

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND ICT USE IN FRENCH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES CLASSES

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Abstract

In recent decades, telecollaboration has become more frequent in different teaching contexts, with regular publication of studies on this type of practice [1]. Based on the interaction, mediated by digital communication tools, between students from different geographical, cultural and/or linguistic contexts, telecollaboration favours sharing, dialogue and debate, contributing to the consolidation of linguistic, cultural and digital competences and, therefore, being a pedagogical option increasingly valued in the context of foreign language teaching-learning [2].

This paper describes a collaborative learning experiment developed (from October 2020 to January 2021) between two French for Specific Purposes (FOS) classes (25 students), from two undergraduate courses taught in Portuguese higher education institutions. This project, which took place in the first semester of 2020/2021, aimed, above all, to interact with FOS students from different scientific areas (Office Management and Business Communication (OMBC) and Tourism and Cultural Management (TCM)), thus favouring interdisciplinarity.

This article, based on data collected through a questionnaire applied to participants in January 2021, presents some digital tools that students used to accomplish the work and describes the technical and soft skills developed by the participants. The technological solutions that students preferred to communicate and share information were *WhatsApp*, *Zoom* and *MSTeams*. *Web* pages of companies, airlines and accommodation/restaurant service providers were the most used sources of information by the students. For French text validation, students refer to *Linguee* and *GoogleTranslator* as the most relevant. The soft skills that were mentioned by the respondents as being the most developed were "tolerance", "resilience" and "autonomy".

Keywords: Collaborative learning, French for Specific Purposes, Digital Competences.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a multiplication of pedagogical practices, in higher education but also in other educational levels, based on telecollaboration. There is in fact an extensive scientific production around these working options [1].

Understood as "online intercultural communication and collaborative learning with a view to developing linguistic, social, intercultural, and digital competences" [1], telecollaboration has gained special relevance mainly since the beginning of the 1990s, when, with the expansion and consolidation of the Internet, it started to be gradually used in several teaching-learning domains, with special relevance in the teaching-learning of Foreign Languages (FL) [2].

As [3] point out, in the context of FL teaching-learning, telecollaboration assumes the online interaction of groups of learners from different cultural backgrounds, under the guidance of teachers and as an integral part of the curricula of the classes concerned, with the aim of developing learners' foreign language competences, as well as digital competence and intercultural competence. In other words, telecollaboration provides contact and interaction between students from different contexts, allowing them, in a guided way, to get to know each other, the surrounding cultural environments and develop joint co-products [4].

In more recent works and approaches, telecollaboration has been called virtual exchange, a designation which, for Colpaert [1], has some drawbacks, since "the term 'virtual exchanges' would suggest that online exchanges do have some limitations compared to real, physical exchanges". For the same author, "telecollaboration affords many more activities than its physical counterparts" [1]. Indeed, telecollaboration and the multiple interaction options that digital technologies currently provide, have brought new possibilities for FL classes, allowing contact with the language in question to extend beyond

the spatial and temporal limits of the class. As stated by Toscu and Erten [5], this methodological option increases learners' autonomy in their own learning process, motivating them towards an authentic and meaningful use of the language.

This multiplication of possibilities and opportunities associated with telecollaboration results, to a large extent, from the use of several digital tools in the context of FL teaching-learning [6], [3]. According to Zhang and Zou [7], there are several benefits of using digital technologies in foreign language teaching-learning, namely by allowing the promotion of differentiated practices and by facilitating richer and more authentic interactions. According to the same authors, positive results have been reported regarding the learning outcomes and the motivation of students who learn with the support of different digital tools.

Considering the progressive cross-sectional evolution of digital communication technologies in everyday life, and particularly in the educational context, and given their relevance in the teaching-learning context during the Covid-19 pandemic period [8], we have chosen to implement a telecollaboration experiment in the context of two French for Specific Purposes curricular units (CU) taught in two Portuguese Polytechnic Schools: Higher School of Technology and Management of the University of Aveiro (ESTGA-UA) and Higher School of Management of Polytechnic Institute of Tomar (ESGT-IPT).

The option for this experiment of telecollaboration aimed, on the one hand, to continue the work experiments in Project/Problem-Based Learning already developed at ESTGA-UA in the context of mother tongue and foreign languages teaching [9], [10]. In fact, it is common for these telecollaboration experiments to arise associated with the implementation of Project/Problem-based learning, an option that contributes to the greater engagement and commitment of students and to the strengthening of soft skills [11]. On the other hand, by choosing to implement this inter-institutional collaborative project, we also wanted to encourage contact between the students in question and other colleagues who were on a similar path of learning a foreign language for specific purposes. Although we could have selected a class of native speakers from a French-speaking country, which would certainly have brought advantages in terms of language practice and intercultural exchange, we gave priority in this first experiment of telecollaboration to a context that allowed interdisciplinarity, achieved through the interaction of students from different courses: Degree in Office Management and Business Communication (OMBC), from ESTGA-UA, and Degree in Touristic and Cultural Management (TCM), from ESGT-IPT. In fact, and given the markedly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary matrix of both study cycles, the strengthening of the articulation with adjacent fields of knowledge and doing is of utmost importance [12].

This article, which follows on from the authors' previous work [13], aims to describe the telecollaboration project implemented and present data regarding the tools used by students to implement it, as well as the technical and soft skills that, from the participants' perspective, were developed and/or consolidated within this project. At the end, some reflections associated with the described experiment and the perceptions that the students have retained from it will be presented.

2 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND ICT USE IN FRENCH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES CLASSES: DESCRIPTION OF A TELECOLLABORATION PROJECT

Considering the exponential use of digital tools associated with the pandemic situation caused by COVID-19, and knowing that students were technically equipped and able to use several distance communication options, it was decided, at the beginning of the academic year 2020/2021, to suggest two French classes from two Portuguese Higher Education Schools to carry out a telecollaboration project. In this project, 25 students were involved: 12 of the French – Customer Relations and Hospitality class of the degree in OMBC, of ESTGA-UA, and 13 of the French III class, of the degree in TCM, of ESGT- IPT.

This collaborative work experiment between different higher education institutions (HEIs) aimed, among other objectives, to diversify students' learning experiences in the context of a foreign language course unit; to provide a sharing experience with other students who were also learning French for Specific Purposes; to provide students' contact with the French language in an extra-class context; to reinforce the use of digital tools and distance collaborative work strategies and to consolidate teamwork and other soft skills.

Thus, and considering the objectives and programmatic contents of the CUs involved, it was suggested to the students that, in mixed groups (2 students from each of the HEIs involved), they prepared a joint oral presentation. For that, the groups should present a Portuguese company and a French partner company and prepare the business visit of the latter to the facilities of the former. The OMBC students were in charge of characterising the companies involved. Both classes defined the program of the business visit, being the OMBC students in charge of the definition and presentation of the work program

and the TCM students in charge of the definition and presentation of the touristic-cultural program, as well as the characterisation of the main touristic points of interest of the surrounding area. Table 1 shows the contributions expected from each class.

Table 1. Contributions expected from each class.

Class OMBC ESTGA-UA	Class TCM ESGT-IPT
Selection of a Portuguese SME that the page is not translated into French.	
Characterisation of the selected Portuguese company.	
Conception of the visit (dates, reasons/objectives, participants, programmes)	
Characterisation of the French-speaking company selected as a visitor.	Preparation before the visit
Preparation of the visit (work programme)	Preparation of the visit (cultural programme)
Introduction, conclusion and references	

This project began on 11th October, 2020, in a hybrid session, since only the ESGT-IPT class was in the context of the French III class and the ESTGA-UA students were connected from their homes, during non-teaching hours. In this first meeting between the two classes, the HEIs and the courses involved were presented. Afterwards, the teachers explained the pedagogical proposal in question, presenting the work guide (developed jointly and made available in the e-learning area of both CUs). The objectives of the work and the products to be developed were presented in detail, paying special attention to the structure of the final oral presentation and the respective supporting documents and to the contributions expected from each class. The students were also informed of the evaluation criteria that would be taken into account by the teachers. Also in this session, the working groups were randomly defined, necessarily composed by elements from both classes.

Subsequently, each group selected the companies they wanted to work with, recording this information in a document shared on *Google Drive*. The next stage was based on the autonomous work of the students, who researched and selected the necessary information, in order to respond to the previously provided guidelines. There was a follow-up of the work in progress not only during class time, especially when the contents taught matched those needed for the work, but also in additional office hours held by videoconference meetings. In these work meetings the groups were able to clarify doubts, share the progress of the work with the teachers and get the necessary feedback from them.

Under the advice of the teachers, the students necessarily worked based on a presentation file shared online (*Google Docs*), but they had total freedom to select the communication channel(s) to use for interaction. The oral presentations of the developed work took place on 12th and 13th January 2021, in a hybrid format for both classes: the students were in their respective classrooms, but remotely connected, via *Zoom*, to the partner class.

In other words, during the two and a half months of joint work, students were encouraged to develop skills at various levels, from the research, selection and personal processing of information needed to prepare the oral presentation, through the use of digital tools of communication and collaborative work and, of course, the skills of comprehension and production, oral and written, in French. Being involved in a collaborative project, they necessarily had experiences that also helped to consolidate human skills such as persistence, teamwork, time management, among others. In the next section, after identifying the tools most used by the students to carry out this work, we present the perceptions of those involved regarding the technical and soft skills consolidated in the context of this telecollaboration project.

3 TOOLS AND COMPETENCES: STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS

The next paragraphs present the students' perceptions of the tools used to achieve this collaborative project and the competences developed through it.

3.1 Methodology

After the development of the experiment of telecollaboration described above, the students were asked to comment on various topics related to this inter-institutional work. To this end, a questionnaire was applied, developed using *Google Forms*, which contained a question about the level of student satisfaction with the project and questions about the level of adequacy of aspects associated with the operationalisation of the project (the results of which were described and commented on in [13]). The questionnaire also included questions on the frequency of use of various working tools, mostly digital, and on the level of development of various technical and soft skills. Finally, the students were asked to give suggestions for improvement for future other editions of projects of this type. Twenty-three answers were obtained out of a possible 25.

3.2 Results

Considering the relevance of several tools for the realisation of this project, the students involved were questioned regarding the frequency of use of two groups of work support solutions: a) tools for communication and collaborative work; b) tools for linguistic validation.

Within the scope of communication and collaborative work tools used by the respondents, we highlight the fact that none of them mentioned using *Skype*, which is why this tool was not taken into account when processing the data. *Padlet* was also little used by the participants. The students involved seem to have used *Facebook* rather unevenly, as 61% claimed never to have used this tool, while 34% reported using it frequently or very frequently.

WhatsApp stands out as the most used tool, with 87% of respondents indicating that they used it frequently or very frequently, and *Zoom*, used frequently or very frequently by 44% of respondents (cf. Fig. 1). There were three responses indicating additional tools to those that had been put as a response option, with *Instagram* (2 responses) and *Google Meet* (1 response) indicated.

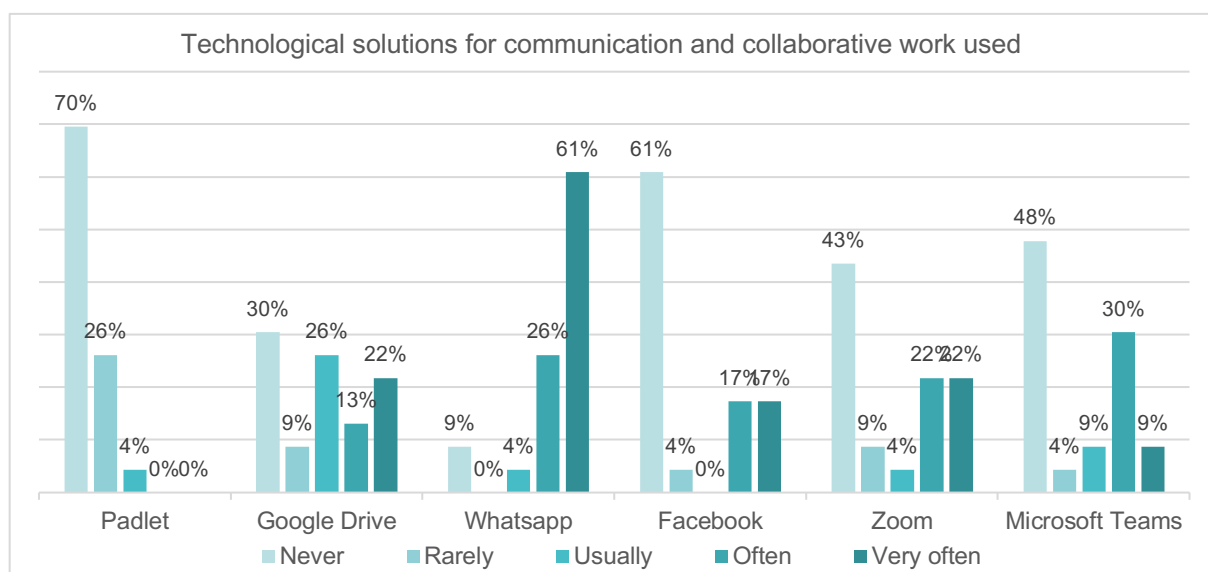


Figure 1. Technological solutions used by the participants.

The respondents indicated as main advantages associated with the use of these tools the ease and speed of communication and information sharing, as well as the possibility of editing documents in real time by the various elements of the group.

Furthermore, regarding the tools used by the students, we tried to understand which ones had been preferred for linguistic validation. At this level, 70% of the respondents stated that they had never used paper-based bilingual dictionaries. There were also 60% of respondents who answered that they had never used or had rarely used French coursebooks. Terminology databases were not much used either, as 48% had never used them. On the contrary, 74% of the respondents claimed to have used *Linguee* often or very often. *Google Translator* was an option used often or very often by 48% of the students. 52% of the students claimed to have often or very often used the French class learning guide for validation of their language production in French, as shown in Figure 2.

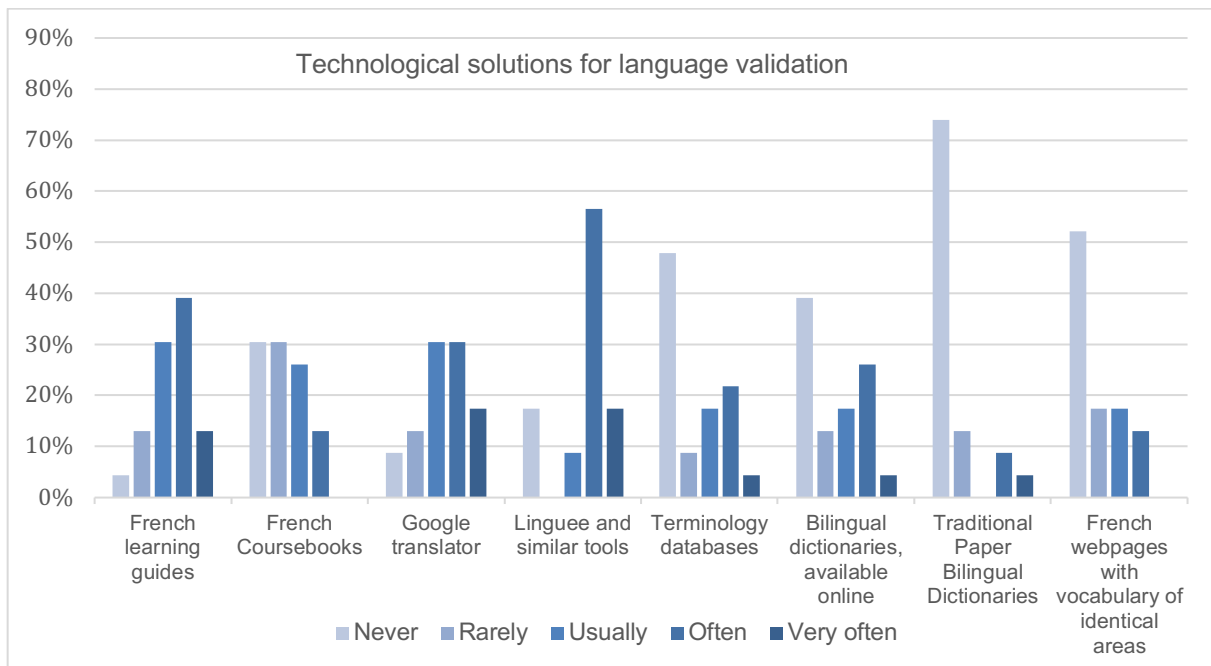


Figure 2. Language validation: technological solutions used by the participants.

Regarding the sources of information which the students used to search for the contents necessary to respond to the requests in the assignment guide, the reduced use of corporate databases stands out, since 50% of the respondents indicated that they had never used them and 28% indicated that they had used them rarely or occasionally.

Although 32% and 36% of the respondents indicated that they had never used the websites of official bodies and the websites of business/industry associations, 50% and 41% of the respondents said that they had used them often or very often. The web pages of companies stand out for their regularity of use, since 68% of the respondents declared having used them often or very often. The webpages of airlines, restaurants and hotels were also often used, with 41% of respondents stating that they used them very often (cf. Fig. 3).

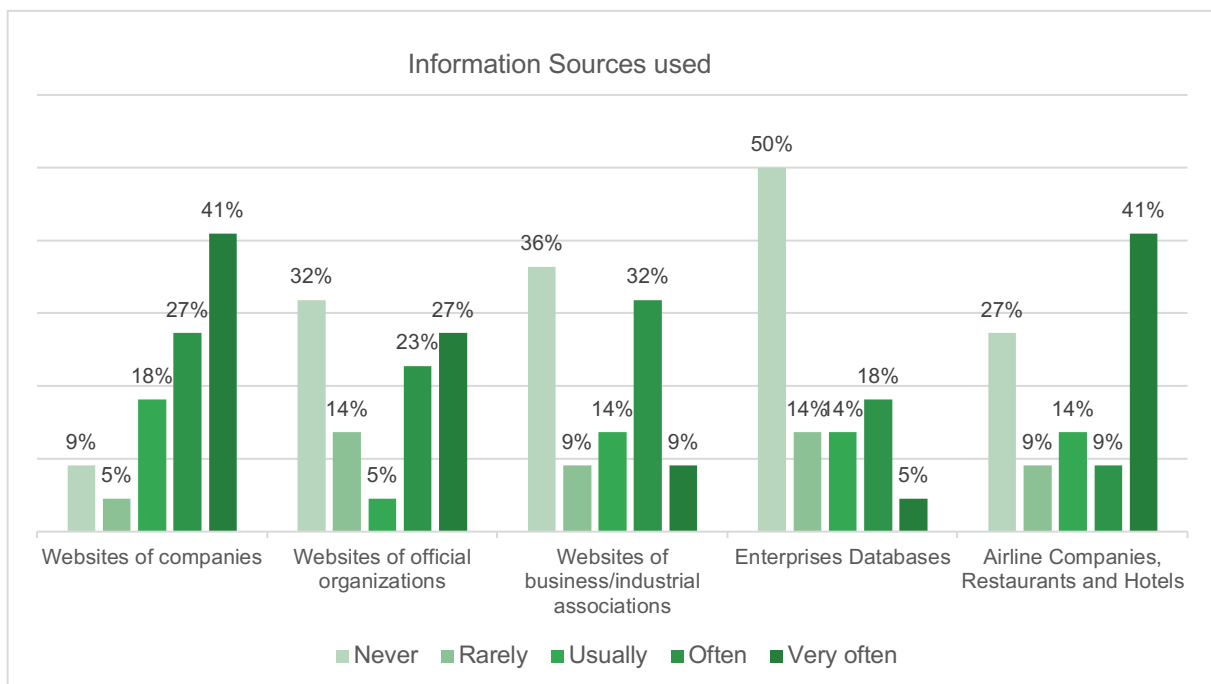


Figure 3. Information sources selected by the participants.

The use of these tools and information sources, mostly digital, as well as all the experiences associated with this collaborative project may have contributed to the development or consolidation of technical and soft skills so important to know nowadays. In terms of technical competences, the average response values for each of the options indicated are fairly homogeneous. Thus, and considering a scale from 1 (not at all developed) to 5 (fully developed), the mean values vary between 3.57 (Writing short texts in French related to the areas of study) and 3.69 (Searching and selecting relevant information; Making oral presentations in French), as shown in Figure 4.

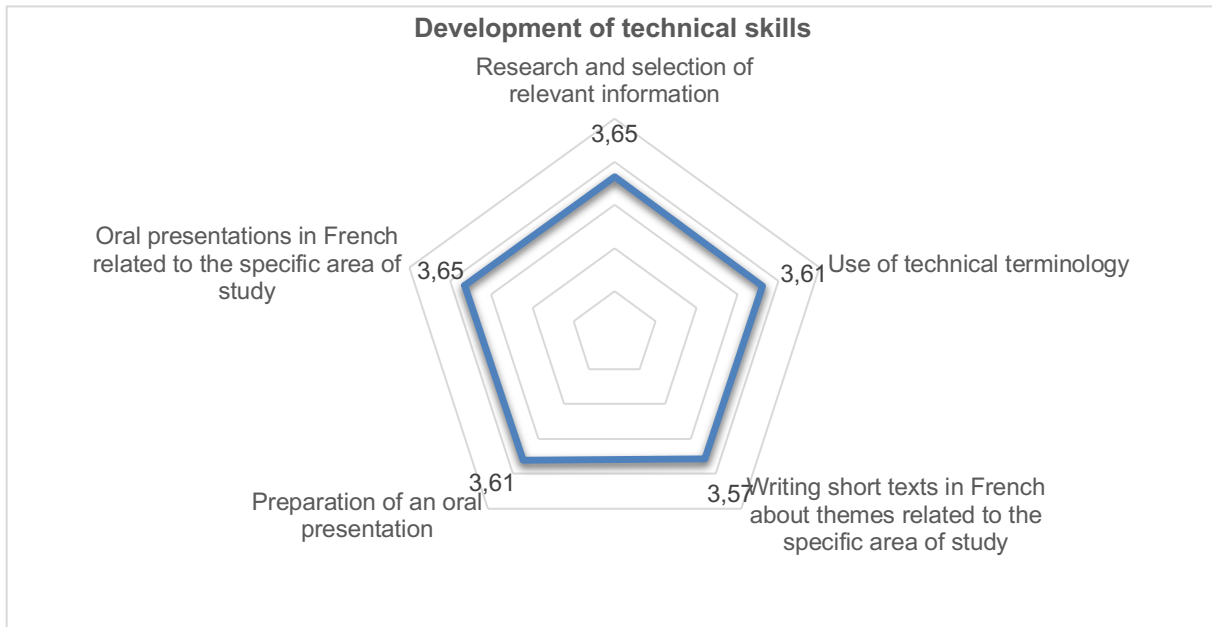


Figure 4. Technical skills developed by the students (mean values).

Amongst the analysed skills, the one for which there was the greatest dispersion of answers was "Writing short texts in French related to the specific areas of study". The mode for four of the five technical skills under analysis is in the "very developed (level 4)" option. The percentage of answers for "fully developed" (13%) correspond to four of the five technical skills indicated. Overall there was a fairly small number of participants who indicated that they had not developed (1 student) or had poorly developed the skills in question (7 students), as shown in Figure 5.

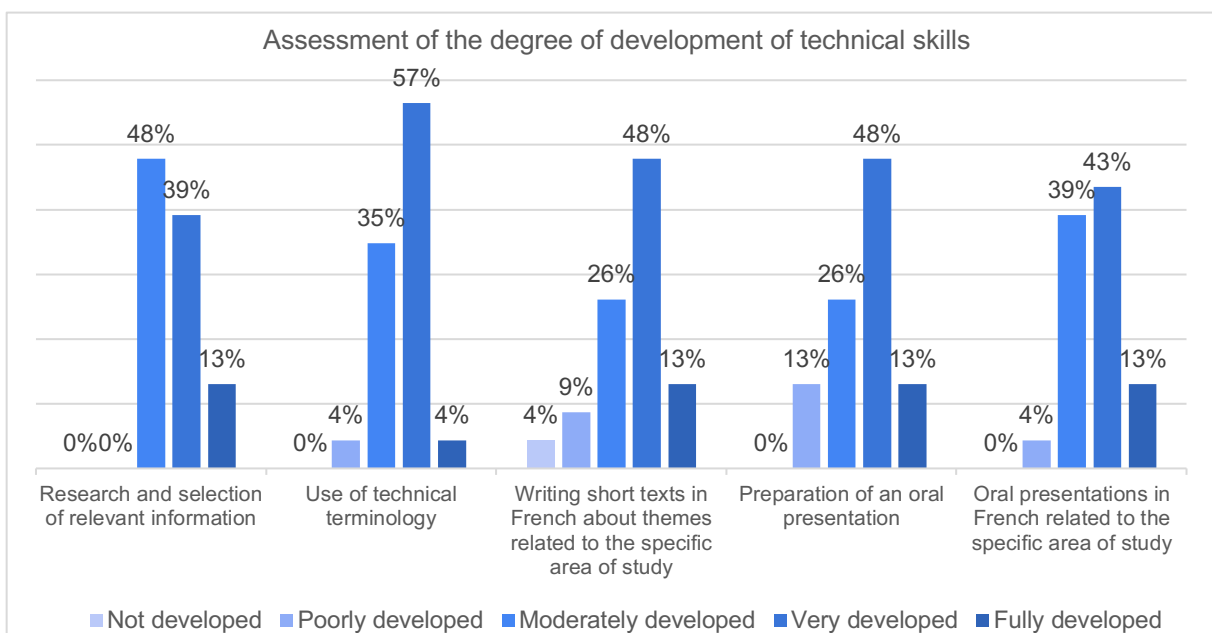


Figure 5. Degree of development of technical skills.

With regard to soft skills, there was some more variation in the answers given, with average values ranging from 3.17% (Time management/priorities) to 3.65% (Tolerance). In this question, the coefficient of variation in the answers was higher than in the previous question (technical skills), which indicates a greater dispersion of opinions among the respondents (cf. Fig. 6).

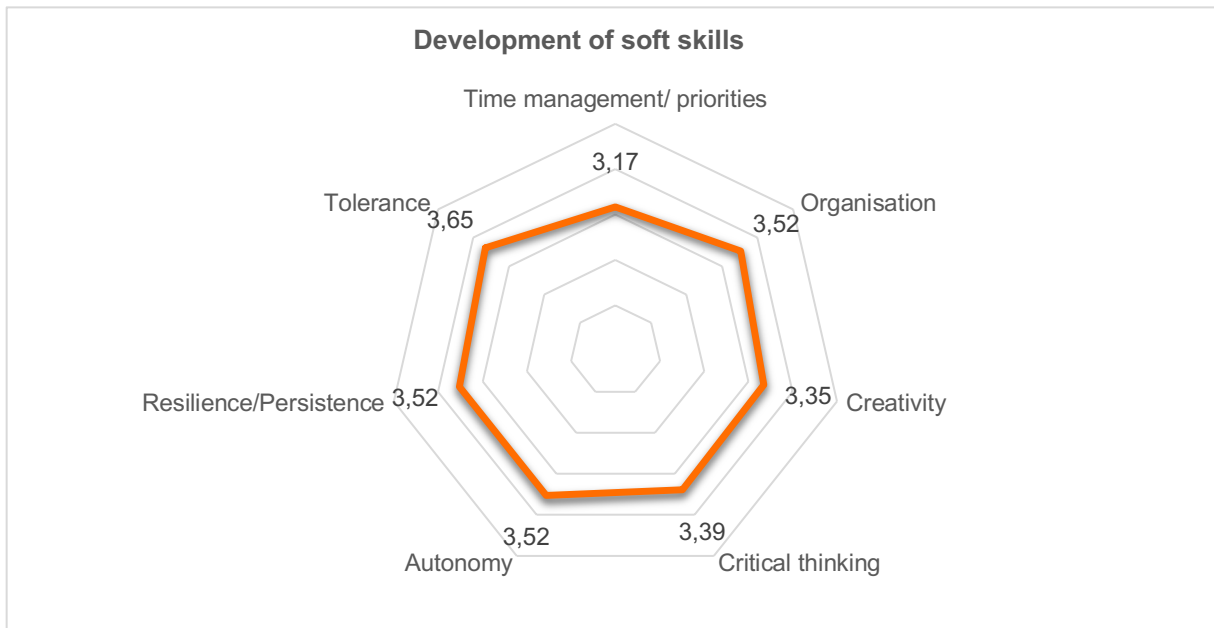


Figure 6. Soft skills developed by the students (mean values).

In this question, the "fully developed (level 4)" mode stands out in all the skills under consideration. However, it should also be noted that for three skills - "Creativity", "Critical Thinking" and "Autonomy" - there were 35% of answers indicating that they were only moderately developed. Overall, there was a significant number of respondents who indicated that they had not developed some of these skills (11 respondents) or had developed them poorly (15), which differs from the scenario identified in the technical skills (cf. Fig. 7).

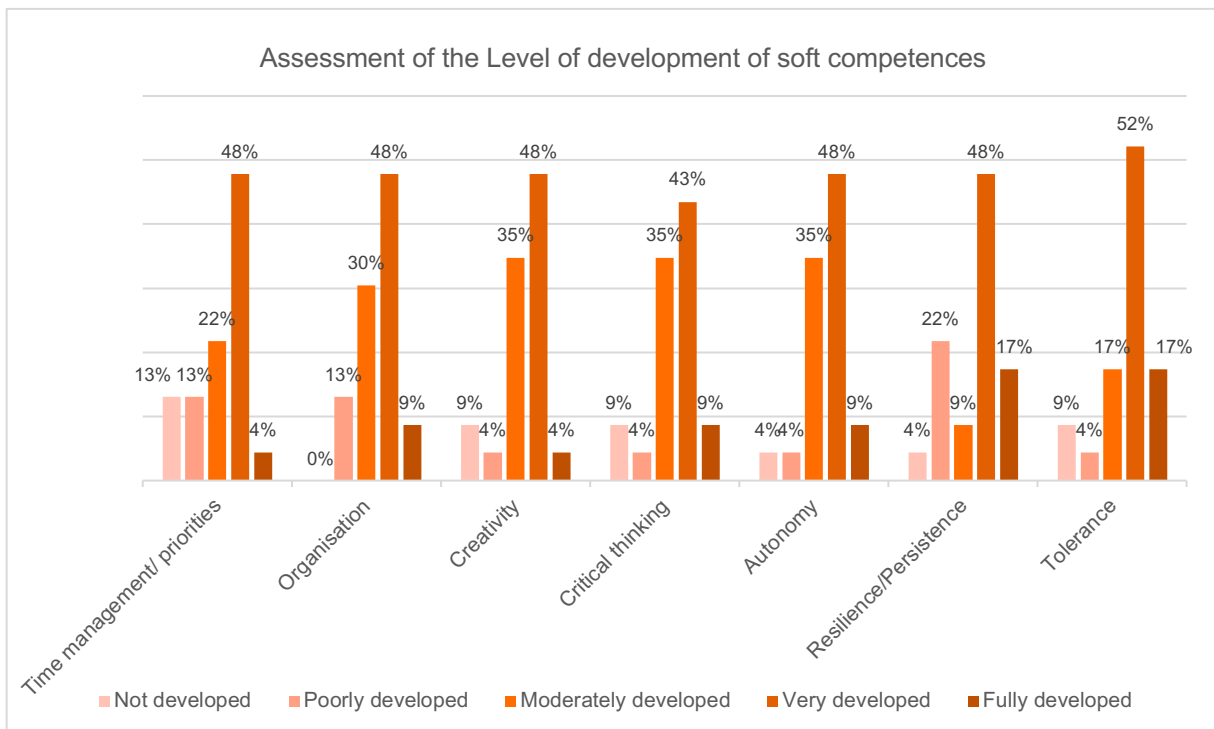


Figure 7. Degree of development of technical skills.

The students were also required to leave some suggestions for improvement, highlighting the need for greater articulation between those involved, namely through familiarisation activities, and for greater organisation of the project. There were also some students who suggested that the work should be based on the interaction with native French students and others who mentioned the importance of an easier matching of schedules between the participants. It is also worth noting some answers suggested to carry out this type of work with colleagues from the same fields of study and/or the same institution. Even so, overall, most participants found this experiment enriching.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the experiment of inter-institutional collaborative work reported above was a success, motivating (most of) the students involved to the acquisition and consolidation of linguistic competences in French language (especially at the level of oral presentation). At the same time, it was also positive the way this project contributed for students to reinforce the use of several tools, mostly digital, either for communication and collaborative work, or for linguistic validation. At this level, it becomes evident the preference for tools of common everyday use, such as *Whatsapp*, for intra-group communication, and the recognition of some advantages of collaborative work tools, such as the possibility of simultaneous editing of documents by several elements of the working groups. It was also interesting to note that students make very little use of dictionaries, hardly using them in paper format. The tool they prefer for supporting the preparation of texts in French is *Google Translator*, and they do not use terminology databases, for instance. This reality is especially intriguing in the OMBC course, since the students involved in this collaborative experiment have already attended a UC dedicated to translation and terminology, and therefore know the importance of the careful selection of tools to support the translation and revision of foreign language texts.

As far as skills are concerned, the groups participating in this experiment showed a more uniform and significant development of technical skills, while progress with regard to soft skills was not so evident. This is a result which is somewhat different from the one obtained in other similar projects [9] and which may indicate that, as suggested by some students, it will be necessary to improve some aspects inherent to its implementation. It is also our understanding that soft skills are hard to identify in one's self and easily, but wrongly, left frequently as apart from the learning process and therefore, students might not have been able to assess them. On the other hand, the fact that basic technical skills, such as writing texts or preparing oral presentations in French, are associated with degrees of development/consolidation of around 3.6 (out of 5) makes it clear that this option motivates students, facilitating the achievement of the objectives of the project and the CUs involved.

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