

**Analysis of the virtual community of practice “Meet my class” to foster bilingualism and
interculturality during the Covid-19 confinement**

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Abstract

Educational demands of international communities have brought up the importance of learning new alternatives of communication and collaboration, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, establishing bilingualism and plurilingualism as a key starting point to tackle these educational challenges. This paper seeks to recognise and analyze the experiences of a group of seventeen teachers from different continents and their students in a virtual community of practice “Meet my class”, created as a result of the pandemic lockdown and its restricted opportunities to have real communication practicing in ESL and EFL environments in different contexts and cultures. Data sources included a questionnaire, interviews and observing participants' interactions in the CoP with an active and meaningful involvement. The research design is based on a case study within a qualitative approach. Findings reveal the importance of collaborative environments for professional development, reasons to join a virtual CoP and its challenges, furthermore, interculturality as an important theoretical construct to foster bilingual development worldwide, it encourages a deep understanding of diversity within a global society having in mind the 21st century required educational skills.

Key words:

Community of practice, Interculturality, bilingualism, education, teachers, culture, interaction, virtual encounters, Covid-19, diversity

Resumen

Las comunidades internacionales han planteado la importancia de conocer nuevas alternativas de comunicación y colaboración, especialmente tras la pandemia del Covid-19, estableciendo el bilingüismo y el plurilingüismo como punto de partida para afrontar retos educativos. Este artículo busca reconocer y analizar las experiencias de un grupo de docentes de diferentes continentes y sus alumnos en una comunidad virtual de práctica “*Meet my class*”, creada a raíz del confinamiento, y de limitadas oportunidades de comunicación en entornos de *ESL* y *EFL* en diferentes contextos y culturas. Los datos incluyeron un cuestionario, entrevistas y la observación de las interacciones de los participantes en la comunidad de práctica con una participación activa. El diseño de investigación se basa en un estudio de caso dentro de un enfoque cualitativo. Los hallazgos revelan la importancia de los entornos colaborativos para el desarrollo profesional, las razones para unirse a una comunidad virtual y sus desafíos, además, la interculturalidad como una construcción teórica importante para fomentar el desarrollo del bilingüismo generando una comprensión profunda de la diversidad dentro de una sociedad global teniendo en cuenta las habilidades educativas requeridas en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave:

Comunidad de práctica, Interculturalidad, bilingüismo, educación, docentes, cultura, interacción, encuentros virtuales, Covid-19, diversidad

Resumo

As demandas educacionais das comunidades internacionais trouxeram à tona a importância de aprender novas alternativas de comunicação e colaboração, principalmente após a pandemia da Covid-19, estabelecendo o bilinguismo e o plurilinguismo como ponto de partida fundamental para enfrentar esses desafios educacionais. Este artigo busca reconhecer e analisar as experiências de um grupo de dezessete professores de diferentes continentes e seus alunos em uma comunidade virtual, criada pelo fechamento geral da pandemia e suas restrições para a comunicação em ambientes ESL e EFL em diferentes contextos e culturas. As fontes de dados incluíram um questionário, entrevistas e observação das interações dos participantes na comunidade com um envolvimento ativo e significativo. O desenho da pesquisa é baseado em um estudo de caso com abordagem qualitativa. Os achados revelam a importância de ambientes colaborativos para o desenvolvimento profissional, motivos para ingressar em uma CoP virtual e seus desafios, além disso, a interculturalidade como um importante construto teórico para promover o desenvolvimento bilíngue em todo o mundo, incentiva uma compreensão profunda da diversidade dentro de uma sociedade global tendo em mente o as habilidades educacionais exigidas do século 21.

Palavras-Chave:

Comunidade de prática, Interculturalidade, bilinguismo, educação, professores, cultura, interação, encontros virtuais, Covid-19, diversidade

Introduction

Creating fair bilingual learning environments to practice, interact in a second language and develop intercultural communication skills has been a challenge in education as well as the most recent pandemic event. The COVID- 19 pandemic has greatly interrupted the usual development of countries where coronavirus was taking over. In order to reduce the crowd, countries had lockdowns, schools closure, workplace non attendance etc. To control the spread of this pandemic, educational institutions went on a permanent break worldwide. More than 90% of the students in the world are affected by this sudden closure of schools (Tarkar, 2020). Furthermore, the closure of the schools affected the teaching practices, to appease the situation online teaching methods were adopted, so having online classes was meant to be a temporary solution during the global lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Meet my class” is a Community of practice (CoP) that was created in order to have a more meaningful educational process. In this community, international EFL and ESL teachers with their students from all ages took part in an intercultural project, in which, by taking advantage of the online resources, academic meetings were held through platforms like Zoom and Google Meet during the pandemic period. This community was founded by a Polish English teacher, whose purpose was to connect the world and meet friends from different countries in a very difficult moment for humanity. One of the first activities the CoP “Meet my class” had with students was letter exchanging. Later, the founder’s idea was to have online meetings to connect students and have them speak about their countries and cultures.

“Meet my class” makes it possible to connect pedagogical experiences of English teachers and share best practices among them, through international encounters from various geographical and cultural contexts; some of them were from countries like Ukraine, Turkey, India, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, and Vietnam. These connections are considered by UNESCO (2021) as one important responsibility teachers have in today's education to work collaboratively as critical agents to create new educational ecosystems.

Communication skills are a relevant factor in educational contexts whose purpose is to promote and consolidate bilingual processes according to the national educational policies. In Colombia, the Ministry of Education (M.E.N.) follows the National Bilingual Programme. This project intends to enable Colombian citizens to communicate through the English language contributing to the country's incursion into the international markets and new cultural perspectives (M.E.N., 2006).

The development of this research is pertinent for the educational communities involved, as it allows recognising narratives of collaborative work in a difficult moment in the world. Therefore, the community aims to connect cultures and integrate realities, allowing learners to develop significant linguistic and sociolinguistic skills to recognise and understand the diversity of different communities worldwide. At the same time, being part of a learning environment that recognizes the identity and expression of their own cultural patterns.

This research seeks to establish how the virtual Community of Practice (CoP) "Meet my class" encouraged intercultural encounters and bilingualism during the Covid-19 confinement among participants.

The project is directed through analysis stages, discussions and reflections aiming to contribute to bilingualism and learning environments, enriching practices and improving bilingual environments. After the interventions and meetings held during the established implementation time, the results are validated through the experiences shared in the community of practice. Moreover, participation in social contexts is helpful and implies a dual process of creating meaning. So, the teacher's community participates actively in activities, live encounters reflecting on possibilities to create social life while interacting within the CoP (Wenger, 2010), via conferencing so people can meet from anywhere in the world.

Considering the contextualization of this introduction, this research study sets out to answer the following question: What are the learning and teaching experiences of the virtual Community of Practice "Meet my class" to foster bilingualism and interculturality during the Covid-19 confinement?

Literature review

The Covid-19 pandemic reached all continents in March 2020, affecting educational systems worldwide, causing the widespread closure of schools, universities, and any other learning centers. It is “estimated that a total of almost 1.6 billion students worldwide have been affected by the closure of educational institutions and confinement” (UNESCO, 2020). Colombian students and teachers were equally impacted by Covid-19 lockdowns. To mitigate the negative impact and due to school being closed, UNESCO started working on proposal known as distance learning together with non-profit educational apps and online learning spaces that have enabled institutions and teachers to get in contact with their students from anywhere in the world and facilitate education.

On the other hand, in the course of educational changes as a result of the pandemic, building bilingual learning environments has become a challenge when implementing bilingualism policies. The constant development of various skills such as linguistic competence, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, establish a relationship between language and society. All of these above must work together, creating a mechanism that allows language acquisition. Vásquez, (2021) explains that the Connectivism theory by Siemens was created for the digital age, it is an important improvement in regards to understanding the learning process in online environments, facilitating learning, thus taking apart the barriers of space and time in education.

As a result, bilingual teachers around the world identified the need to innovate and look for solutions that allow them to approach and take advantage of digital tools to deal with these ever-changing educational realities.

One reason to start writing about this phenomena was the students' limited opportunities to develop intercultural competences through cultural exchanges. Research has found that these interactions help students in their learning process, (Corbetta & Bonetti, 2018) argued that what is sought with interculturality is to build bridges that allow reformulating the positions of each one in the social structure. Unfortunately, this was restricted by the pandemic, the little rapprochement with bilingual or native English cultures led to the virtual community of practice “Meet my class” having a role in bilingual environments. For that reason, teachers need to go beyond the physical configuration of a school; therefore in this proposal, our participants met each other virtually from far distances. These practices allowed students to be empowered and became active subjects in a student-centered learning environment. (Nair, 2019).

Community of practice: shared knowledge and best practices in bilingual education

During remote education in 2020, having involved students was a pedagogical challenge worldwide. To find solutions Siemens, (2017) explains that the starting point of connectivism is the individual, who is involved in a cycle of knowledge that needs to be connected and transferred. Some principles of connectivism point to necessary aspects to maintain communication, the learning and knowledge relies on diversity of opinions, whereas nurturing

connections is needed to facilitate continual learning. Creating connections between teachers from different cultures through communities of practice interactions was the best way to improve teaching practices in online scenarios.

Communities of Practice are described as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). According to the authors, those communities share a topic of interest (*domain*) and learn from others by building strong relationships (*community*), allowing them to exchange resources, experiences and ways of addressing problems (*practice*) to constitute a real community of practice. Gannon-Leary and Fontainha (2007) state that virtual communities of practice increase participants' knowledge through the use of information and communication technologies to promote interactivity and incorporation of collaborative pedagogical models.

As a Community of Practice (CoP), “Meet my class” involves the voluntary online participation of language teachers worldwide. It was created to provide pedagogical, cultural, social and emotional support in English classes with digital learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. The teachers define a CoP as a space for cooperation and shared knowledge on the ESL/EFL field. According to Munby et al. (2006), a CoP involves shared tasks, practices and resources, sharing a common technical language, standards of practice, behaviors and perspectives, promoting the best practices in bilingual education. It is defined as “the practical

teaching, techniques, tips, strategies, methods, and exercises that result in excellent product for program delivery” (Perry, 2003, as cited in Soomro et al, 2016, p.01).

Communities of Practice involve successful collaborative work to create and share new knowledge. Stahl and Hesse (2009) describe four paradigms of shared knowledge in collaboration, in which the CoP “Meet my class” approaches three of them. The first one refers to the participants’ capability of expressing, transferring or comparing their well-formed opinions of their mental representations; the second one makes reference to a shared knowledge that arises from the participants’ interactions and work with the same object that results in new knowledge to all participants of the collaborative group. In the CoP “Meet my class”, teachers have the opportunity to share their knowledge from their own mental representations about teaching English but also from their teaching experiences during pandemic and in online learning environments.

When the participants’ interaction is shared in a common context, the group builds a collaborative discourse called the paradigm of a sharing situation. “Meet my class” has evidenced the construction of a shared new knowledge among participants, through a collaborative discourse regarding ESL/ EFL teaching and learning processes in online environments when in this CoP, teachers proposed training sessions and own authority online resources to improve bilingual teaching practices. This has undoubtedly led to the recognition of

best practices that have driven teachers through the implementation of “existing practices that already have a good degree of widely agreed effectiveness” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Developing teacher’s intercultural competence in an online learning environment

Current trends in education attempt to enhance learning environments that prepare students for a globalized world. Fantini, (2020) states that internationalizing curriculum and campus increase exchanging opportunities and develop intercultural abilities in educational processes. First and foremost, it is necessary to define intercultural competence, understood as the ability to mobilize and deploy relevant attitudes, skills and knowledge to interact effectively and appropriately in different intercultural situations (Deardoff, 2009). It means that learning environments, which set an intercultural education approach, foster the development of a visible interaction among different cultures, while facilitating communication and the understanding of the cultural diversity.

Echcharfy (2019) affirms that culture in language learning is the key to better communication among cultures. To reduce cultural gaps, the implementation of Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) is an accurate option, according to O’Dowd and Lewis’ (2016), OIE offers a collaborative environment, furthermore, it makes an important contribution to ESL/EFL learning processes and the intercultural competence development. Teachers worldwide have included these practices in their lessons to increase virtual mobility to create meaningful and authentic communication. So that, everyone should have a deep understanding of their own

and the others' cultural norms of interaction, values, beliefs, thoughts, traditions and customs. Moreover, it is a lifelong learning process that allows language and culture to be artfully connected.

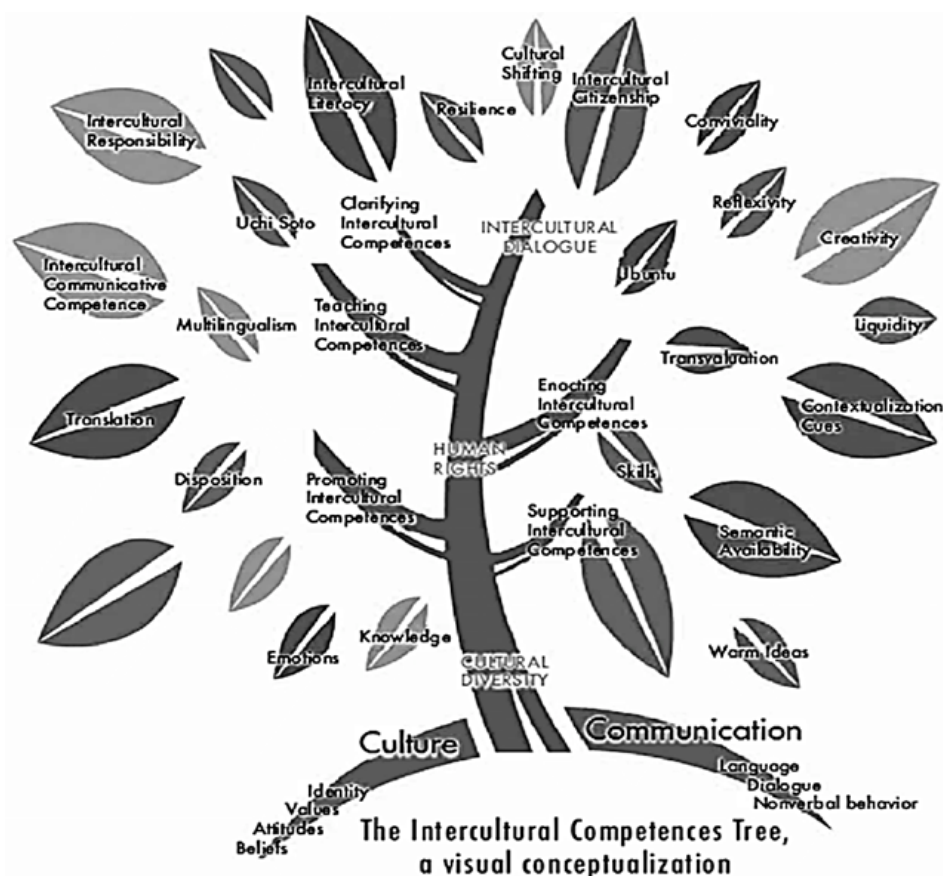
Formulating strategies to carry out necessary teaching actions at a distance methodology became a priority in confinement. Hodges et al. (2020) makes an adequate difference between carefully arranged online learning and teaching experiences from online courses quickly designed due to a crisis. It can be argued that online learning has its own advantages, such as flexible access from anywhere, at any time (Smedley, 2010) that means a permanent availability, which is translated into having good quality interactive materials for self study and self instruction (Leszczyński et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2008). Moreover, these online experiences involve interculturality when teachers' communities have the opportunity to meet new cultures just click away. Remote teaching was a solution, that is why online learning environments began to take place while adapting to the new conditions shaping the educational system. (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). The "otherness" as a key concept becomes relevant by Trujillo (2020) in which the author believes that interculturality has an influence on teachers and the way they accept both the target language and the behaviors of others.

Intercultural communication refers to the interactions that come up between members from different cultures, keeping a receptive attitude, establishing contact with the rest while having required abilities to communicate with different people from diverse cultural

backgrounds. Furthermore, intercultural competencies “include respect, self-awareness, identity, seeing from other perspectives or worldviews, listening, adaptation, relationship building, and cultural humility” (UNESCO, 2013. pag. 24 in Deardorff, 2020. p. 4). To sum up, Deardorff (2020) defines intercultural competence as the skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to enhance interactions that are both successful and suitable for exchanges across differences; it enhances bilingual environments to be aware about their inner characteristics while having a whole perspective of the world. To add to the discussion, the figure below represents the characteristics of intercultural competencies according to UNESCO (2013).

Figure 01

UNESCO Intercultural Competencies Tree



Roots: Culture (Identity, Values, Attitudes, Beliefs, etc.) and Communication (Language, Dialogue, Nonverbal behavior, etc.)

Trunk: Cultural Diversity, Human Rights, Intercultural Dialogue

Branches: Operational steps (Clarifying, Teaching, Promoting, Supporting and Enacting Intercultural Competences)

Leaves: Intercultural Responsibility, Intercultural Literacy, Resilience, Cultural Shifting, Intercultural Citizenship, Conviviality, Reflexivity, Creativity, Liquidity, Contextualization Cues, Transvaluation, Ubuntu, Semantic Availability, Warm Ideas, Skills, Uchi Soto, Multilingualism, Disposition, Emotions, Knowledge, Translation, Intercultural Communicative Competence. Some of the leaves have been left free so that this tree, which is very much alive, can be complemented upon the rich diversity of contexts available worldwide.

Bilingual education and remote teaching during the contingency of Covid 19.

Defining bilingualism has always been controversial, several definitions come from social and historical features. The term bilingualism typically describes the use of two languages of an individual (Baker, 2021) and the abilities and skills each person has to switch and combine the two languages. Features like perfect code switching is another current idea about a bilingual status that is now seen as a positive and desirable feature in people's personal and professional lives but even that notion is being discussed by authors like García & Sánchez (2018). In addition, teaching languages is an important path to close the communicative and social gap among people. García (2008) argues that bilingual education is a reasonable and unique way to educate in the twenty-first century in relation to lifelong language learning.

According to Baker (2021) the English language is on trend due to the mass media diffusion, internet, movies, music, etc., while having influence on the development of bilingualism worldwide, since it has become a useful language to connect and to have international communication. In countries like Colombia, this foreign language has taken importance in all educational levels with the implementation of the National Bilingual Programme (2004-2019) by the Ministry of Education (M.E.N.). In Latin America, English is usually learned as a foreign language, whereas in Asia and European countries it is acquired as a second language.

Having in mind Baker's (2021) arguments, the reality shows that bilingual individuals need a community to interact and exist, they have to work together in networks, regions and communities. These language communities behave and interact with others thanks to all systems that make communication possible around the world, and as a result, languages can become stronger, they can be extinguished or get through big changes.

The globalization and new technologies emerged as a result of people's demands and sociolinguistics realities promoting the change of the traditional models in bilingual education. "It is important to underline that the greater power and visibility of language minorities in the 21st century has resulted in bilingual education programs for them, and by them, where they exercise a great deal of agency" (García, 2014) " Nowadays, nation-states recognize the language diversity and its heritage so they work to ensure a continuous development of bilingual education.

Bilingual education in terms of the latest changes has faced challenges due to the contingency of Covid 19. Life has changed in many ways and adverse impacts of lockdown were evident. Consequently, the terms bilingual education and remote teaching have come together when online teaching appears. This methodology makes teachers figure out how to integrate technology into their pedagogical practices. Online teaching provides teachers and learners with digital media and resources to integrate them with their realities. Nelson (2021), argues the lack of systematic integration of technology through a stand-alone technology course in which

in-service teachers were not prepared enough to deal with such situations. Fortunately, looking for a possible mechanism to interact is necessary as a response to the educational demands during the pandemic crisis, and teachers go beyond their social circles to continue developing learners' language skills.

This situation is forcing education systems to face challenges and question the future of educational contexts. Once again, teachers have been forced to move to an “emergency remote education” Valverde, et al. (2021), as a result, implementing practices that differ from those planned previously is a positive but improvised response to these difficulties.

Research Design

Method

A suitable way to explore and evidence phenomena with details is a case study, defined as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time” (Creswell, 2007. p.97).

Furthermore, Stake (2005) recommended case study to optimize understanding, experiencing and interpreting the studied phenomenon. According to Creswell, (2018) the main purpose of a case study is to understand the information through qualitative data like observations, interviews, even audiovisual material. This case study was oriented to be analytic.

Yin (2009) argues that empiricism of case studies depends on knowledge and experience lived by participants and researchers; this also involves the collection and analysis of data. So that case study research is highly recommended to keep focus on research questions because it is more closely connected to the researchers’ main context or particular situation. The main characteristic of case studies is to present a deep understanding of the situation through the use of “many forms of qualitative data, ranging from interviews, to observations, to documents, to audiovisual materials” (Creswell, 2007. p.98).

This case study aims to establish how the virtual Community of Practice (CoP) “Meet my class” encouraged intercultural encounters and bilingualism during the Covid-19 confinement among participants.

Instruments

In order to achieve the specific objectives of this research, three instruments to collect data were implemented. Firstly, to characterize and identify participants' profiles of the community of practice "Meet my class" locally and globally for understanding cultural aspects, expertise and practices of participants, a questionnaire was applied. The questionnaire <https://forms.gle/rVyTJ42NBYrDeHkGA> intended to describe, analyze and establish the relationships between variables in particular populations or groups, usually of certain extension (Yuni & Urbano, 2014).

Secondly, the interviews were meant to analyze the community of practice "Meet my class" contributions and the incidence of interculturality and bilingualism encouragement; having in mind teachers' variables, experiences and beliefs. According to Yuni & Urbano (2014), the use of technology for interviews allows people to talk about their experiences, sensations, ideas, etc. A data collection method selected for this qualitative research were semi-structured interviews as they are widely used because of the preselected set of questions and the openness to bring in new topics related to the same subjects. Galleta (2012) highlights the importance for the interviewer (researchers) of listening and asking for clarification when necessary, also, to encourage a critical reflection in some points of the interview; these two processes make evident a relation of reciprocity between the interviewer and the interviewees.

Finally, unobtrusive methods like observation help the researcher to take notes and analyze the findings by reducing the observer's presence in the studied community. Creswell (2007) states that observation is an essential device for data collection in this type of descriptive research. This instrument attempted to interpret the participants' experiences and intercultural encounters in the community of practice "Meet my class", the researchers observed and analyzed the participants' evidence of interactions after the online encounters, taken from posts on the CoP social network group, as well as their narratives about experiences and the way they transformed their learning environments. The instruments aforementioned allow researchers to observe the phenomenon countless times. In this study, the researchers were observers without direct involvement with activity or people.

Participants:

This study explored a Community of Practice conformed by teachers from more than ten countries who, during the Covid-19 pandemic, decided to foster bilingualism through cultural and linguistics exchanges. The CoP has around 6.450 participants. However during the Covid pandemic contingency not all of them were active participants, the most representative teachers that were involved in all the exchanges and training were seventeen teachers. The participants were selected through an observation process in the community, they were recognized as the most active, creative and helpful. Fortunately, there were participants from different countries, each representing their culture. The questionnaire was delivered to the seventeen participants

who previously accepted the digital formal consent, to gather features of participants of the community such as location, languages, culture, bilingual practices and motivations, moreover the narratives and experiences of the most successful teaching experiences. Finally, conducting in-depth interviews with only the most committed participants with multiple meetings held, the most active and interested in the project will be interviewed. There are six teachers. They will also have an interview about the experiences, reflections and conclusions, to gather precise information about what the participants think or believe.

Data analysis

The project's main objective is to establish the development of bilingual learning environments and intercultural approach by describing the experience of the virtual Community of Practice (CoP) "Meet my class" during the Covid-19 confinement in terms of a case study. Initially, researchers addressed qualitative research which allowed them to get the uniqueness of the human beings being studied and their environment as particular phenomena of study (Rodríguez, 2005).

Data collection involved a period of seven months. During this time the three researchers were looking for evidence to observe in the CoP. Then, participants involved in the project were contacted to take part in the virtual process of data collection, by taking into account their intercultural experiences regarding their impact on the professional development during the online sessions that were carried out in the pandemic lockdown. Seventeen teachers accepted the informed consent.

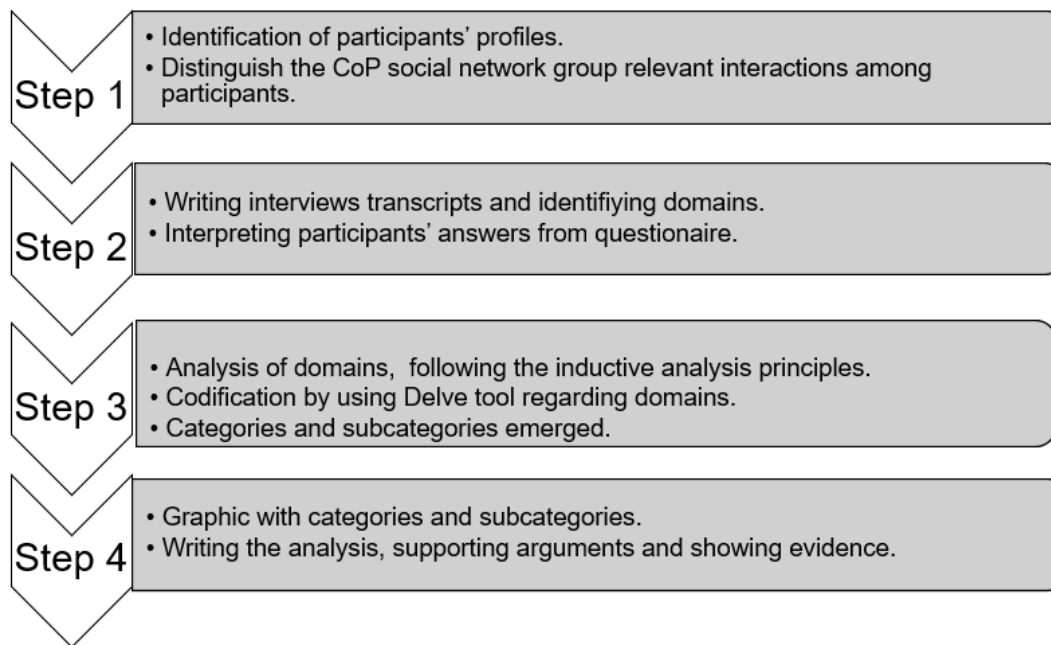
The principles of inductive data analysis approach supported the process of analysis of data collected in this project. Hatch (2002) states that inductive analysis searches and examines specific patterns of meaning in data in order to create general statements. Moreover, inductive analysis theory guided researchers to find domains, which were called categories, having in mind

the relationships among codes found in the excerpts for supporting while breaking data into analyzable parts.

Ho & Limpaecher (2022) refers to inductive coding as an approach that allows the theory to emerge from data itself. The first step in the inductive analysis was to read the collected data and create frames of analysis that were later assigned some codes. Then a process of abstraction applies to decrease the quantity of information available by grouping up data, so the research question can be answered based on findings that are expressed as categories which Kyngäs (2020) defines as a unit of analysis as a tool to gather open codes to form sub-categories. Once the unit of analysis has been identified, researchers have a solid base to start reporting results.

Figure 2.

Steps for data analysis



Three data collection instruments were used for this study: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The first step for data analysis was to identify the main characteristics of the CoP participants profiles as well as to recognize the most significant interactions in the CoP “Meet my class” social network group.

In the second step, after having conducted six interviews with the most active teachers participants of the CoP “Meet my class”, some of these interviews were transcribed manually and others with the auto-transcription programme *Happy Scribe*, in this process the intelligent

transcription was used in order to transcribe every word but “making an interpretation to exclude pauses, status, and filler words and potentially cleaning up the grammar” (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022).

Once the process of reading was done, the researchers used the online software Delvetool, to have a clear and organized process of coding having in mind the nature of the semi-structured interviews and the open questions in the questionnaire. It allowed the researchers to identify the domains, and name the categories and subcategories regarding the research question.

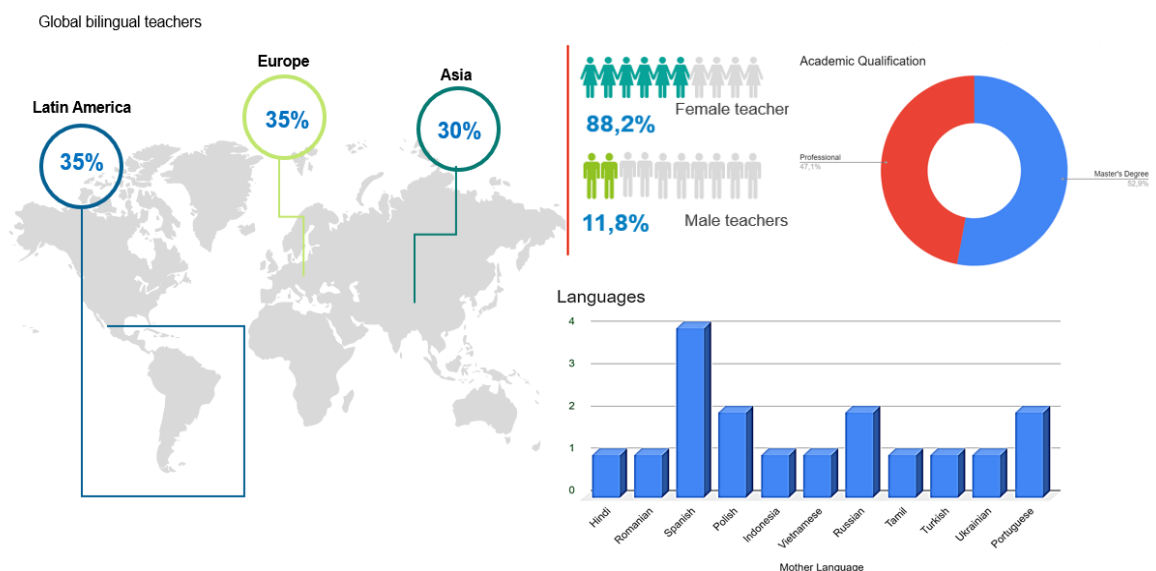
In order to start writing the narrative of the analysis process, three graphics were created, one of them stated the CoP participants characterization result (see Table 1), a second one clarifies the emerging categories, subcategories and codes (see Table 2) and a third graphic supports this information with excerpts taken from data collection instruments (see Table 3).

When domains were identified, connections and relationships among them were recognized and from this analysis four subcategories emerged to group domains. Subsequently, these subcategories were organized in two main categories, the first one was named *Virtual Community of Practice, CoP: learning and teaching experiences during the Covid lockdown* and the second one named *Contributions of the CoP “Meet my Class” in fostering bilingualism and interculturality*. The categories evidenced aspects that were relevant in the interviews and

questionnaire and led to answer the research question “*What are the learning and teaching experiences of the virtual community of practice “Meet my class” to foster bilingualism and interculturality during the Covid-19 confinement?*”

Table 1.

Participants’ characterization



Note: This table shows the main CoP participants’ characteristics according to the questionnaire results.

The research data generated by participants through the questionnaire, helped to identify particularities among participants’ profiles and their characterization, (See table 1). The group of teachers, as aforementioned, are from different countries, specifically from three continents. It is noticeable how female teachers are more numerous than male teachers. Moreover, it is important to highlight the academic qualifications, some of them are professionals and the others have

studied for a master's degree. About language, it is necessary to have in mind that all the participants are bilingual, they all speak their mother tongues plus English and some other languages from different cultures which lies down to establish the analysis below.

Table 2.

Research categories and subcategories

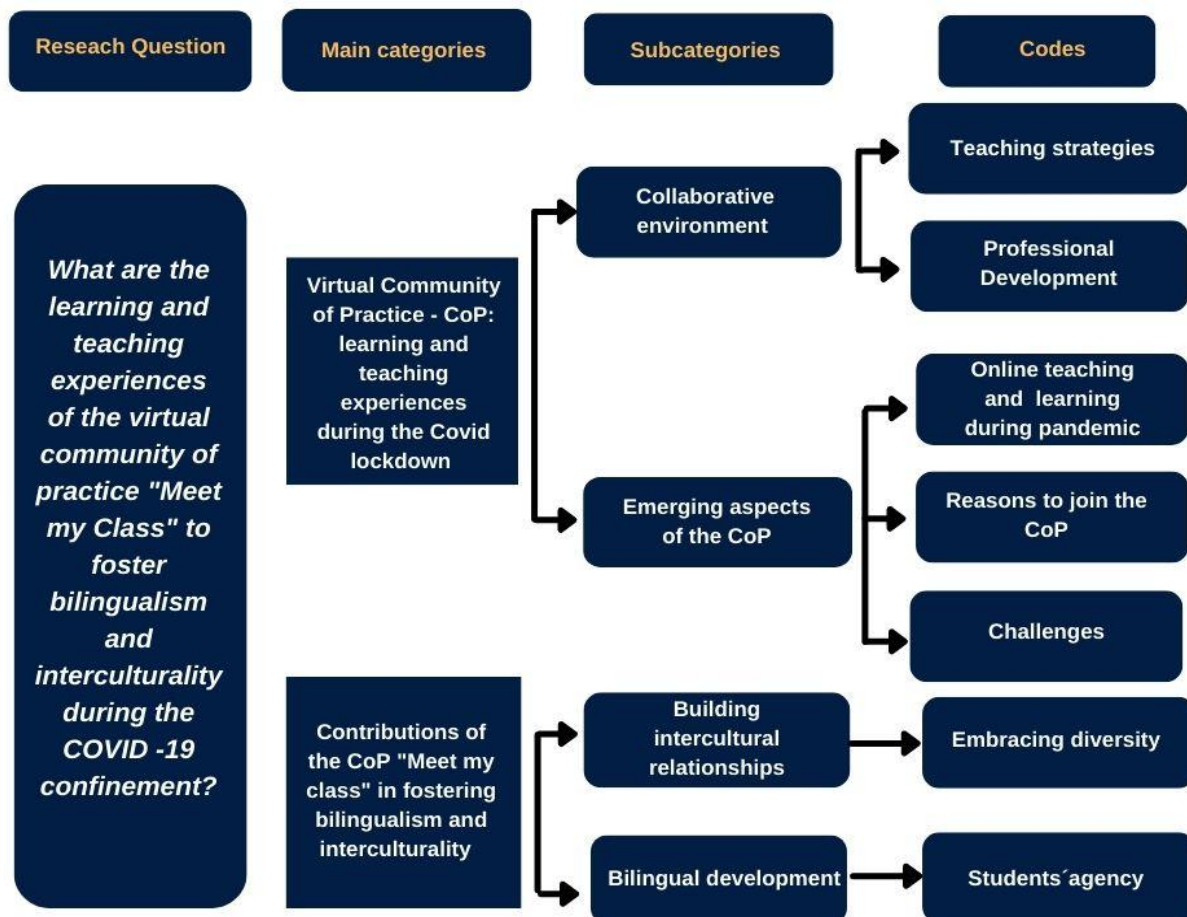


Table 3.

Research categories, subcategories and excerpts

Main Categories	Subcategories	Codes	Sample excerpts
Virtual Community of Practice – CoP: Learning and Teaching experiences during the Covid lockdown	Collaborative environment	Teaching strategies	“I became much more aware of online tools to make my lessons more relevant and meaningful for my students” (T04_CoP) “I can say that the lessons are more communicative now and my students have understood the purpose of learning other languages” (T08_CoP)
		Professional development	“I think it is a really great experience for us teachers to discuss some issues, to suggest solutions and to help each other” (T06_CoP) “I’ve found here a fantastic and very supportive community and it’s a really great learning opportunity” (T08_CoP)
	Emerging aspects of the CoP	Online Learning during pandemic	“The pandemic brought us a new opportunity for us to share and to make our lessons much more meaningful for the actual interaction of students” (T04_CoP) “When schools were closed, this group proved to be a virtual window to the teaching and an opening to the cultural similarities” (T07_CoP)
		Reasons to join the CoP	“and that’s why I engaged on the international meetings, to make my students able to communicate in English” (T05_CoP) “I tried to involve many classes into different meetings just to make them meet new people, new cultures and practice English” (T06_CoP)
		Challenges	“I could just warn my group members about the possible dangers of being part of this project and of being part of the group and what precautions they should take just to prevent their kids or themselves from some bad things.” (T01_CoP) “You never know who the person is if you have not met him or her before” (T06_CoP) “We have had some kind of experience that the teacher didn’t appear although the time was scheduled” (T06_CoP)
	Building intercultural relationships	Embracing diversity	“They are not the center of the universe and we can expect people to think the same way we do. That’s something we have to respect so that was really interesting in terms of religion, in terms of food” (T04_CoP)
Contributions of the CoP “Meet my class” in fostering bilingualism and interculturality	Bilingual Development	Students’ agency	“I noticed that they were more open in terms of religion, in terms of food, in terms of cooperation, in terms of you know, accepting other cultures because some of them asked me.” (T04_CoP)
			“My students realized and then they become much more confident and then now all of them, they open the cameras, they give the presentations, the presentation that my students give on the international meetings, they prepare everything by themselves” (T05_CoP) “it made them more self-aware and self-confident by expressing their thoughts in English” (T06_CoP) “So, this project gave us the chance to practice in a real context. So, that motivated my students to learn, to ask and that was really, really meaningful for me. I’m sure it was for my students as well and to increase their motivation to keep on learning” (T04_CoP)

Virtual Community of Practice - CoP: learning and teaching experiences during the Covid lockdown

According to the findings, two main categories emerged to answer the research question of this study (see Table 3). This session addresses the analysis of the first main category named *Virtual Community of Practice - CoP: learning and teaching experiences during the Covid lockdown*, and the two emerging subcategories: *Collaborative environment* and *Emerging aspects of the CoP*.

The first subcategory of this analysis describes the *Collaborative environment* in which participants of the CoP were immersed in. Wenger (2012) states that participants of a community of practice are able to be involved with others actively, meanwhile they learn from observing other people while fostering interactions based on mutual respect to share new knowledge. Consequently, two codes emerged from this subcategory, they describe the *teaching strategies* and *professional development* that were evident in the teachers' participation in the CoP.

It is noticeable how teachers changed their *teaching practices* and learned from the others participants creating an interactive online environment of global teachers. The evidence in this study showed how the CoP “Meet my class” has been a meaningful window for communication during the online learning that brought the Covid-19 Pandemic because the CoP facilitated their lessons while providing their students with new and meaningful experiences. In the following example a teacher reflects about her lessons:

“I can say that the lessons are more communicative now and my students have understood the purpose of learning other languages.” (T08_CoP)

This means their interactions were a mechanism to make their teaching practices more experiential and engaging due to these new dynamics in online learning spaces. So that when the participant (T05_CoP) was asked to define her experience in the CoP, her answer was:

“I have no words other than incredible! It completely changed my way of teaching”
(T05_CoP)

Having in mind that a CoP encourages professional development and self-empowerment, UNESCO (2021) considers in the social contract for education, the future of teaching as a collaborative profession to promote learning in diverse escenarios and times, in which teachers' individual talents are strengthened. Teacher' participation in the CoP “Meet my class” revealed how being part of this collaborative environment had an impact on their professional development. The previous excerpt demonstrates the positive perception the participant had. To sum up, the research data evidenced that experiences in the CoP merged from participants' roles and kept them updated in terms of resources, methods and mindset.

Secondly, the subcategory “*Emerging aspects of the CoP*” explains by means of three codes named “*online teaching and learning during pandemic*”, “*reasons to join*” and “*challenges*”, the unexpected and remarkable findings that came out from teachers' experiences in their the participation in the CoP. First, the way teachers tried to figure out how to redefine

their teaching practices during the pandemic states that one of the main *reasons to join* was the opportunity they had for their students to make new friends worldwide and practice English in real scenarios.

Additionally, the code “*online teaching and learning during pandemic*” presents how the participants faced the barriers and established the opportunities presented with the CoP “Meet my class” and defined it as a window to communicate with the rest of the world. OECD (2020) reported the students’ needs and response to education were affected by the social distancing. Indeed, participants were exposed to the online teaching and learning transformation, due the pandemic Covid-19 that required teachers to set the meetings so everyone could join from far distances in a videoconference where they could interact.

Finally, the code “*Challenges*” describes the difficulties participants in the CoP had before and during the virtual encounters, like the barriers when scheduling meetings due the time zones differences taking into account participants’ daily routines and teachers’ commitment to attend and carry out the meeting successfully. Moreover, to guarantee having safe spaces for virtual interactions among participants as it is referred by one of the interviewees below:

“You never know who the person is if you have not met him or her before” (T06_CoP).

These drawbacks made the teachers become aware of the dangers and limitations of being part of a virtual global community of teachers. The digital era has undoubtedly brought the world closer, however, conversely within this global space, potentially leading to the virtual

harmful learning environments (Currarini, Matheson, & Vega-Redondo, 2016; Yardi & Boyd, 2010 cited in Fernández & Villard, 2020).

Contributions of the CoP "Meet my class" in fostering bilingualism and interculturality

The second main category, Contributions of the CoP “Meet my class” in fostering bilingualism and interculturality was created based on the data gathered from the questionnaire and the interviews. Regarding intercultural relationships and bilingual development the results indicated different and useful perspectives. As a result, the subcategory, *“Building intercultural relationships”* was identified from the participants' narratives about experiences during encounters where students expressed their cultural awareness.

Deardoff (2020) argued that the ability to mobilize and deploy relevant attitudes, skills and knowledge to interact effectively in cultural situations is called intercultural competence. From this category, the code *“Embracing diversity”* emerged, as a result from excerpts in the data that demonstrate the opinion and experience that participants and their students have had in the virtual CoP regarding the ability to recognize and accept cultural diversity. In one of these excerpts a teacher recognized some of his students' intercultural attitudes during the interaction with students from other cultures in “Meet my class” encounters.

“I noticed that they were more open in terms of religion, in terms of food, in terms of cooperation, in terms of, you know, accepting other cultures because some of them asked me.”
(T04_CoP)

This situation shows the understanding that teachers have of the term interculturality, that, according to Echcharfy (2019), culture in language learning is the key to have better communication among cultures. The participants evidenced how the virtual encounters among learners and teachers exposed them into the diverse cultures and gave them an opportunity to learn about cultural patterns, similarities and expressions including linguistic abilities, even the recognitions of their own cultural backgrounds, self-recognition of their own local culture, tolerance and respect were emerging values from the analysis. Learning environments that recognize and appreciate diversity become safe places to have enjoyable educational experiences and significant relationships among students.

Lastly, the finding of this subcategory “*Bilingual development*” showed that even teachers and their students were more likely to improve their communication skills while they had the international virtual encounters with people from different parts of the world. Participants frequently had the opportunity to express their beliefs and their opinions freely without concerns about their accents, recognizing dialects. In the following example, the participant shares her students’ progress regarding bilingualism.

“My students realized and then they become much more confident and then now all of them, they open the cameras, they give the presentations, the presentation that my students give on the international meetings, they prepare everything by themselves” (T05_CoP)

At the end, participants were able to experience real communication, to learn about new cultures and to understand that bilingualism is essential in today's world. It illustrates how bilingual development impacts on other aspects of the learner development such as personality and relationships (Baker, 2011).

Furthermore, participants argued that when they were exposed to listening and talking to the others they realized everyone speaks the same language in a different way, depending on their cultures, leading to the opportunity to interact without feeling frustrated. Those experiences significantly influence the future ways of learning and practicing a different language as well as terms of technology integration in the learning environment.

Bilingualism development also depends on users' point of view about languages. For this research, participants are located in their home places and getting into international scenarios via conferencing. Students and teachers are stepping into a wide variety of accents, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this project itself is a proof of how people come together to learn from each other as world citizens without the presence of the so-called 'perfect pattern' of a native speaker of the target language.

An emerging aspect for this subcategory is "Student agency" which is defined by OECD (2018) as the capacity to set a goal, that requires reflection and responsible actions to make things happen. Evidence exposes that students became agents of their learning of English during the "Meet my Class" sessions, the teachers' reflections present students' sense of engagement for

learning how to learn . The next excerpts presents the way agency is developed thanks to the participants' experiences in the CoP “Meet my class”.

“It made them more self-aware and self-confident by expressing their thoughts in English” (T06_CoP)”

“So, this project gave us the chance to practice in a real context. So, that motivated my students to learn, to ask and that was really, really meaningful for me. I’m sure it was for my students as well and to increase their motivation to keep on learning” (T04_CoP)

“Meet my class” participants identified their learners' agency capabilities mentioned in the learner’s agency matrix (Anderson, 2020), they are: embracing challenges, cultivating habits of mind, using mistakes, tailoring feedback, growing time and energy. To conclude, education needs to focus on learner agency to become future-ready. It implies a sense of responsibility to participate in the world and, in doing so, influence others to modify circumstances or situations for the better (Araque, 2021).

Conclusions

First at all, it is necessary to look back on the purpose of this study which is to identify the learning and teaching experiences of the virtual Community of Practice “Meet my class” during the Covid-19 confinement in order to foster bilingualism and interculturality. It is valuable to highlight how much a virtual CoP promoted collaborative environments that provided teachers with new strategies to mitigate the effects of Covid pandemic on education and allowed members to share their expertise, from diverse locations worldwide. The use of online tools to communicate was promoted, leading to opportunities to interact and grow professionally.

Creating communities of practice connects people with different cultural backgrounds and their beliefs, which may be key for successful global leaders. Throughout the analysis of this project it was noticeable how participants from different countries made implicit agreements and academic alliances in which a role of collaborator is assumed because they had the willingness to negotiate and share the power that implies using a majority language in their exchanges. Moreover, having spaces with multiple visions enhances people to become more adaptable while developing a global mindset to support each other.

Considering all of the facts above-mentioned, the results affirm that having international experiences promote intercultural competence expansion, which foster bilingual environments development to show equality while being able to communicate in real situations without any concern about accents, cultural differences or beliefs leading to increase the use of the target

language. In addition, intercultural competences are necessary for people who work with humans, Deardoff (2020) concludes that humanizing each other can reduce social and technological gaps and even geographical borders can be taken down. It helps to understand how different people are everywhere, discovering the diversity, increased respect, curiosity and empathy. The experiences in this analysis were influenced within diverse settings and showed capabilities from online communities to reach dreams together during a pandemic, integrating empathy, integrity and effectiveness aspects that contribute to foster a learning culture of peace.

Thanks to bilingual education progress, it is even more evident that modern societies are joining hands to embrace bilingualism, as part of their human nature, their ability to create, use and reproduce language and their need to communicate from a holistic perspective. Bilinguals also“ help preserve the variety and therefore the ‘beauty in diversity’ of our world. Bilinguals are environmentally friendly people.” (Baker, 2011).

This project contributes to a reconfiguration of bilingual learning environments by recognizing the importance of virtual communities of practice and its impact in the role of participants, sharing a common safe learning space where they can take actively part in, making connections with peers and helping others. To sum up, building qualified communities that increase intercultural awareness perspective of the world proves that the linguistic and interaction factors enrich the learning and acquisition of a language while embracing the global diversity.

Limitations:

In the course of this research project intervention, some constraints were part of the development process as a normal direction to reach the objectives. Initially, researchers identified that gatherings in online meetings with the whole group of participants to conduct interviews was not possible due to time zones and personal agendas, so researchers were limited to carry on individual interventions via conferencing which was different from the initial planned stages of the project.

Moreover, while having the interviews, participants' personalities and cultural identities influenced the way they expressed their ideas and how questions were answered. Even when this paper promotes empathy for diversity of accents, this aspect played a challenging role in the interviews caused by participants' accents from their native languages, which made the process of writing down their interviews and interpreting them a more demanding task.

Finally, the CoP group in the social network was paused in the last year, making it difficult for researchers to contact and interact with the whole group of participants and share the results of this study with them.

Further research

After experiencing a complete process of analysis during the implementation of this project, it is necessary to mention aspects for future research projects and present some recommendations regarding the discussion presented in this study. Promoting spaces for virtual encounters can have a substantial impact on learning environments, these experiences could lead to carry out research projects that work on a deep understanding and knowledge of culture, build global connections and understand differences accepting diversity.

For upcoming research projects, it would be meaningful to gather a different amount of sample data from more countries in order to reflect upon the plurilingualism and multilingualism that are observable in a global community like “Meet my class”. On the other hand, as translanguaging processes are evident in these escenarios of interaction, further projects can study deeper the way it occurs in intercultural exchanges.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: [Informed consent forms](#)

Appendix B: [Questionnaire](#) and [Characterization](#)

Appendix C: [Interviews and videos](#)

Appendix D: [Observation-images field notes format](#)

Appendix E: [Transcripts and codification](#)

Appendix F: [References](#)