

# Agency and competency-based communicative pedagogy in secondary additional language teaching in Catalonia

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## Abstract

The LOMLOE (2020) and Decree 175/2022 establish the foundation for a competency-based approach that enhances the quality of learning in Catalonia. However, materializing such an approach in the additional language classroom can be challenging when theoretical concepts are to be concretized into tangible pedagogical actions. In view of this challenge, this study aims to design an agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach. This approach would be founded on the legal framework above and complemented by an agency-based conceptual framework and its accompanying pedagogical principles. The implementation and effects of the suggested approach is analyzed so as to understand how it promotes learners' use of the additional language that is, in turn, driven through agency. A sociocultural psychology research methodology has been chosen and involves twenty students in compulsory secondary education in their fourth year in a school in Barcelona. For this study, interviews have been conducted and recordings have been taken based on virtual interactions. The interviews that focus on students' perceptions of the pedagogical approach and how they felt during its implementation are examined through content analysis. The recordings from the students' virtual interactions are analyzed for agentic behavior through agency-based classroom discourse analysis. The findings indicate that there are two main reasons as to why the new approach promotes agentic use of the

additional language: a co-constructed trustful learning environment (Johnson & Golombek, 2016) and reflective action-oriented learning (Esteve, Fernández, Martín-Peris, & Atienza, 2017).

### **Keywords**

LOMLOE; Decree 175/2022; additional language teaching; competency-based approach; learner agency.

## **Pedagogía comunicativa basada en la agentividad y las competencias en la enseñanza secundaria de idiomas adicionales en Cataluña**

### **Resumen**

La LOMLOE y el Decreto 175/2022 establecen la base para un enfoque competencial que aumenta la calidad de la enseñanza en Cataluña. Sin embargo, materializar un enfoque competencial para la enseñanza de idiomas adicionales puede suponer un reto debido a la transformación de conceptos teóricos en acciones pedagógicas concretas. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de esta investigación es analizar la implementación y los efectos de un enfoque comunicativo pedagógico basado en la agentividad y las competencias que se fundamenta en este marco legislativo junto con un marco conceptual complementario basado en la agentividad y sus principios pedagógicos. La intención detrás del análisis es entender cómo esta pedagogía promueve el uso de la lengua adicional por parte de los estudiantes a través de su agentividad. Se ha elegido una metodología de investigación basada en la psicología sociocultural para analizar veinte estudiantes de una clase de cuarto de la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (ESO) de un instituto en Barcelona. Por un lado, se han analizado las entrevistas sobre sus percepciones de la pedagogía y cómo se sintieron durante su implementación mediante un análisis de contenido cualitativo. Por otro lado, se han examinado las grabaciones de sus interacciones virtuales con el foco en el comportamiento agentivo a través de un análisis de discurso de aula basado en la agentividad. Los resultados de este estudio indican que esta nueva pedagogía promueve un uso agentivo de la lengua adicional por dos razones principales: la co-construcción de un entorno de confianza (Johnson & Golombek, 2016) y el aprendizaje reflexivo orientado a la acción (Esteve et al., 2017).

### **Palabras clave**

LOMLOE; Decreto 175/2022; enseñanza de lenguas adicionales; enfoque competencial; agentividad.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport approved the Organic Law of modification of the Organic Law of education (henceforth, LOMLOE). This law, which is founded on the Organic Law of education (henceforth, LOE) dating back to 2006, proposes new characteristics while incorporating various changes to the current education system. The LOE's (2006) main aim is to contribute to the physical, affective, social and intellectual development of all children. According to Coll & Martín (2021), the changes and adaptations that were brought forward in the LOMLOE (2020) provide an opportunity for curricular modernization of the Spanish education system. Although the education sector in Spain falls under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, each region independently determines how the aims can be achieved by means of decrees. With the introduction of the LOMLOE (2020), the Catalan Government designed Decree 175/2022 on the ordination of the teaching of basic education. Ever since the LOE (2006) was enacted, all decrees have established the foundation for a competency-based approach that enhances the quality of learning.

Nevertheless, it can be difficult to materialize a competency-based approach in the classroom (Coll & Martín, 2021). The main reason is that bridging the gap between theoretical concepts (originating from laws, decrees, and research) and teaching practice has been a challenge for decades (Valente & Xerri, 2022). In relation to additional language teaching, this extends to communicative competence (Dell Hymes, 1972). This issue has led to situations where erroneous communicative approaches are still unsuccessfully applied by teachers due to misconceptions on what both teaching and learning an additional language implies (Esteve, 2018). Therefore, this study addresses a need for teachers and researchers of an additional language in Catalonia to find practical ways of employing the recent legal framework on their terms, as well as to design, implement and analyze an informed communicative pedagogical approach.

## 2. Research objective

The aim of this study is therefore to create an agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach for the secondary school classroom where English is taught as an additional language and analyze its implementation and effects. This teaching strategy is founded on the ideology of the LOMLOE (2020) and Decree 175/2022, and is complemented by an agency-based conceptual framework and accompanying pedagogical principles that foster secondary students' self-regulated language use in socio-culturally situated contexts (Lagerwaard, 2021). Taking into account the approach's intention, this study attempts to discover how the designed agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach influences and promotes secondary school learners' use of the additional language when driven through their agency.

At first, this article will aim to facilitate an understanding of the LOMLOE's foci, followed by the Decree 175/2022's vectors and the curricular elements in relation to additional language teaching. Afterwards, a conceptual framework for an agency-based

approach and its complementary pedagogical principles built on the legal framework will be provided. Thereafter, the sociocultural psychology research method will be outlined, followed by a presentation of the results of the data analysis. Once the results have been triangulated and discussed, conclusions will be drawn and future research directions will be recommended.

### 3. Legal framework

To design an agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach, it is vital to become familiar beforehand with the educational intentions of the LOMLOE (2020) and Decree 175/2022's vectors and curricular elements.

#### 3.1 The foci of the Organic Law of modification of the Organic Law of education

The LOMLOE (2020) aims to equip students in Spain with the necessary competences to meet current world demands, such as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, as well as future global digital advances, particularly the rise of AI. To ensure quality education and equal opportunities for everyone, the LOMLOE (2020, p. 122871) strives to achieve five key outcomes:

- The right of education for every child;
- The assurance of gender equality;
- The focus on sustainable development and global citizenship;
- The development of students' digital competence; and
- The implementation of a competency-based approach.

#### 3.2 Decree 175/2022 on the ordination of the teaching of basic education

To achieve the LOMLOE's (2020) objectives above, Decree 175/2022 has made it clear how to realize this through its vectors and completing curricular elements for compulsory secondary education in Catalonia.

##### 3.2.1 The vectors

Decree 175/2022's vectors (p. 6) are cross-curricular elements that pertain to all subjects. The vectors need to be taken into account during the decision-making process as they promote students' development for their future studies or professions.

These are

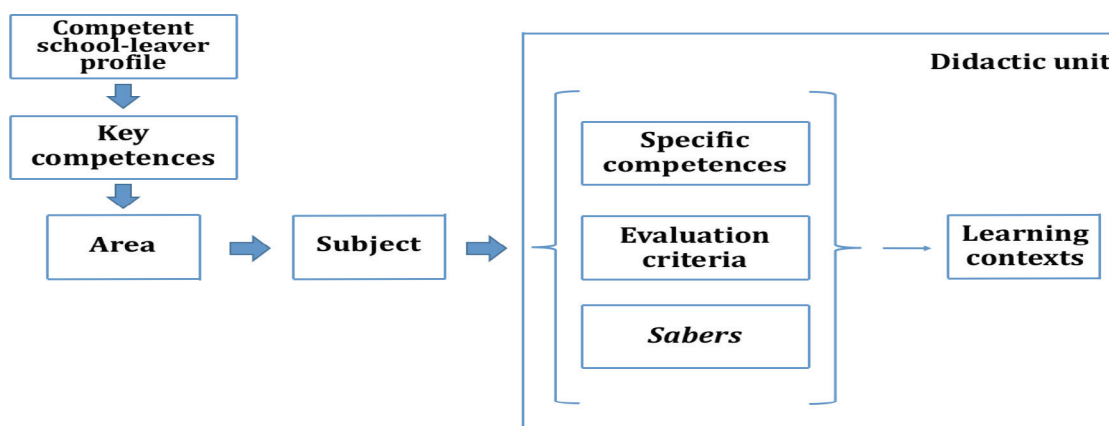
- A competency-based approach;

- The quality of language education;
- The universality to ensure all students' inclusion;
- The incorporation of co-education to encourage people's development outside stereotypes and gender roles, sexual orientation, identity or expression;
- Special attention to students' emotional well-being; and
- The promotion of a democratic, critical and committed citizenship with the view towards growing a global conscience.

### 3.2.2 The curricular elements in relation to additional language teaching

As can be deduced from the first vector, all education in Catalonia should aspire towards the implementation of a competency-based approach. To achieve this, Decree 175/2022's curricular elements and their relations (image 1) need to be understood:

Image 1. The interrelationship between the curricular elements



#### 3.2.2.1 Competent school-leaver profile

By means of a competency-based approach, students should be enabled to attain a competent school-leaver profile, which stands for the development of the necessary key competences through which they can successfully face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the end of their primary or secondary education (p. 9). This profile consists of eight key competences with their own operational indicators that are identical for each subject.

#### 3.2.2.2 Key competences

The reference for these key competences is the *Council Recommendation on 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (Council of the European Union), which defines them as “a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes” (...) “which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion,

sustainable lifestyle, successful life in peaceful societies, health-conscious life management and active citizenship” (Council of European Union, 2018, p. 7). Decree 175/2022 presents these key competences (p. 9) in the following way:

- Linguistic competence
- Plurilingual competence
- Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) competence
- Cultural and artistic competence
- Digital competence
- Personal, social and learning to learn competence
- Citizenship competence
- Entrepreneurial competence

Although the four latter competences are cross-curricular and do not pertain to a certain area or subject, they need to be considered and included in the educational program and, if possible, in didactic units. All key competences form the reference for the definition of the specific competences of each subject, and are closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2017).

### 3.2.2.3 *The linguistic area*

Developing students’ key competences differs per area. The goal of the linguistic area is to enable students to develop themselves as human beings within a plurilingual and pluricultural society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Decree 175/2022, p. 194). The subject of English, coined “the foreign language” in Decree 175/2022 (p. 215), forms part of this area, together with Spanish, Catalan, and another additional language of the school’s choice. However, as Decree 175/2022 integrates languages where linguistic repertoires are treated as one entity to develop students’ plurilingual competence, the term additional language is preferred (Wilson & González Davies, 2016).

### 3.2.2.4 *Specific competences for additional language teaching*

Specific competences create a bridge between the key competences and the *sabers*. That is, they do not only stand for what has to be learned in terms of *sabers*, but especially for how students of an additional language are supposed to apply these in context. When designing a didactic unit, all specific competences can be included, but only one or just a few of them can be chosen for evaluation. There are ten specific competences for additional language teaching which are briefly paraphrased in table 1 (Decree 175/2022, p. 215-226):

### 3.2.2.5 *Evaluation as a regulation tool*

The evaluation in Decree 175/2022 has two aims (Sanmartí, 2020). The first one is to regulate the learning process. By identifying students’ decisions, mistakes and doubts along

Table 1. Specific competences for additional language teaching

<p><b>I.</b> Describe and value the linguistic and cultural diversity of Catalonia, Spain.</p> <p><b>II.</b> Understand and interpret oral and multimodal texts in the standard language.</p> <p><b>III.</b> Produce oral and multimodal texts coherently, clearly and adequately.</p> <p><b>IV.</b> Understand, interpret, and analyze multimodal and written texts critically and intentionally.</p> <p><b>V.</b> Produce written and multimodal texts adequately, coherently and cohesively.</p> <p><b>VI.</b> Look for, select and contrast information proceeding from different sources.</p> <p><b>VII.</b> Select and read different works as a source of joy and knowledge.</p> <p><b>VIII.</b> Mediate between different languages.</p> <p><b>IX.</b> Expand and use personal linguistic repertoires between different languages.</p> <p><b>X.</b> Engage in dialogued resolutions about conflicts and equal rights.</p>
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the way, they can become aware of, identify, and reflect on their strengths, mistakes and difficulties. Since these reflections are related to clear competence criteria, students can apply, improve, and develop their specific competences (Esteve & Fernández, 2013).

The second aim is to evaluate the results from the learning process by means of a final task. The focus here is not to investigate whether students remember what they have been taught, but to assess their capacity to effectively and appropriately apply *sabers* in a context. By making students aware of the evaluation criteria at the onset, it will be clear for them what is expected to competently carry out the final task (Esteve & Fernández, 2013).

Therefore, instruments need to be created to evaluate both the students' development and final result. The evaluation criteria for the additional language are included in Decree 175/2022 per competence (p. 216-226), and need to be used as references to create evaluation criteria and indicators. If teachers evaluate the final result through, for example, rubrics, it is summative evaluation. When teachers evaluate the students' development and monitor their learning with a learning portfolio in which students' include their meta-reflections after each lesson, it is considered formative evaluation. Both teachers and students should be involved in summative and formative evaluations to encourage students' learning (Sanmartí, 2020).

#### 3.2.2.6 *Sabers*

The concept of *sabers* consists of students' knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that belong to an area or subject that are necessary for the acquisition of specific competences and the design of evaluation criteria (Decree 175/2022, p. 10). The *sabers* consist of four blocks: languages and their speakers, oral communication, reflection about the language and literary education (Decree 175/2022, p. 226-231).

#### 3.2.2.7 *Learning contexts*

Learning contexts (Decree 175/2022, p. 10) are real-life situations. Each context needs to be completed by a question or a problem, so students are presented with a significant challenge they can solve. As a result, students not only apply their *sabers* into situated practices; they also activate and develop their key and specific competences (Council of Europe, 2018).

### 3.2.2.8 Didactic unit

As each subject contributes in its way to the students' development of key competences, this means that in additional language teaching, the specific competences, evaluation criteria, *sabers* and contexts need to be reflected in both didactic units and didactic sequences. The latter refer to a sequence of educational activities that make possible the achievement of the established goals from the didactic unit. It interrelates all the elements that intervene during the teaching-learning process, such as the curricular elements, methodology, temporization, materials, evaluation instruments, etc. (Ibañez, 1992). This article takes on the perspective of Carandell (2013) and Esteve (2014), who consider the didactic sequence as a materialization of a competency-based approach through a type of reflective action-oriented learning. That is, it cognitively and communicatively orients students through a sequence of connected tasks in their first and the additional language before they express themselves in context.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

### 4.1 Conceptual basis for an agency-based approach

Founded on the legal framework, this article suggests an agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach. The notion of agency will be addressed historically; it will be defined and discussed so as to underscore its relevance in its conceptual basis and pedagogical principles. The focus is to design agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequences for additional language teaching.

#### 4.1.1 Communicative competence

To comprehend the relevance of learner agency, a revision of the communicative competence is required. Dell Hymes (1972) described this concept as one's ability to use the language meaningfully in specific real-life situations. This changed additional language teaching, which had until then defined students' grammatical or lexical competence as the end goal. Since its introduction, additional languages had to be taught in a way that reflected real-life skills and demands, and where language use and the message students wanted to convey became more pragmatic, dependent on particular contexts and specific situations. This led to ascent of the communicative approach, which placed communicative competence as the final goal.

Although the communicative approach offered a clear philosophy, a lack of understanding in how to put it in practice led to various misinterpretations and misapplications, specifically when the core principles were concerned: authenticity, context, oral interaction, and learner-centeredness (Piccardo, 2014). Fortunately, the process of modifications, additions and changes has helped to create "tools, principles, and resources for the development of language curricula, textbooks, and programs to support the teaching and learning of various languages, as well as assessment tools" (Piccardo, 2014, p. 8). The emergence of such documents, specifically the LOMLOE (2020) and



Decree 175/2022, “embrace a broader notion of competence that now include the capacity to act with ever increasing autonomy” (Piccardo, 2014, p. 7).

#### 4.1.2 Learner agency

Nowadays, Decree 175/2022 aims at a broader competency-based approach for students’ acquisition of the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes which can in turn enable them to successfully face some of the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Consequently, it may be necessary to shift away from the always ubiquitous communicative competence framework and adopt one which focuses on learner agency, as this embraces competency-based additional language teaching. This article proposes and unpacks a definition of learner agency for additional language education: *the capacity to consciously make emotionally influenced decisions on how to express yourself in relevant sociocultural contexts* (Lagerwaard, 2021).

First of all, Ahearn coined agency as ‘the socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ (2001, p. 112). This means that the student’s interpretations and language use are influenced by the cultures (of a community, school, etc.) and pre-established social relations (such as a teacher, friend, etc.) within interactions. As situated activities are constrained by cultural and social conditions, there is a need to teach ‘social languages’ for learning contexts, as emphasized in Decree 175/2022.

Secondly, the students’ capacity to express themselves ‘appears to emerge from a series of multiple, interconnected causes which can interact in unpredictable ways and can vary in their relative significance’ (Mercer, 2012, p. 44). These causes are connected to how a student experiences the learning context (Veresov & Mok, 2018). Including and embracing emotions that trigger students’ behavior (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) is in line with Decree 175/2022’s vector on emotional well-being (p. 6).

Another consideration is the secondary school students’ development of formal-logical thought (Karpov, 2014), which enables them to consciously regulate their emotions, *sabers*, and self-beliefs before acting. On the one hand, they can ‘modify emotions in terms of their quality, intensity, frequency, course, and expression’ (Holodynski, 2009, p. 145). On the other hand, they can also self-regulate *sabers* (Arievitch, 2017) and master how to competently use these in context. Finally, students also hold beliefs as to whether they are capable of expressing themselves or not (Bown, 2009), and consequently do so, or not.

Finally, for students to develop a competent school-leaver profile, they need to be in control of their learning. By being in charge of their own actions, students discover how to competently express themselves with their *sabers* in contexts and evaluate this personally. This designates autonomy as the enhancing factor of agency, as students can only exert and develop their agency by virtue of it (Huang & Benson, 2013).

#### 4.1.3 Teaching from an agency-based perspective

In line with Decree 175/2022, Stetsenko (2017) argues that the ‘task of education is to work on developing students’ own agency as actors of social transformation by providing them with access to the tools that afford such agency’ (p. 347). She proposes the

daring metaphor, which underpins the conceptions for agency-based approaches. This metaphor suggests didactic sequences to present a challenge, as this optimizes proleptic instruction. That is, having a communicative objective elevates collaborative interaction in class as it awakens students' presuppositions of *sabers* they need to take on board to courageously engage in context. This daring metaphor's conceptual basis is completed with five aspects of additional language teaching (Lagerwaard, 2021):

First of all, Johnson (2009) introduces language as a social practice perspective and emphasizes that creating awareness on the context in which interactions take place is crucial for students, as it determines how the additional language is used, what it means, and what is being achieved through it. As a result, the teacher needs to look for ways to enable students to make their own choices on how to access the *sabers* to competently face the communicative challenge of a didactic sequence.

Next, students need opportunities to (re-)construct their knowledge about the additional language and its use in context. By reflecting on and evaluating *sabers* individually and through collaborative work, students create tools for thinking (Arievitch, 2017), which strengthen their capacity to apply these in contexts.

The third premise involves encouraging students to exercise their voice in emotionally engaging learning contexts. Apart from competence development, emotional involvement creates "the conditions for children to become more consciously aware of self and the environment" (Fleer, 2017, p. 86).

The penultimate aspect is what Swain (2013) calls the relevance of discovering, as teachers look for ways to connect and relate to students. By understanding and anticipating the students' feelings through daily interaction and constructive feedback, a safety zone can be created where students feel safe taking risks, such as making mistakes when speaking in the additional language.

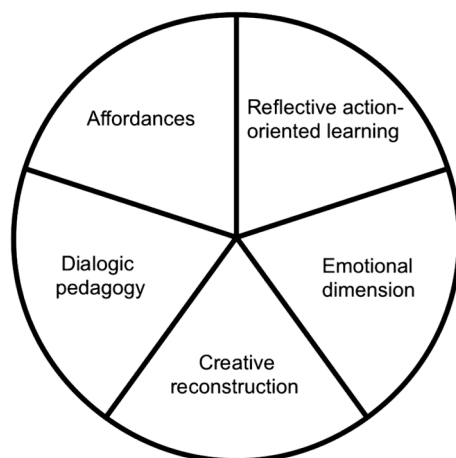
Finally, sufficient predictability, security and structure need to be present to afford students a sense of direction and space. It can be challenging to hand over autonomy to students due to institutional constraints, such as restrictive curricula (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2021). However, excessive emphasis on structure and order hinders students from self-expression, and thus, from activating and developing competences.

## 4.2 Pedagogical principles of an agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach

This section builds on the conceptual basis through five pedagogical principles that aim to develop students' key and specific additional language competences (image 2). These principles (Lagerwaard, 2021) will be addressed separately, although they always appear simultaneously.

First, *reflective action-oriented learning* (Esteve et al., Fernández, Martín-Peris, & Atienza, 2017), which is the underlying principle of the forthcoming didactic sequence, aims to cognitively and communicatively orient students before they express themselves in situated activities. Through a sequence of connected oral and written tasks in the students' own languages and the additional language with collaborative reflections,

Image 2. Pedagogical principles for an agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach (Lagerwaard, 2021)



they become aware of the communicative and contextual elements. A Zoom interaction, its characteristics, and the typical steps that are to take place when speaking on this platform in front of an online audience about education in Africa is an example. As a result, students can apply this knowledge in context.

Reflective action-oriented learning cannot be detached from the principle of *creative reconstruction*, which helps to make or re-construct the students' knowledge so they can achieve their communicative purposes. This starts with the students' pre-understanding of the use of the additional language in context, and is then shaped by the tasks, collaborative practices, and the teacher's guidance to develop new understanding (Lantolf & Esteve, 2019); students will then use the latter when expressing themselves.

Without the principle of *dialogic pedagogy* (Alexander, 2020), students are not incentivized to creatively reconstruct their knowledge. This principle offers a means of classroom interaction through which students can openly engage in any language to question their knowledge. Although the teacher plans and steers the classroom talk with specific goals in mind, the tasks are addressed together. Viewpoints, questions, and doubts are exchanged and anticipated together to reach common understanding. The teacher builds on these ideas to chain them into coherent lines of thinking for all.

As a result, teachers need to be receptive to the principle of *affordances* (Huang & Benson, 2013), since these are possibilities for action in the additional language within an environment perceived by the student. That is, what takes place in class can turn into reflections about situated language use for a more student-aware manifestation of their competences. Autonomy is thus a crucial component; without control over their learning (Benson, 2011) students' competence development and exertion are limited.

These four principles are enhanced by the *emotional dimension*. Not necessarily because this accounts for students' emotions in tasks that create awareness on how they would use the additional language in agreement with their personalities (Fleer, 2017), but also because it strongly considers emotions teachers bring to interaction and their impact on the students' participation and language use (Johnson & Golombek, 2016).

## 5. The agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequences

Based on the legal and theoretical framework, seven actions to design agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequences are proposed. The designed didactic sequence is a materialization of the discussed pedagogical principle *reflective action-oriented learning* (Esteve et al., 2017). This principle allows for structuring significant lessons that work on and develop students' key competences related to SDGs (Coll & Martín 2021). However, although reflective action-oriented learning is the central component, the other pedagogical principles evolve around it during its implementation to facilitate learning. In addition, as the core principles and implementation of the communicative competence are frequently misunderstood (Piccardo, 2014), an example of the third specific competence is used to facilitate its understanding.

### 5.1 Allowing students to choose a topic of interest

The topic should ideally emerge from the students' interests. In this case, each student chose a foundation and after considering all options, the *Malawi Schools Trust* was voted by the class for the didactic sequence. This is related to the fourth SDG to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

### 5.2 Establishing a specific competence as the main objective

A specific competence can be chosen randomly or intentionally in relation to the topic. In this case, the third specific competence, the communicative competence, as the main objective is a suitable option to undertake action for quality education in Malawi: "To produce oral and multimodal texts coherently, clearly, and adequately, while taking into account the different speech genres, and participating autonomously in a variety of oral interactions in order to express ideas, feelings, and concepts, and to construct knowledge and establish personal relationships" (Decree 175/2022, p. 217).

### 5.3 Choosing an evaluation criterion from the chosen specific competence

Thereafter, an evaluation criterion needs to be chosen for the evaluation instruments. To evaluate interaction on the need for quality education in Malawi, the fourth evaluation criterion (3.4) can be useful: "To use adequate strategies to initiate, maintain and finish the conversation, to intervene, to encourage participation, to ask to be allowed to speak, and to ask for and provide clarifications or explanations" (Decree 175/2022, p. 25). Although the evaluation criterion is clear, the instruments cannot be designed until the context and *sabers* have been determined.

## 5.4 Designing an age-relevant learning context with a clear competence goal

As almost 37% of teenagers in Spain spend more than six hours per day on their phones (García, Rodríguez de Blas, Pallero Soto, Sánchez-Sierra Ramos, 2022); an online platform can be an age-relevant context. For such a context, we need a goal related to the specific competence, as this will be evaluated. Then this has to be turned into a question for the students' didactic sequence: "How can we make our personal community aware of the need for quality education in Malawi by using Zoom?"

## 5.5 Consulting the sabers and determining what students need to become aware of in order to communicatively and personally orient them in the L1 and L2 so they can competently act within a learning context

When the context is clear, the *sabers* need to be consulted to understand the situated language use before planning the steps from the didactic sequence. For this online interaction on education in Malawi, the *sabers* of the language and its speakers, communication, and reflection about the language are relevant. Regarding the example, this could include: information about the Malawi Schools Trust; awareness of the Zoom context; or the most likely steps involved in an online interaction.

## 5.6 Creating a rubric based on the evaluation criterion to evaluate the final task

The evaluation criterion now needs to be turned into criteria. Based on criterion 3.4, the designed criteria for a rubric could be: adequately opening, maintaining and closing the interaction; politely intervening; encouraging participation; and providing explanations. Then, these criteria need to be complemented with qualitative indicators of performance to indicate the level of achievement from the specific competence:

Table 2. Indicators for the criterion *encouraging participation*

Excellent <b>AE</b> achievement	Good <b>AN</b> achievement	Satisfactory <b>AS</b> achievement	No <b>NA</b> achievement
The student asks planned and improvised questions about the topic.	The student asks several prepared questions about the topic.	The student asks one prepared question about the topic.	The student does not ask a single question about the topic.

## 5.7 Designing the sequence of tasks and materials to enable students' competence development

With all curricular elements established, the didactic sequence's tasks and objectives can be designed. Each task has to be completed with the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines (CAST, 2018) to include all students and empower them to hold a conversation to develop their communicative competence. The following table proposes a sequence of activities for teachers to design their own didactic sequence. These tasks are not only interconnected; after the first one, each task progressively builds on what has been learned during the previous one in order to construct a solid foundation for every student to effectively engage in the final online interaction.

Table 3. Students' tasks in agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequences

<b>Students' tasks in agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequences</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussing through a comprehension activity the relevance of the topic and introducing the objective: To make our personal community aware of the need for quality education in Malawi.</li> <li>2. Examining information by individually answering, and comparing afterwards, why it is important to talk about this issue and use Zoom to create awareness.</li> <li>3. Specifying together the characteristics of the communicative context: Zoom.</li> <li>4. Organizing the likely structure of the interaction through individual, group and class reflections or by directly providing the structure in a guideline.</li> <li>5. Writing for each communicative step what you would say in your L1.</li> <li>6. Translating the authentic creations to the additional language.</li> <li>7. Locating frequently made mistakes (selected by the teacher after correcting the guidelines) and correcting these individually before doing so together.</li> <li>8. Practicing for the final task in class with rows where students sit in front of each other and evaluate their performances through rubrics.</li> <li>9. Executing the Zoom interactions. In this case, three rooms are needed: one for each interacting student, and a room where the class can see the interactions.</li> <li>10. Co-evaluating the result of the task and the development during the sequence.</li> </ol>

## 6. The study

The implementation and effects of the pedagogical approach were analyzed through a socio-cultural psychology research framework. The administration of it will now be discussed.

### 6.1 Context

First of all, the investigation took place at Regina Carmeli, Horta, a school in Barcelona. A mixed-level class of twenty secondary students from the fourth year, of which the teacher is the researcher, participated in this study. Two students, C and M, were chosen as examples for this article as their interaction patterns during the online conversation from the didactic sequence were so different, and thus, richer in data.

## 6.2 Sociocultural Psychology Research

For this study, the sociocultural theory, which is normally applied as a theoretical lens to understand classroom interactions, was used as a research framework. There are three reasons why sociocultural psychology research has been chosen instead of mainstream SLA research (Lantolf, 2008). Firstly, the former considers the sociocultural context of the study. Additionally, the method is both the initial tool and revised result of the study. That is, through an analysis of the implementation and effects from the agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach, one can grasp via the results what aspects from this tool fostered agentive language use. Finally, there is a relationship between theory and practice, as the materialization is not only informed by theory, but also informs theory through the conclusions.

## 6.3 Data Collection

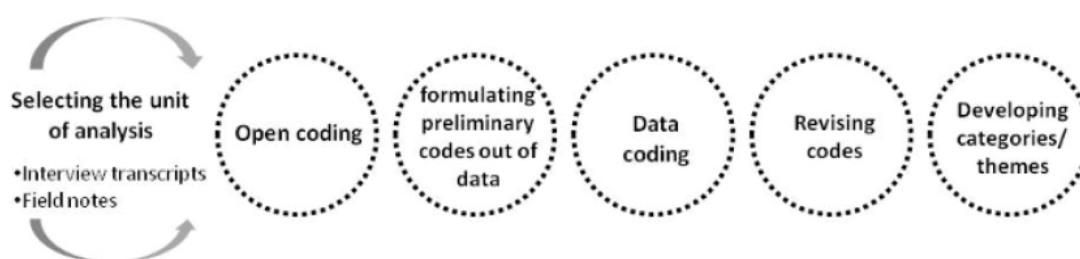
During and shortly after the implementation, three main types of data were collected. First of all, stimulated recall interviews were conducted to investigate how students described the agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequence and felt during its implementation. Next, the students' recorded Zoom interactions were collected to analyze how and when they used the language for their own purposes and how this agency manifested itself. Finally, the students' guidelines with their creations in their L1 and the additional language for each communicative step were considered to find out how and when they decided to use these actions in the same way, differently, or not at all. As secondary data, the teacher's diary to compare observations to the conclusions was collected and analyzed. Any alignments reaffirm conclusions, whereas contradictions reflect the teacher's transformation and that conclusions have not been deliberately looked for (Lantolf & Esteve, 2019).

## 6.4 Data Analysis

### 6.4.1 The units of analysis

Once these data had been collected, three units of analysis were established. Firstly, the students' perceptions of the didactic sequence and its impact on their self-expression,

Image 3. Procedure of qualitative content analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 11)



plus their experience on how they felt during the lessons and the online talk, also known as one's lived experience (*perezhivanie*) in sociocultural psychology research, were extracted during the interviews. Secondly, agentic behavior as a unit of analysis for the recordings showed how students used the additional language for their own purposes during the interactions, and how this agency was exerted. Finally, the transcriptions of the talks were also analyzed on whether students understood what was said and on how this made them feel by analyzing their intentions within the volitional linguistic creations. In other words, a consideration was made for how their feelings (*perezhivanie*) influenced them to use the language to achieve their own goals during the virtual conversation.

#### 6.4.2 The analysis tools

As for the analysis tools, the steps of qualitative content analysis were applied for the interviews to systematically describe the meaning of qualitative material:

On the other hand, agency-based classroom discourse analysis (Rymes, 2016) was executed to study agentic behavior with the features of the agentic learner:

- The agentic learner as controlling his/her own behavior (Duranti, 2004) to see if the student chooses to paraphrase his/her ideas from the guideline.
- The agentic learner as actively engaging in constructing the terms and conditions of his/her own learning (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001) to see when he/she literally implements his/her own created guideline.
- The agentic learner as assigning his/her own relevance and significance to things and events (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) to observe one's willingness to volitionally act in the additional language, or choice to deliberately not do so.
- The agentic learner as being both cognitively (Arievitch, 2017) and emotionally active (Holodynski, 2009) to see if the learner finds solutions to deal with the unexpected and if he/she expresses his/her feelings.
- The agentic learner as a creator of the language (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998) to find all additional language improvisations that do not appear in the guideline.

Students' volitional linguistic creations were analyzed in terms of cohesion and appropriateness during this Zoom interaction, if they showed an understanding of what had been previously said in English, whether they included emotional connotations, and what the intentions were behind these contributions.

After comparing and triangulating the outcomes to ensure accuracy and credibility, conclusions were reached.



## 7. Results

The clarified research framework eased the analysis of the students' perceptions about the didactic sequence, how they felt during its implementation, and their agentic behavior. The next pages, however, only display students C and M's results.

### 7.1 Perceptions of the agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequence

These tables summarize C and M's main descriptions of the didactic sequence and its impact on their self-expression. When comparing these answers, the focus will be on how they believe its implementation encouraged them to either exert their agency in the additional language or not.

#### STUDENT C

Perceptions	Page
The activities are helpful to prepare yourself for the online interaction, but not all of them necessarily enable you to express yourself better, like the comprehension activities.	P. 6
The guideline's co-constructed communicative steps make you confident about what to expect from the online talk, although the order can change.	P. 6
The use of Spanish empowers you to clearly grasp what you are saying.	P. 6
Practicing helps you to learn how to speak with different people. However, depending on how comfortable you feel, you either speak more or less.	P. 7
Carrying out online conversations helps to express yourself more and be yourself, due to the fact that you do not have to speak in front of the class.	P. 8
Evaluating yourself and then discussing this with your teacher forms a gateway to start believing more in yourself and consequently speak more.	P. 7

#### STUDENT M

Perceptions	Page
The listening and reading comprehension about the topic facilitate the preparation and execution of the virtual chat.	P. 13
The co-constructed communicative steps orient students and allow for a coherent conversation, although the steps may vary during this interaction.	P. 13
By using the Spanish language, you come up with ideas you would have liked to include had the actual conversation been in your language.	P. 13
Practicing allows you to become more confident and to get ready for the conversation. This positive self-belief is encouraged when improvising.	PP.15, 16-17
By sitting in a different classroom, you have more privacy and you do not have the feeling that all eyes are directly on you when speaking in English.	P. 15
Evaluating your performance with the teacher can modify your self-belief. It can motivate you to do a better job next time and feel less ashamed.	P. 16

The most relevant ideas from these verbalizations are the following: to begin with, the lessons were all related to each other and helped students to achieve the goal of car-

rying out the online interaction (P. 13). However, this does not mean that all steps from the didactic sequence enabled them to express themselves better (P. 6).

Secondly, the guideline was beneficial for both learners. The co-constructed communicative steps oriented them and made them feel confident about what to expect from the conversation (PP. 6,13). Yet, when implementing these guidelines, they discovered that the order could change, but this did not make the interaction less coherent (PP. 6,13). The communicative orientation had also been advantageous; by using Spanish, it determined what to say for each step and enabled a clear vision of how the conversation would unfold (P. 6). Furthermore, it made them come up with language creations that were true to themselves, but translated (P. 13).

Next, practicing had helped them to learn how to interact with other people, gain confidence, and prepare for the virtual chat (PP. 7,15,16-17). Depending on how comfortable Student C felt with the classmate she spoke to, she would express herself accordingly (P. 7). Whenever Student M spoke more in English, she realized that she improvised. Consequently, she started to develop self-confidence when she succeeded (PP. 16-17). Furthermore, the virtual chat encouraged self-expression as both C and M could be comfortable and feel less nervous as it was not in front of the class (PP. 8,15).

Finally, both C and M had a negative assumption of how they had expressed themselves during the online interaction. Therefore, evaluating with the teacher helped them to not only change their viewpoint on their achievement, but becoming aware of their strengths and areas to work on boosted them to believe more in themselves, to feel less ashamed when speaking, and to be motivated to speak more in English in the future (PP. 7,16).

## 7.2 Experiences of the agency and competency-based communicative didactic sequence

The upcoming tables summarize C and M's main experiences during the lessons and the online interaction. Similarly, the comparison focuses on their feelings, the reasons behind them, and the impact these had on their self-regulated activity.

### 7.2.1 In the classroom

#### STUDENT C

<b>Experience</b>	- Comfortable - Secure	P. 1 P. 1
<b>Reasons</b>	- When she got corrected, it was in a kind way. - She had the freedom to share things with the teacher. - During evaluations, the teacher not only looked at how she performed in English, but also at the "way she is". That is, her nerves and effort were taken into account.	P. 1 P. 2 P. 3
<b>Consequences</b>	- Her classroom participation increased, as she was not afraid to be told off for saying something wrong. - When practicing in English, she expressed herself more.	P. 2 P. 3

**STUDENT M**

<b>Experience</b>	- Entertained - Comfortable	P. 9 P. 9
<b>Reasons</b>	- Entertained due to the teaching style: There was pair-work and no textbook use or long explanations. - Comfortable due to the co-constructed trust, which was fostered through the teacher's kind attitude, chatting with him, his kind feedback when making a mistake, and interaction with other students.	P. 9 P. 9, P. 10, P. 11. P. 16
<b>Consequences</b>	- Entertaining lessons foster participation. - With comfort, she was more likely to speak, be herself, and not be afraid of feedback, so she learned more.	P. 9 P. 9 P. 10

In the classroom, both felt comfortable (PP. 1,9) because of a learning environment based on trust. This was a result of the kind feedback (PP. 1,11), the freedom to share things with the teacher (P. 2), evaluations with the teacher where performance and personality were both taken into account (P. 3), the teacher's kind attitude (P. 10), chatting with the teacher in English (P. 9), and speaking activities in class (P. 16). There is a relationship between this co-constructed trust and use of English. On the one hand, this invited C to express herself more (P. 3). This was not the case with M, but this is due to her personality (P. 9). When speaking in English, M felt she could be herself and that she did not have to be afraid of the teacher's reaction (P. 10).

**7.2.2 During the virtual conversations****STUDENT C**

<b>Feelings</b>	- A little nervous - Comfortable - Confident	P. 4 P. 6 P. 6
<b>Reasons</b>	- Nervous due to having to speak in English online. - Comfortable, as she knows she can count on M. - Confident because of the communicative steps.	P. 4 P. 4 P. 6
<b>Consequences</b>	- Due to her nerves, she expressed her doubt with "eh". - When feeling comfortable with someone, she was more likely to speak and then notice her improvement. - With the structure from the communicative steps, she could learn by speaking fluently (in a different order).	P. 4 P. 7 P. 5 PP. 6,8

**STUDENT M**

<b>Feelings</b>	- Quite nervous - At ease	P. 11 P. 11
<b>Reasons</b>	- Nervous, due to the interaction. Although speaking online helped to not be the center of attention. - At ease, as it was easier to talk to someone you trust.	P. 15 P. 11

<b>Consequences</b>	- As she was nervous, she used the sound “eh” often, did not find the linking words, and forgot to ask questions.	P. 11
	- Although feeling at ease, as M is a more introvert person, she does not necessarily speak more.	P. 9
	- Despite the orientation, the dialogue changed. This made her improvise and realize her improvement.	P. 12

C and M felt a little nervous, but also quite comfortable (PP. 4,6,11). They felt nervous as they had to speak in English in front of the class (PP. 4,15), although carrying out the conversation in a different classroom made it less nerve-wrecking (P. 15). These nerves caused them to use the gap filler “eh” frequently when in doubt, to stall from finding the right linking words, and to forget to ask questions (PP. 4,11). Nevertheless, they also felt comfortable as they spoke to a friend (PP. 4,9). In addition, C also felt confident by relying on the communicative steps from her guideline (P. 6). This context promoted C’s English language use (P. 7). M did not express herself profusely, as she is more introverted (P. 9). Both realized that the guideline was not implemented word for word as they had to adapt to their classmate (PP. 6,12). However, by improvising, they realized that they had improved through their fluency, intonation and adaptations (PP. 5,6,8,12).

### 7.3 The students’ agentive behavior

Before summarizing C and M’s agentive behavior, it is relevant to first have a look at the transcription from the actual conversation on education in Malawi.

- 1 *(M and C both enter their classrooms laughing and giggling.)*
- 2 M: [/] Hello C.
- 3 C: Hello M.
- 4 M & C: [/] How are you?
- 5 M: |Good, thank you. [/] And you?
- 6 C: Good, thank you.
- 7 M: Well, I think that we have to talk about the:: education in Malawi, that I think that is very bad.
- 9 C: Yes, I think || eh:: | is very bad, and:: for example, eh::, in Malawi they need a lot of “recours” to::, for example, eh, books, tables, eh::, and others. And:: for example, in::, after 6 pm. |, eh::, they didn’t study because:: of electricity.
- 13 M: Yes.
- 14 C: ... - [/] And you? [/] What is your opinion?

- 15 M: Yes, [/] I agree with you. And, also, in Malawi eh there are so poor. And::, eh::, in one class there are, eh::, one hundred thirty children because there are so few teachers.
- 18 C: Yes, I agree with you. I think the classes are very small, eh::, for a lot of childrens. [/] And you? Eh [/] what we can do to solve this problem?
- 20 M: Well I think that we can create a crowdfunding, and donate not also [/] money. And we can donate, eh::, clothes and food and also bicycles.
- 22 C: It's a good idea. | Eh, thank you for:: your:: time and:: goodbye.
- 23 M: Thank you, goodbye. [*M & C: Both stand up and leave*].

The table below indicates the sentences where the students controlled their actions by consciously deciding to use their guidelines. However, as they were nervous, it was noted that they paraphrased many sentences instead of following the guideline exactly. This made them say “eh” frequently (except 3,23) and prevented them from using linking words.

Manifestation	Student C	Student M
Control over one's behavior	[3, 9-12, 18-19, 22].	[15-17,20-21,23].

This emphasizes the guidelines were frequently used and underlines that the students took advantage of the terms (the characteristics and steps from the talk), and the conditions (the personal linguistic creations) they had actively created in class. However, only a few of these creations were used in their original form. This happened when greeting (2), asking how the other person was doing (4), and saying goodbye (23).

Manifestation	Student C	Student M
Actively engages in constructing the terms and conditions of her learning	[4,23].	[2,4].

Although the students mainly stuck to their guidelines, the next table shows they also used the additional language creatively in other ways than paraphrasing. Both stated they had to improvise when having to adapt to comments or questions.

Manifestation	Student C	Student M
Creator of the language	[6,9,14,18-19,22].	[5,7-8,13,15,20].

C and M used their cognitive abilities to deal with the unexpected during the interaction. For example, they shared emotions when explaining how they were doing (5,6), or expressed doubt with the filler word “well” (20) to gain time to answer. In both examples they are acted upon, as they answer questions.

Manifestation	Student C	Student M
Cognitively and emotionally active	[6].	[5,20]

In the remaining improvised creations in the additional language, both C and M were active agents who took the initiative to express themselves. On the one hand, C voluntarily asked questions out of interest (14,19), shared ideas by anticipating information from M (9,18), and actively listened by sharing that she agreed (18,22). On the other hand, M was more discrete, as she only invited C to speak (7,8), gave her opinion (7-8), and actively listened with short affirmations (13,15). When comparing these sentences, a certain willingness can be observed to either share or ask something to which they had assigned relevance or significance. Feeling comfortable made it more likely for C to express herself. M mentioned that she is not the type of person to ask questions due to her personality. Both of these experiences are reflected in their agentive behavior.

However, C and M did not implement everything they had prepared in their guidelines. This was because they either did not remember, or the creation was not needed (like asking the other person to repeat herself), or due to the fact that they were nervous, or as they believed it was not worth sharing. For example, C could have easily shared her own idea to improve the education in Malawi when she said M's idea was good (18). Similarly, M did not take advantage of this opportunity to ask for C's opinion (20-21), which was according to her a consequence of her nerves.

Manifestation	Student C	Student M
Assigns her own relevance and significance to things and events	Action: [9,14,18-19,22]. Non-action: [18].	Action: [7-8,13,15] Non-action: [20-21]

## 8. Discussion

The analyzed and compared results will now be discussed regarding conducted research on agency.

During the interaction, students were nervous as they had to talk online in English for the rest of the class. It could also be observed this negatively influenced their self-regulated activity in the additional language. They found it hard to combine prepared sentences with each other, and used the "eh" sound instead of linking words. Moreover, the nervousness could make students forget to ask questions, despite having opportunities to do so. Agentive behavior is therefore not only "mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors" (Van Lier, 2008, p. 171), but "also needs to be understood in terms of a person's physical, cognitive, affective, and motivational capacities to act" (Mercer, 2012, p. 42).

Despite being nervous, students felt comfortable during the online chat, as they knew they could count on each other. In addition, they also experienced trust in the classroom, which had been co-constructed during the lessons of the didactic sequence. Knowing there was this trust encouraged students to speak more during the interaction. Some students, like M, did not express themselves more profusely, as they consider

themselves to be more introverted. The creation of a trustful learning environment thus enhances students' self-regulated activity. In line with this, Mercer suggests that "teachers can work at creating momentum by attending to a range of dimensions and components in the agentic system such as creating a range of conditions and learning environments (in and out of the class) designed to enhance and facilitate learner agency (2012, p. 56).

When expressing themselves, the volitional improvisations were a clear indicator of agentive behavior. These emerged out of a need to share or ask something in the additional language to which students had assigned personal significance. This willingness from students to exert their agency can also take place during classroom interactions. In Lagerwaard's study (2021), the pedagogical principles of dialogic teaching, affordances, and the emotional dimension fostered this volitional exertion of agency. The investigation corroborates this through Joan, a student who shares his anger when he realizes he cannot write down a classroom rule that he had invented on a poster. When the teacher asks why he is sad, Joan angrily points at his rule, and says in English "because this... this text... is MY text! And María are writing MY text and is not acceptable". This rant carries on, and is a clear example of agentive behavior; not only because Joan is in control over his actions and actively engages in a conversation about his learning conditions, but especially because of his willingness to use his cognitive abilities in order to volitionally share how he feels about this injustice. His mistakes are irrelevant, as long as he gets his significant message across.

Like Joan, the students in this study also reveal there is more to agentive expression than merely one's willingness to speak, as Gao (2010b) claimed. On the one hand, agency may be visible through the initiative to express yourself, but this does not impede other students from answering questions. Self-regulated activity in the additional language in these cases is not volitional, but a consequence of having to deal with the unexpected, such as answering to how she is doing. On the other hand, not expressing yourself in the additional language does not necessarily make you less agentive, as this can be a conscious decision or a result of one's incompetence to do so.

Although the guidelines had helped students to get ready for the conversation, they realized that they ended up improvising more when speaking. Apart from voluntary contributions and paraphrased sentences, this happened when answering questions and using a filler word, for instance. The guidelines had laid a foundation for the interaction to take place, but it was the "choice, giving learners the right to speak and the responsibility for their actions" (Van Lier, 2008, p. 183) that promoted their agentive language use. Moreover, although they improvised, it did not make the interaction incoherent. This reaffirms Gao's viewpoint that for learners to exert their agency, they should first have "a critical understanding of particular social learning contexts" (2010a, p. 154).

On a final note, although students had experienced their improvement through their fluency and capacity to react in English to the unexpected, they still had a negative idea of how they had expressed themselves. Evaluating with the teacher helped them to change the perception of their achievement and to be more aware of their strengths and

weaknesses. This made them believe more in themselves, and feel motivated and less ashamed to speak more in English. Thus, merely including “learner beliefs about themselves and their contexts of language learning” (Mercer, 2012, p. 56) is not enough, as their view of the interaction does not necessarily have to match their performance. Descriptive feedback can then establish trusting relationships, increase learners’ self-beliefs and self-esteem, and develop growth mindsets (Dweck, 2006).

## 9. Conclusions

With the discussed results in mind, the research question and future research directions can now be answered.

### 9.1 Answer to the main research question

There are two reasons as to how the designed agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach promoted use of the additional language by students through their agency.

The first reason is the didactic sequence from reflective action-oriented learning (Esteve et al., 2017), which enabled students to prepare for an online interaction in which they had to self-regulate their activity in the additional language to deal with the unexpected. They flexibly used their cognitive abilities to anticipate questions, use a filler word to gain time to answer, and deal with their nerves by paraphrasing their guidelines. Furthermore, the choice to act on their terms encouraged students to use the additional language in ways that showed a certain willingness to either share, ask, or anticipate something to which they had assigned personal significance. That is, they voluntarily asked questions out of personal interest, invited someone to discuss a certain topic, gave their opinion, and also anticipated by sharing one’s idea about what was being said and by actively listening. Even though these improvisations made them feel they had improved, the teacher-researcher discovered the same students could still be pessimistic about the outcome of their talk: “It is surprising that some students’ own interpretation of a great interaction was negative despite having carried out a self-evaluation with clear observable criteria” (p. 9). At this stage, the teacher was not aware of the impact the co-evaluation would have, as it helped students to reconsider their perception after getting to discover their merits and demerits. This increased their self-belief and made them feel more motivated and less ashamed to speak in English.

The second reason is the co-construction of a trustful learning environment throughout the implementation of the didactic sequence (Johnson & Golombek, 2016), as this enhanced students’ self-regulated activity during the interaction. This is because even though the students felt nervous due to the pressure of having to virtually interact in front of the class, they also experienced trust with the person they spoke to and the trustful learning environment. This trust was created as a result of kind feedback, the freedom to share things with the teacher, evaluations with the teacher where perfor-



mance and emotions were both taken into account, the teacher's kind attitude, chatting with the teacher in English, and speaking activities in class. As a result of the trust they experienced during the interaction, it was more likely for them to take the initiative to speak in the additional language, unless this clashed with their personality. The teacher-researcher indeed observed that "(a)lthough everybody seemed to feel comfortable during the interaction, it did not necessarily mean all of them improvised more in the additional language" (p. 8). Agency is therefore not only manifested by one's self-regulated decision to volitionally act in the additional language, but also by one's conscious decision not to do so.

To sum up, although the materialization of reflective action-oriented learning encouraged students to use the additional language through their agency, it must be stressed that the other pedagogical principles were implemented simultaneously. Among these principles, the emotional dimension in particular fostered volitional self-regulated activity and encompassed students' personalities in the additional language.

## 9.2 Future research directions

As the agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach had a positive impact on students' volitional agentive behavior, additional language teaching in Catalonia should "make understanding learner agency, its emergence and ongoing development a priority" (2012, p. 58). Research is therefore encouraged in different contexts in Catalonia where the provided legal framework and completing informed conceptual basis with pedagogical principles, as well the pedagogical actions, are analyzed according to the implementation and its impact. This is ideally done with more students, different secondary school years, and other designed didactic sequences throughout an entire course as it would give a more thorough understanding of the students' agentive development. Until then, the agency and competency-based communicative pedagogical approach should be seen as a provisional informed blueprint to promote students' agentive use of the additional language, rather than a guarantee of it.

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