eTwinning procedures.
- To disseminate eTwinning action, both using online activities and participating in a great set of other kinds of initiatives such as the creation of blogs or didactic meetings.
- To coordinate groups of work in schools.
- To encourage other teachers with the use of educational technology.
- To develop some projects which may serve as examples of good practices.

Despite the importance of eTwinning ambassadors, research has not yet explored their opinions about the platform and its functioning, or its educational potential in detail. This served as an incentive for developing this investigation.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aims to explore the role of eTwinning ambassadors regarding the use of eTwinning as an initiative to improve students' foreign language learning process. More specifically, the main objective of this research is to examine the perceptions of eTwinning ambassadors regarding the use of eTwinning in foreign language educational practice.

This study, therefore, seeks to answer the following research question (RQ): What are the eTwinning ambassadors' perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using eTwinning in the educational practice?

Participants

A total of eight eTwinning ambassadors took part in the study. All of them were Spanish, coming from different autonomous communities of Spain: Andalusia (n = 4), Basque Country (n = 2), Region of Murcia (n = 1), and Castile-La Mancha (n = 1). Four of them worked with students

in Higher Education, whereas the other four worked with Primary Education students. For these participants to be selected, purposive sampling techniques were followed, as the researchers deliberately chose the sample due to their qualities (Etikan et al., 2016). Eligibility criteria were based on nationality (only Spanish people were selected), gender diversity (2 men and 6 women), a minimum of four years working with eTwinning, and the role of eTwinning ambassador.

Data gathering

To collect data for the study, a semi-structured interview composed of five questions was designed, validated and used as research instrument. This choice is motivated by the nature of education as a science. As mentioned by Troncoso and Daniele (2003), in the field of education we deal with different perceptions about the same topic; this kind of interviews allows us to assess these different opinions in a scientific way, establishing networks of relationships.

The interview was designed based on a previous literature review on eTwinning and COIL developed by the researchers. This review allowed the identification of significant themes and common preoccupations of teachers when developing online collaborative projects in the language classroom.

Before the administration of the interview, the researchers asked a panel of three experts (in the fields of education, learning language, and educational technology) to revise the designed questions. After receiving their feedback on the pertinence and clarity of the questions, the researchers applied their modifications and suggestions until having the finalized version of the interview. The final questions included in the interview are the following:

- Question 1 (Q1). What do you think are the main functions that eTwinning ambassadors carry out that make them different to any other position within this initiative?
- Question 2 (Q2). According to your experience, what are the main advantages and disadvantages that arise when carrying out an educational practice using eTwinning? Regarding the drawbacks, could you make some proposals to solve them?
- Question 3 (Q3). Are there any methodologies more favorable than others regarding the use of eTwinning? If so, what are these methodologies and what do they consist of? If not, how is the inclusion of educational technology, in general, and of the eTwinning tool, in particular, addressed from a traditional teaching perspective?
- Question 4 (Q4). What are the most frequent problems that emerge when using telecollaboration as a communication tool in the classroom? How can they be solved in order to improve the learning of foreign languages?
- Question 5 (Q5). Do you consider that current education promotes the development of digital competence both in students and teachers? In any case, and assuming your role as an eTwinning ambassador, what advice/recommendations would you give to all those teachers who show a reticent attitude towards the use of educational technology in their planning to improve their digital competence?

The interviews were conducted online using Zoom in April and May 2023 on an individual basis, using the Spanish language to facilitate the understanding for participants. Each interview lasted around 25 minutes, and all of them were audio recorded to ease the subsequent process of transcription of the participants' responses. Before participating in this study, written consent was demanded to the participants in order to give them information about the purpose of the investigation and the confidentiality of their responses. The participants were also informed of the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time.

Data analysis

To get a first approximation to the data and propose a possible explanation based on the theoretical framework, the Grounded Theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used. This theory allows us to understand the complexity of the object of our study, taking account of the perceptions of the researcher as well as the particularities of our topic (Páramo-Morales, 2015). Then, using content analysis, the data obtained were ordered according to its internal structure by analyzing the content of the informants' responses (López-Noguero, 2002). For this structuration to be successful, the phases established by Arbeláez-Gómez and Onrubia-Goñi (2014) were considered, which are divided into:

- Theoretical phase: this step allows us to organize the information for the first time.
- Descriptive phase: in this phase we are asked to analyze our data.
- Interpretative phase: this last step lets us to reflect on the meaning of the analyzed data according to the ideas and concepts that emerged from the prior procedure.

The qualitative analysis of the data was carried out using ATLAS.ti version 9 for Windows. Since this software allows operating with categories, the procedure consisted of comparing categories (groups of codes) and subcategories (codes) with intersection matrices. Once the results of the qualitative analysis were obtained, they were transformed into quantitative data.

FINDINGS

The categories obtained from the analysis of the answers of eTwinning ambassadors were organized into four categories, namely: (1) main functions of eTwinning ambassadors; (2) the use of eTwinning in the classroom; (3). methodologies to use eTwinning in the classroom; and (4) solutions and advice for teachers. The categories are explained in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Emerging categories

Category	Explanation
Main functions of eTwinning ambassadors	This category includes references to the role of eTwinning ambassadors, which makes them be different when comparing them with other members in the platform.
The use of eTwinning in the classroom	This category includes references to the benefits (such as the development of digital competence or the learning of foreign languages) and pitfalls of using the platform.

Category	Explanation
Methodologies to use eTwinning in the classroom	This category includes references to some of the best methodologies to work with eTwinning, as well as to those not appropriate for its use in the classroom.
Solutions and advice for teachers	This category includes references to some advice that can be used by eTwinners to solve pitfalls and problems, as well as some recommendations for teachers when using the platform in the classroom.

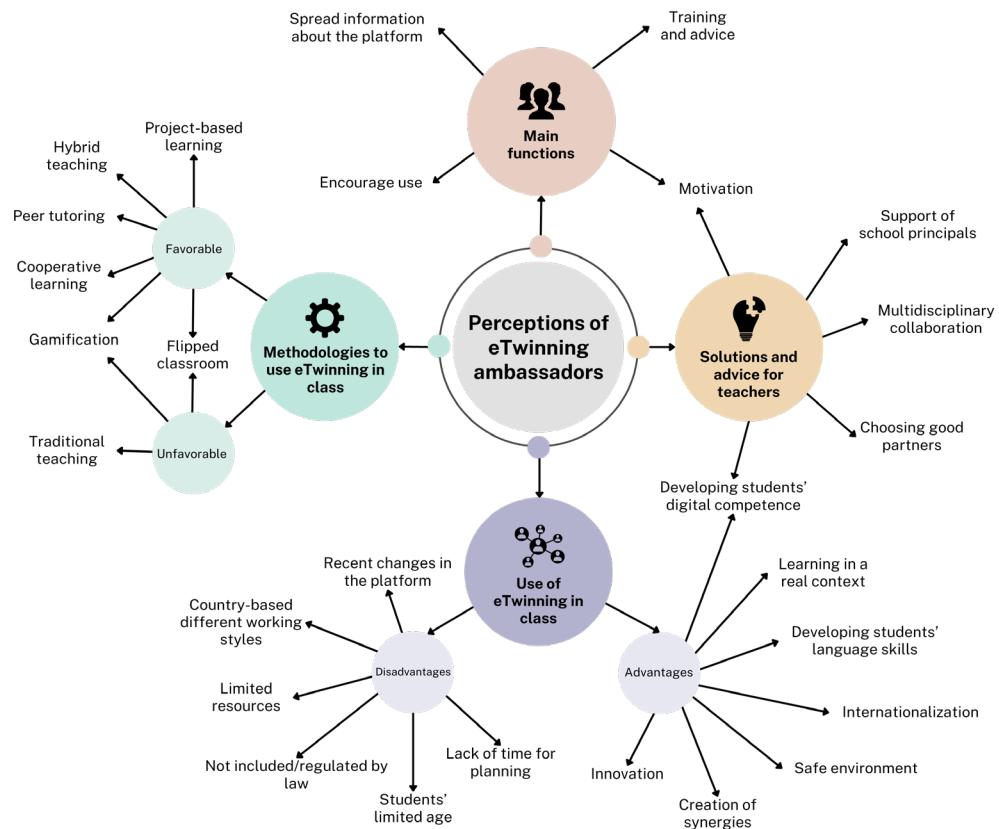


Figure 1 Network of codes

Main functions of eTwinning ambassadors

In this category we found four codes. A key function pointed out by seven participants is to encourage new teachers to use the platform, and create and join eTwinning projects, as mentioned by Participant 2: “Darles la formación necesaria tanto para crear proyectos como para unirse a ellos” [We have to give them [the teachers] the training necessary to create as well as to join to eTwinning projects]. Nevertheless, only one participant considers the ambassadors to be real representatives of the platform.

Five participants think that one of the main functions of eTwinning ambassadors is to spread the platform through different sources (online or face-to-face). In this regard, Participant 1

states that “Una es difundir la plataforma eTwinning, haciendo seminarios, participando en congresos, vía redes sociales...” [*One of them is to spread the platform, attending to seminars, participating in conferences, through social media...].*

Finally, a unanimous result in the study is the function of training and advising other teachers, as well as motivate them to use eTwinning. As indicated by Participant 5, “No solo hemos tenido que dar apoyo tecnológico sino también psicológico en el aspecto motivacional” [*We had to provide eTwinners not only with technological support but also with psychological support in terms of motivation*].

The use of eTwinning in the classroom

Based on their experience as project designers and ambassadors of eTwinning, the participants point out that one of the main advantages of the use of this platform is that students are involved in a real learning context since they use the language for communication with other students from different European countries. According to Participant 7, “Necesitan la lengua para poder comunicarse, para poder trabajar, llegar a acuerdos con otros compañeros de otros países de Europa” [*They need the language to be able to communicate, work, agree with other mates from different European countries*].

In relation to the development of the digital competence, the ambassadors think that it is a good way to foster the development of this competence as in students as in teachers, as Participant 4 explains: “El objetivo principal de eTwinning es mejorar las destrezas relacionadas con las tecnologías de la información” [*The main objective of eTwinning is to enhance the skills related to information technologies*]. Similarly, the participants use the platform as a means for improving their foreign language competence, especially English, as highlighted by Participant 3: “El uso de la lengua para la cotidianidad hace que el aprendizaje suceda, que sea significativo” [*The use of the language in the daily life produces significant learning*].

Most of the participants consider eTwinning as an agent to promote the internationalization of students. As mentioned by Participant 7, “Lo que aporta eTwinning es la internalización, es la posibilidad de trabajar con alumnado de otros países en Europa” [*eTwinning contributes to internationalization, the possibility to work with students from other European countries*]. Finally, one participant pinpoints that the eTwinning platform is a safe digital environment and eTwinning as a powerful tool for promoting synergies among educational agents. “Otra ventaja es que eTwinning es un entorno seguro, por lo tanto, todo lo que hacemos a través de internet está en una aplicación a la que solo tienen acceso los usuarios registrados”. [*Another advantage is that eTwinning is a safe environment, thus, everything that is made through the Internet is in an App with restricted access*] (Participant 7).

Regarding the disadvantages and pitfalls of eTwinning, the ambassadors agree with the opinion that the platform was more attractive and intuitive in the past. This is the reason why some teachers have not worked with eTwinning recently, as they prefer to try the new platform once they have explored it in their free time. “Para mí, la solución ha sido este año no llevar a cabo ningún proyecto, estar parada, y ya el que viene continuaré cuando esté más familiarizada con

ella". *[For me, the solution this year has been to stop with the projects. Next year, I will continue when I get more familiar with it]* (Participant 6). Another difficulty identified by the participants is the use of different methodologies depending on the countries, which makes cooperation difficult: "Las diferencias de trabajar que tienen distintos países" *[Differences in the way different countries work]* (Participant 2). Furthermore, two specific pitfalls of eTwinning have to do with the Spanish educational system, since all the participants agree that the government should invest more money in technological resources, whereas four of them also demand the inclusion of eTwinning in the law in order to have clear educational objectives, remuneration, and recognition. "Los proyectos eTwinning no están recogidos en la legislación educativa, por lo que no hay ni criterios de evaluación ni objetivos asociados" *[eTwinning projects are not included in the law, thus, there are neither evaluation criteria nor goals]* (Participant 2).

Participants also mention students' limited age as a negative aspect when using eTwinning. In this light, two different aspects can be highlighted: on the one hand, two participants state that the younger the students are, the less their digital competence develop, which makes it difficult to work using telecollaboration, as it requires certain level of this competence; on the other hand, other two ambassadors find legal problems in terms of policies of different platforms, which disallow their use for students under the age of 16. Participant 2 mentioned "Tendríamos que emplear tiempo en explicar cómo se manda un correo, y no solo eso, sino que también depende de las edades porque a ciertas edades hay limitaciones con el uso de distintas plataformas" *[We would need to spend time to explain how to send an email, and we have to take into account that there are some limitations in relation to the age and the use of some platforms]*.

Finally, two participants highlight the differences in lesson planning and schedules among countries, and all ambassadors consider that there is a lack of time for developing a good collaboration project at school. For this reason, teachers need to spend their free time at home to develop their projects in order for them to succeed: "Las dificultades para encontrar espacios de coordinación con otros docentes es lo más ingrato porque si pretendes hacer un proyecto eTwinning con tu socio ya es complicado por hacerlo a distancia" *[The difficulties in finding spaces for coordination with other teachers is the most unrewarding because if you intend to do an eTwinning project with your partner, it is already complicated to do it remotely]* (Participant 3).

Methodologies to use eTwinning in the classroom

The results of this category are clear and consensual –the best approach which favors the use of eTwinning are active methodologies. The participants particularly pinpointed the potential of Project-Based Learning in eTwinning projects, as it promotes the collaborative elaboration of projects and cooperative work. Linked to this methodology, ambassadors named Cooperative Learning as another of the best methodologies to implement eTwinning projects in the classroom, since students need to cooperate with other students from different European countries at the same time to build a final product.

“Claramente el aprendizaje basado en proyectos y el aprendizaje cooperativo son imprescindibles en eTwinning, son metodologías muy potentes porque el alumnado aprende a partir de sus inquietudes e investigaciones, lo que dota al proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de una motivación extra” *[Project-Based Learning and Cooperative Work are necessary in eTwinning, they are powerful methodologies because students learn from their interests and investigations, which give extra motivation to the teaching and learning process]* (Participant 3).

In the same line, the ambassadors think that the flipped classroom is a good way to use eTwinning: “Flipped Classroom, los niños trabajan un contenido en grupos mixtos y obtienen un producto que enseñan al resto de compañeros, al docente y se difunde” *[Flipped Classroom, students work the contents in groups, and they get a product which is shown to the rest of students, teachers, and it is disseminated]* (Participant 1).

On the contrary, half of the ambassadors do not consider the use of traditional methodologies for including eTwinning in the classroom. Nevertheless, none of them thinks that this inclusion is impossible, as pointed out by Participant 6: “Desde la perspectiva tradicional sí que tiene cabida eTwinning” *[From a traditional perspective, there is a place for eTwinning]*.

In relation to the specific methodologies (i.e., Flipped Classroom and Gamification), considered appropriate by some participants, an ambassador mentions that they are unfavorable because they do not work with formal contents as previously mentioned. In particular, this is mentioned by Participant 2, who states that “El aula invertida no serviría, porque no se trabajan contenidos formales” *[Flipped Classroom would not be useful, because we do not work with formal contents]* and that “La gamificación no creo que sea útil” *[I think Gamification is not useful]*.

Solutions and advice for future teachers

In order to palliate the effects of both disadvantages and difficulties with COIL, two participants highlight that the support of school and high school principals is essential in terms of facilitating coordination and planification, which could help solve the lack of time: “Tener apoyo de la dirección, porque a veces, como docente, te encuentras un poco solo al frente de todo y puede ser que agobie” *[Counting on the support of the head of school, because, sometimes, we are alone, and you might get stressed]* (Participant 1). Moreover, the ambassadors consider the possibility to coordinate different subjects and develop a project together in order to reduce the work of only one teacher and share different considerations. This is indeed mentioned by Participant 3: “La solución sería idear unos horarios flexibles que incorporaran estos momentos de coordinación” *[The solution may be planning flexible schedules where coordination could take place]*. Similarly, the ambassadors also think that one of the most important things to do is to look for good partners from other countries, as mentioned by Participant 1: “Lo que es importante a modo de solución es tener buenos socios que respondan” *[What is important as a solution is to have good partners who take the action]*. Coordination is therefore very important if we take the different time zones into account.

In terms of recommendations for teachers, motivation was identified as a first subcategory: the participants agree that teachers should try to look for motivational practices which might encourage them to use eTwinning in their classrooms: “Lo que yo recomiendo a los docentes que muestran una actitud conservadora del aprendizaje es que vayan a Suecia y vean cómo se enseña, se va a otro ritmo” [What I would recommend to all the teachers who defend traditional learning is to travel to Sweden and observe how to learn at school and the different rhythms they follow] (Participant 5).

Finally, the ambassadors also highlight the current social needs. In this sense, our students, as future citizens, will make use of technology for their academic, professional, and personal lives; thus, teachers must not only promote technology in education but also properly train students so that they can adequately develop their digital skills: “Hay que formar a los alumnos para que no sean analfabetos digitales, luego llegan y no saben hacer un trámite, una cuenta de banco...” [There is a need to teach the students in order not to let them be digital illiterate, they do not know how to make different procedures or open a bank account...] (Participant 1).

Practical implications

With a wide range of platforms, features and functions, the advancement of COIL and telecollaboration brings exciting opportunities to language education, and eTwinning can play a key role for collaborative virtual exchanges. To realize the full potential of eTwinning for EFL teaching and learning, Figure 2 summarizes some of the most widely accepted practical implications of eTwinning and their proven or potential benefits for language education.

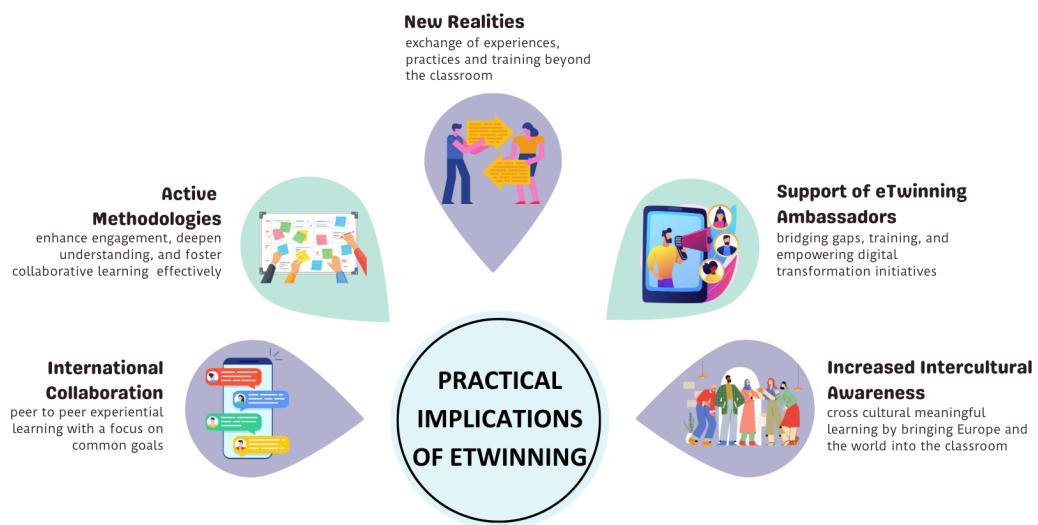


Figure 2 Practical implications of eTwinning for language education

For language learners, eTwinning may facilitate varied international collaborative exchanges and interactions, providing students with peer-to-peer experiential learning while trying to reach a common objective. This is also supported by the use of active methodologies (e.g., cooperative learning, project-based learning), thus enhancing learners' engagement and

deepening understanding. Furthermore, eTwinning provides language learners and educators with opportunities of discovering new realities thanks to the exchange of good practices, experiences and training beyond the traditional classroom. Numerous examples of eTwinning projects can be checked on the European School Education Platform: <https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/etwinning/projects>

For educators, the support of eTwinning ambassadors is essential, as these experts can bridge gaps, provide training and empowering digital transformation. eTwinning learning environments can also improve and increase intercultural (communicative) awareness for both instructors and students, due to cross cultural meaningful learning processes by bring other cultures into the classroom.

DISCUSSION

The European Commission (2012) considers that educational technology is key in developing quality education. In this line, the current educational system in Spain is trying to include educational technology in the classroom (Fernández et al., 2020), as it is shown by the results of this research. However, there is not a correlation between the theory and the practice, as the government bets on the development of educational technology and includes it in the law, but it does not provide the school with the necessary tools to do it. This research highlights the importance of providing schools with the necessary tools which may help both students and teachers to enhance their digital literacy as well as English linguistic competence in this particular case, paying special attention to the role that eTwinning ambassadors play.

On the one hand, in this study we analyzed the functions of eTwinning ambassadors, a group of teachers who work with technology and consider it as an axis for their educational planification. Although the participants stated that they must teach other teachers how to work with technology in the classroom, they also consider that the government does not provide them with quality tools for developing this function (Haro-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Moreover, eTwinning is not included in the law, and this aspect might make it difficult to coordinate their labor both as teachers and as eTwinning ambassadors.

On the other hand, this lack of materials affects the procedure of eTwinning platform: telecollaboration or, in other words, COIL. On the one hand, eTwinning is characterized by following the principles of COIL, which is considered by Appiah-Kubi and Annan (2020) to be a pedagogy that promotes the planification of a process of teaching and learning focused on the development of the intercultural competence of students through the use of a vehicular language (generally English) for communication. As it has been already mentioned, COIL is basically a form of telecollaboration, which is defined by Guth and Helm (2010) as the medium which makes possible virtual exchanges among groups of people who are geographically distant but that share a common language. In order to succeed when carrying out a cooperative work based on telecollaboration, several basic materials are needed, apart from the linguistic competence. One of the problems of education in Spain is that there is an unequal distribution of resources: private and charter schools have more technological materials than public schools, as pointed out by some of the participants (Haro-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Regarding the methodologies which are adequate for creating an eTwinning project in the classroom, there are some methodologies which are more favorable than others. Despite this statement, we can say that we can implement this kind of projects whatever the methodology used is. The current educational law in Spain (Real Decreto 157/2022, Spanish Government, 2022) grants freedom to the teachers in terms of using the methodology they consider more appropriate at school. Nevertheless, this may not happen in many European countries, and this is the reason why there are many differences regarding the methodologies used in the classroom. Although at first sight we can think of this as a pitfall, our results show that this fact favors the process of internalization, defined by Tanhueco-Nepomuceno (2015) as the way to open students' minds to other cultures by developing some cooperative activities and tasks sharing a language which is different from their mother tongue.

One of the objectives of COIL, the pedagogy on which eTwinning is based, is to foster internationalization. In particular, the eTwinning program in general benefits both teachers and students. As mentioned by Paz-Albo and Hervás (2017), teachers develop strategies of collaboration and cooperation with other teachers, incorporating good educational practices into professional action. Regarding the students, both these authors and our results point out that eTwinning improves their cooperation strategies and incorporate multicultural and linguistic knowledge into their background. This encourages the breaking of stereotypes and respect for differences.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to explore the role of eTwinning ambassadors regarding the use of eTwinning as an initiative to improve students' foreign language learning process. The analysis of the participants' responses clarifies that eTwinning is an educational platform that helps students develop not only their English linguistic competence but also their digital and intercultural ones. Thus, we can infer that culture is related to language, and that technology favors this important relationship.

At this point, it is relevant to go back to the research question of the study (*What are the eTwinning ambassadors' perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using eTwinning in the educational practice?*). Our findings show that eTwinning has numerous advantages when talking about the development of competences, as cited before. On the one hand, we should consider internationalization, as telecollaboration and COIL favor intercultural exchange among students when using a foreign language in real contexts. Moreover, participants also agree that eTwinning promotes the development of digital competence, since it is a digital tool, and English linguistic competence. These ideas are in line with the findings of the study developed by Martín and Barrio (2021). In addition, it is necessary to highlight that telecollaboration and COIL have the power to connect countries which are geographically distant (Huertas-Abril, 2020), so that we can state that eTwinning contributes to promoting the relationship between language and culture in a real context.

Nevertheless, the platform has some pitfalls, described by the eTwinning ambassadors, as the majority of our informants agree with the opinion that the main difficulty is the one related to the instability of the Internet (e.g., lack of WiFi access and need for using teachers' own devices), as the platform depends on it, and also that it is complicated to succeed in the planification of the activities. In fact, technological resources at schools tend to be scarce, and due to the fact that these resources are essential to carry out an eTwinning project, this is an important limitation. Moreover, as eTwinning does not appear in the current Spanish law, its use is supposed to be extra work for teachers. Finally, there are many teachers and students who are not digitally competent enough to develop an eTwinning project, or, in the specific case of students, they are not allowed to use certain apps because of their age, so they have to start using easy tools to then be able to use this platform.

Moreover, we realized that although eTwinning gives information about the functions of eTwinning ambassadors (i.e., to help other teachers with eTwinning procedures, to disseminate eTwinning action, both using online activities and participating in a great set of other kinds of initiatives such as the creation of blogs or didactic meetings, to coordinate groups of work in schools, to encourage other teachers with the use of educational technology, and to develop some projects which may serve as examples of good practices; eTwinning, 2015), reality differs from what is written on the platform, since our informants have only pointed out three of them: training, motivating and helping to solve problems because of the excessive workload to which the ambassadors are subjected.

It is necessary to mention that our results show that the ambassadors are working to provide training through different means. In addition, they suggest a way of proceeding that does not stress new teachers or students in the use of educational technology: the ideal process would be to start by joining projects already created with the advice of the ambassadors, so that once students and teachers are familiar with the platform, they can participate in and create new projects.

Finally, it is necessary to note that the process of teaching and learning a foreign language requires not only the language to be learnt but also the culture; in other words, we cannot separate language and culture when teaching and learning a new language. In this sense, as eTwinning ambassadors highlight, telecollaboration (and COIL) contributes to facilitating the intercultural exchange in a real context, as shown in Appiah-Kubi and Annan (2020), since students are asked to use the foreign language to communicate with students from other countries, allowing distant immersion and internationalization.

Nevertheless, the results and conclusions of this study should be interpreted in the light of certain limitations. First, this project has considered only Spanish ambassadors working in Spain, so we have not taken account of other points of view from different countries. Moreover, the number of ambassadors is limited, and they do not represent all the Autonomous Communities of Spain. In addition, subjectivity might have affected the results since the nature of the study is purely qualitative. Furthermore, the opinions and perceptions of the ambassadors may be influenced by the change of the platform occurred recently, considering that this change has been an extra disadvantage for them and has increased negative feeling in eTwinners. All these aspects should be considered to be included in future research.

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