

Attain Cultural Integration through teachers' Conflict Resolution skills Development: The ACCORD Project

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Abstract

Scenario-based learning (SBL) has recently received more and more attention in the training and education fields as a mechanism for providing active and generative learning. E-learning systems can provide a solid platform upon which SBL can be created and used to promote relational competences development, and to offer open source e-learning tools so to overcome common lack of access to affordable training resources. Within this paper a project called ACCORD to develop a new e-learning system to promote intercultural skills in terms of intercultural literacy, inclusive education and conflict management will be described. This project aims to prepare secondary school teachers from five European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain) to take an active stand against intercultural conflicts within the school context, by providing SBL and game-based learning approach. The present article will provide an overview of the ACCORD project, highlighting the theoretical framework underpinning its development, the methodologies that have been used, and the main preliminary outcomes.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Europe has experienced massive demographic and cultural changes featured by important population flows, leading also to a growth in the proportion of young people with different sociocultural backgrounds (European Commission, 2017).

In this context, the education sector has been considered as playing a central role to promote social inclusion and to foster mutual understanding and respect of societal values, as well as to prevent discrimination. In this direction the existing policies at European level aim to redress the disparities in educational outcomes between native and children with a migrant background and to favour inclusion and integration, with the urgency of offering curricula tailored to the specific needs of the diverse groups of migrant students. This results into an integrated approach to making a more inclusive education system, which should ideally include a combination of elements, such as linguistic and academic support, parental and community involvement, and intercultural education (Dumcius, Siarova, Balcait«, Hutova, & Nicaise, 2013).

The quality of teaching is recognised as one of the most important school-level factors influencing student outcomes. Therefore, a school culture that is reflective and committed to equality plays a crucial role in creating a secure and enriching environment for children (OECD, 2012).

However, intercultural education remains marginalised in policy terms and this could be due to the scarce empirical evidence on the effectiveness of this approach on student learning, leading some researchers and policymakers to question such measures (Brind, Harper, & Moore, 2008).

As the most influential factor contributing to school improvement and student achievement is the teacher, the growing changes of the

European societies and, therefore, of the educational context induced to newly define the role of teachers and educators and the competences they are expected to possess in integrating knowledge with relational and technical skills (European Commission, 2017). Indeed, teachers are constantly required to adapt their practices and to handle complexity, with classroom management representing one of their major challenges not only in terms of teaching new programmes, and organising the learning environment but also in terms of managing relational aspects of the educational duties, handling differences and diversity and promoting inclusion and a satisfactory class climate (Kurawa, 2010; Vasilescu, Popescu, & Popescu, 2012).

Nevertheless, research underlined that teachers often report to feel unprepared for dealing with the increasingly diverse range of learners in their classrooms, perceiving lack of knowledge, skills and expertise necessary to put into “practice” inclusive education, and requiring more customised and focused interventions to efficiently support them in the adoption of more inclusive approaches (Black-Hawkins, 2012; Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

In this perspective, the main motivation for the ACCORD project comes from a need emerged at European level, for a flexible, accessible, and affordable learning tool, which is capable of helping teachers and educators to access informal learning pathways for the autonomous improvement and assessment of their interethnic and intercultural competences. The rationale of the ACCORD project is that of addressing this need by bridging social skills enhancement and assessment with the smart agenda proposed in the Europe 2020 strategy, which encourages the use of ICT methodology for extending the accessibility of resources and rebating their implementation and running costs.

2. The ACCORD project

ACCORD is a two-year project funded in 2016 by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ EU Programme, “Social Education through Education, Training and Youth”. It aims to support teacher training and self-development through the innovative methodology

exploited from a previous EU project ENACT (Enhancing Negotiation skills through on-line Assessment of Competencies and interactive mobile Training, Lifelong Learning Programme, Key Activity 3, 2014-15). Its main objective was to contribute to the development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practices by providing free, flexible, innovative scenario-based learning teaching and assessment methods to improving negotiation and communication skills in formal and informal educational contexts. The ACCORD project consortium is constituted by seven core partners across five EU countries, i.e., Italy (University of Naples Federico II, SMARTED srl, and Fondazione Mondo Digitale), Spain (University of Barcelona), Austria (University of Vienna), Germany (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) and Belgium (University of Antwerp).

More specifically, the ACCORD project aims to prepare teachers to take an active stand against all forms of discrimination and racism, to deal with diversity and handle conflicts that might emerge in classrooms. Through a free, open online training course based on game-based learning (GBL) and scenario-based learning (SBL) methodologies, secondary school teachers from all over Europe will develop their competences in terms of intercultural literacy, inclusive education and conflict management to effectively manage interethnic conflicts in classroom. Consequently, teachers will be able to acquaint their students with the necessary competences for living in culturally diverse society, and creating a safe, caring and constructive community (Wilkerson, Perzigian, & Schurr, 2013). In this respect, ACCORD aims to offer a structured and innovative platform for the provision of pedagogy and assessment methods for helping teachers and educators to enhance and (self)assess their intercultural and negotiation competences (Pacella, Di Ferdinando, Dell'Aquila, & Marocco, 2015).

The training methodology is based on the development of an integrated platform merging: a) the production of theoretical training material through a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) offering multimedia material and video lecture by various experts on the topics, and b) the development of a series of virtual role-playing game scenarios where teachers can directly experience the dynamics of interethnic conflicts.

The main objectives of ACCORD project can be summarised as follows:

- to develop and test an easily accessible and flexible e-learning platform and training methodology that could facilitate the enhancement of conflict resolution skills development at a low cost;
- to overcome both geographical and resource obstacles that often hinder the access to professional training and assessment schemes in interethnic communication and conflict resolution by exploiting digital practices, especially within the educational sector;
- to promote and evaluate the acceptance of Serious Games and GBL approaches in teacher education, in order to derive observations and best practices from comparative analysis in various EU Countries;
- to adapt, upscale, and generalise through the implementation and analysis of extensive testing the positive results obtained by a previous LLP EU project, *ENACT* in integration with a Moodle MOOC platform to deliver ad hoc user training material focusing on interethnic conflict communication, and relations.

3. The ACCORD methodology

Pedagogical, Sociological, and Psychological framework

The theoretical framework underpinning the ACCORD project development was structured through the analysis and the identification of pedagogical, sociological and psychological models and approaches addressing diversity, inclusion and conflict management. Indeed, this integrated research allowed to review and condense the most updated knowledge in terms of key competences to manage interethnic conflicts to address the main psycho-social mechanisms and areas of social and psychological tensions and intervention.

This research has been essential to design the ACCORD methodology including the online platform, the serious games scenarios and the theoretical material.

3.1 Pedagogical framework

The pedagogical framework underpinning the ACCORD project identified three key competence areas, i.e., Intercultural literacy, Inclusive education, and Conflict management, required by teachers for addressing culturally diverse educational environments, for applying methodologies oriented to an inclusive education, and for managing intercultural conflicts (e.g., communication, problem solving, negotiation and mediation).

Furthermore, two main Pedagogical Approaches have been proposed: 1) *Scenario-based learning (SBL)*, which provides meaningful learning experiences by engaging students in authentic environments to support reflective practices and active learning in a real-world problem and in a subsequent solution finding process. 2) *Game-based learning (GBL)*, which offers risk-free virtual worlds featured by freedom of exploration, providing players with a real sense of agency over their actions, but also creating meaningful learning experiences where learners can experiment various options within a safe environment where there is always a chance to learn from one's own mistakes as the experience itself becomes source of self-reflection.

3.2 Sociological framework

The sociological framework underpinning the ACCORD project includes perspectives derived from sociology, anthropology and social psychology, focusing on the definition and implications of ethnic discrimination in the classroom (Wrench, 2015), and the main mechanisms occurring when facing diversity (e.g. stereotypes, majority and minority, prejudice, microaggression, ethnic humour). The sociological perspective has been mainly adopted to frame and develop the ACCORD game scenarios, covering key occurrences of ethnic discrimination in a classroom context (Brown, 2015; Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009).

3.3 Psychological framework

The psychological framework underpinning the ACCORD project focuses on factors playing a key role for promoting teachers' self-reflection, awareness and intercultural effectiveness. From this perspective, this framework aims to identify the behavioural and emotional mechanisms and factors involved in negotiation processes within teacher-student conflictual interactions, integrating different theoretical models capturing the following psychological dimensions: the Conflict management model (Rahim, 2001), the Multicultural Personality construct (Van Der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Ponterotto, & Fietzer, 2013), and the Assertive Model of Communication (Dryden & Constantinou, 2004), summarised as follows.

The proposed *Conflict management model* (Rahim, 2001) differentiates the interpersonal conflict on two basic dimensions: concern for self (the degree, high or low, to which a person attempts to satisfy her own concerns) and concern for others (the degree, high or low, to which a person attempts to satisfy the concern of others), whose combination results in five styles of handling interpersonal conflict: Integrating, Obliging, Dominating, Avoiding, Compromising. The process of negotiation implies effective communication crucial to understand, inquiry, explore, develop shared interests and make joint decisions. Indeed, effective communication is inextricably related with assertiveness that is being able to effectively communicate thoughts, feelings and opinions in direct and appropriate way while maintaining respect for other people's rights, feelings, needs and opinions, by not being abusive or submissive.

Multicultural Personality (Van Der Zee et al., 2013) is defined as an individual competence as successfully operating in a new cultural environment, feeling of psychological well-being in multicultural environment, and interest in and ability to deal with individuals from a different cultural background, supported by five main dimensions: Cultural Empathy, Open-mindedness, Flexibility, Emotional Stability and Social Initiative.

The ACCORD project moves from the interest in connecting two key dimensions in secondary school teachers and educators: 1)

the relevance of possessing specific personality characteristics for teachers and educators to efficiently dealing with the actual increasingly multi-ethnic school context; and 2) the importance to efficiently manage conflicting interethnic situations in the interactions with students.

4. Methodological approach and preliminary findings

In order to inform the design and the development of the ACCORD training programme for inclusive education and intercultural conflict management, a systematic Training Needs Analysis (TNA) with teachers across the five partner geographical areas has been conducted, adopting multiple methods of data collection. Specifically, an online National Survey has been administered to the key actors involved in training and education, such as teachers, trainers and education managers, school leaders. National focus groups have been organised in order to gather secondary school teachers' perspectives and to gain useful insights regarding their training needs in relation to inclusive education and intercultural conflict management.

4.1 National Survey

Overall 589 people completed a National Survey including two internationally known questionnaires assessing: 1) multicultural personality (Multicultural Personality-Questionnaire- Short Form, MPQ-SF; Van Der Zee et al., 2013), and 2) conflict management styles (Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II, ROCI II, Form B; Rahim, 2001).

The MPQ SF is a 40-item Likert-type self-report measure of multicultural personality. The ROCI-II consists of 28 statements on a 5-point Likert scale to measure independent dimensions of five styles of handling interpersonal conflict.

The two questionnaires – open and answered on a voluntary basis – were translated into the different project languages, made available online and widely diffused through partners' teachers and secondary school networks.

Findings from the National Survey directly informed the design of the psychological modelling underpinning the simulation scenarios of the ACCORD game.

Data collected from the National Surveys have been used to investigate whether there were significant associations between multicultural personality dimensions (from MPQ-SF) and the individuals' styles of handling interpersonal conflicts (from ROCI-II) in secondary school teachers and educators, so to provide meaningful indications regarding which areas and aspects to include in the role-playing learning scenarios. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's Correlations.

Descriptive statistics on socio-demographic characteristics of teachers and educators participating in the ACCORD National survey are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographics of participants

Characteristics	Value	p value
Gender		
Female	416 (70.6 %)	< 0.001
Male	173 (29.4 %)	
Age in years [n (%)]		
Under 35	154 (26.1 %)	< 0.001
35-45	144 (24.5 %)	
Over 45	291 (49.4 %)	
Experience in years [n (%)]		
Under 5	130 (22.1 %)	< 0.001
5-10	121 (20.5 %)	
Over 10	338 (57.4 %)	
Country		
AU	109 (18.5 %)	< 0.001
BE	116 (19.7 %)	
DE	42 (7.1 %)	
ES	213 (36.2 %)	
IT	109 (18.5 %)	

Moreover, Table 2 shows findings from Person's correlations analysis (Pearson's r) exploring significant correlations between Multicultural Personality dimensions and the different Conflict Management styles. Data revealed that Cultural Empathy, Open Mindedness, and Social Initiative were significantly positively related to Integrating, Obliging and Compromising styles, while Emotional Stability was positively related to Integrating style. Conversely, Cultural Empathy was negatively related to Dominating style; Social Initiative was negatively related to Avoiding style; Flexibility was negatively related to Dominating and Avoiding styles; and Emotional Stability was negatively related to Obliging and Dominating styles.

Table 2. Correlations between MPQ-SF and ROCI-II dimensions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Cultural Empathy	1									
2 Open Mindedness	0.64**	1								
3 Social Initiative	0.41**	0.51**	1							
4 Flexibility	-0.03	0.16**	0.16**	1						
5 Emotional Stability	0.13**	0.28**	0.35**	0.29**	1					
6 Integrating	0.45**	0.46**	0.28**	0.08	0.11**	1				
7 Obliging	0.26**	0.24**	0.09*	-0.04	-0.10*	0.42**	1			
8 Dominating	-0.16**	-0.07	-0.03	-0.17**	-0.09*	-0.28**	-0.02	1		
9 Avoiding	-0.06	-0.03	-0.15**	-0.10*	-0.06	-0.02	0.12**	0.15**	1	
10 Compromising	0.26**	0.23**	0.12**	-0.03	0.03	0.49**	0.38**	-0.10*	0.10*	1

These data were then integrated with the results emerged from the focus groups and supported the design of the ACCORD role-playing game.

4.2 National Focus groups

National Focus groups were organized across all project countries and carried out involving secondary school teachers to investigate training needs and perceptions in relation to inclusive education and intercultural conflict management. Overall, 69 participants were carefully recruited, so to obtain a heterogeneous group of teachers from

different levels and disciplines to which different intercultural conflicting scenarios to be discussed were introduced.

In particular, teachers were asked to provide their thought and feelings regarding: (a) the identification of the conflict at stake; (b) their emotions as well as the potential emotions of the students involved in the presented situations; (c) the way to manage the conflict; (d) the adaptation of the conflict to their specific educational contexts. Therefore, teachers contributed to the creation of the content of the game scenarios by: clarifying what may be considered as an interethnic conflict; identifying the main feelings that may be experienced both by teachers and students involved; setting up what kind of interventions may be considered effective to redeem the proposed conflict; reflecting on the most effective communication style to be used to deal with a specific situation, context and student; and defining new possible scenarios based on their experience. A summary of the proposed scenarios is reported in Table 3.

At the end of the focus group discussions conductors also gathered information regarding the feasibility of the proposed integrated training methodology (digital education, GBL and SBL) that was positively valued by participants, and teachers' expectations in participating in the project. Overall, has emerged that the ACCORD scenarios have been recognised as a potential meaningful tool to support conflict management situations in classroom within teacher-pupil interactions.

Additionally, interestingly, focus group discussions allowed to understand at a deeper level than we could access with the National Survey, the existence of a connection between the styles of conflict management and the dimensions of the multicultural personality.

Moreover, participants across all the partner countries considered the ACCORD training methodology interesting and innovative, as well as appropriate for their profiles and educational contexts, and that the MOOC can provide the necessary flexibility to match teachers' professional and time constraints and make the material easily accessible. No technical concerns (e.g. Internet access or technical specificities) have been raised. In all countries, the GBL and SCL approaches appeared to constitute a powerful resource for teachers. Furthermore, besides those approaches, teachers in all countries highlighted the importance to share intercultural classroom experiences

Table 3. Intercultural and Inter-ethnic conflict scenarios

SCENARIOS	DESCRIPTION
Majority vs. Minority cultures	A boy of Ethiopian descent caught the attention of the teacher during class because he was making too much noise. Despite several warnings of the teacher, the student and the teacher get caught up in a verbal conflict. At some point during the conflict the boy screams to the teacher that 'history still lingers on' and 'white people still treat people of colour as slaves'.
Stereotyping and Ethnic Humour	During an ICT-Class, a boy of Italian descent forwards an e-mail with a picture enclosed to his classmates. Suddenly, the whole class starts laughing. The picture shows a selfie of two monkeys wearing sunglasses and has a text which says: "this is a picture of us during our holidays in Brazil." He shouts: 'Sam's holidays picture [boy of African descent].'
Good Intentions and Stereotyping	The subject of the course today is the exploration of religions. The teacher kindly asks a Muslim pupil to teach the class everything what there is to tell about the religion of Islam. The teacher always enjoys it when her own pupils can learn her something new. The pupil refuses to accomplish the request of the teacher.
Racism is exceptional	During class, the subject of ethnic discrimination comes up. The teacher invites everyone to share their experiences. One girl shares the story of how people in the grocery store always look weird at her mother because of the fact that she wears a headscarf. One of the pupil of the class states that people may not look weird at her because of what she wears but because of the way she acts. Not everything that looks like a racist reaction at first sight is racist per se. The Muslim girl becomes furious and responds that this is not true.
Gender and Sexuality	The class watched a movie that tackled the theme of sexuality. One of the topics during the movie was about homosexuality. After the movie a discussion in class takes place. A Muslim boy of Turkish descent feels disgusted and shouts that two boys kissing shouldn't be allowed and is completely unethical. The other classmates react and say that 'the Turkish is a backward culture and the Islam is not a religion of modern times.'

and debate with other educators involved in similar situations, like it was done during the focus groups, as well as learning from experts. The main topics of ACCORD, i.e. inclusive education and intercultural conflict management appeared to be relevant and of critical interest for the participating teachers in all countries.

5. ACCORD outcomes

The first outcomes of the ACCORD project regard the design and the development of a learning platform based on a training methodology

encompassing the production of: 1) a MOOC course, and 2) the development of virtual role-playing game scenarios where directly to experience the dynamics of intercultural conflict able to enhance secondary school teachers' intercultural awareness and strengthen their skills and competence to interact effectively with pupils from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The virtual game design has been starting from the preliminary analyses and results emerged from the TNA as described above. Findings from online surveys and focus groups have informed the definition of contents and variables for the design of the training virtual scenarios.

5.1 MOOC

The MOOC supports teachers with in-depth multimedia and video lecture material available online to develop competences related to intercultural literacy, inclusive pedagogical approaches and conflict management, creation of positive learning environments featured by intercultural coexistence and positive approaches towards conflicts. It offers five video lectures, each of ten minutes duration (Figure 1), structured as follows:

- *Lesson 1.* ACCORD pedagogical framework;
- *Lesson 2.* Multicultural Personality dimensions and teachers' role in multi-ethnic classes;

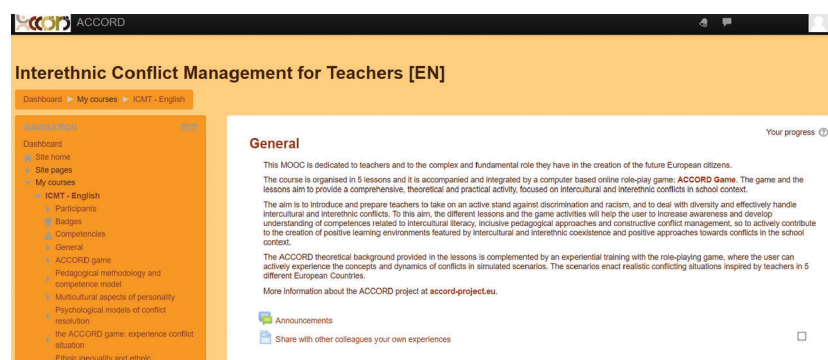


Figure 1. ACCORD Moodle MOOC platform

- *Lesson 3.* Psychological models of conflict resolution: applications in the school context and within teacher-pupil interethnic interactions;
- *Lesson 4.* The use of Serious Games in the school context: ACCORD games for Teacher-pupils inter-ethnic and intercultural interactions;
- *Lesson 5.* Theoretical framing interethnic conflicts in the classroom: perspectives derived from sociology, anthropology and social psychology.

5.2 The ACCORD game

The ACCORD game has been developed as an educational tool in the form of a 3D, single-player, to train users' interethnic communication and negotiation skills in realistic scenarios during the interaction with artificial agents, and to be employed by teachers in secondary school contexts. It aims to cross the boundaries between educational games and Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITSs), merging the importance of an online and dynamical learner training with the intrinsic and extrinsic motivating environment of serious games (Pacella, Dell'Aquila, Marocco, & Furnell, 2017).

The game simulates a dialogue between two characters (an avatar controlled by a human player, and a BOT computer-controlled counterpart). This interaction includes behavioural characteristics such as the act of speech and some elements of body language playing a key role (Marocco, Pacella, Dell'Aquila, & Di Ferdinando, 2015). The ACCORD game is designed to be played by a single user over the Internet, and the interaction user-3D artificial agent (BOT) is simulated on the computer according to well-defined psychological theories, based on the aforementioned models of five style of handling interpersonal conflict (Rahim, 2001) and assertive communication in effective interactions (Dryden & Constantinou, 2004).

The game is organized in five different interethnic conflicting scenarios where the user plays a role of the teacher and negotiates with



Figure 2. An example of ACCORD scenario

various virtual agents representing students in interethnic conflicting situations.

The communication model has defined the range of basic expressions performed by the digital characters representing the user and the artificial agent, such as verbal cues (vocal tone, shape of the speech bubble and structure of the sentence) and non-verbal indicators (facial expression, eye contact, body posture and gestures). The user is introduced to the game with a scene explaining the situation and the reason of the conflict that conduct the player to the stage of the virtual agent-user interaction (Figure 2).

Each exchange between the two is organized in a five-state scene, which includes one turn of speech for each party. In each state, the user can choose one among five possible sentences (one for each of Rahim's styles of handling conflicts) that are complemented with gesture and facial expression as expression of the non-verbal indicators as identified by the assertive model of communication for the assertive, passive and aggressive behavioural styles (Figure 3). Indeed, both verbal and non-verbal indicators in the communication process between the user and the artificial agent have been chosen for their relevance in the behavioural description of the three different communication styles, and they can be seen as indicators of specific behavioural traits.

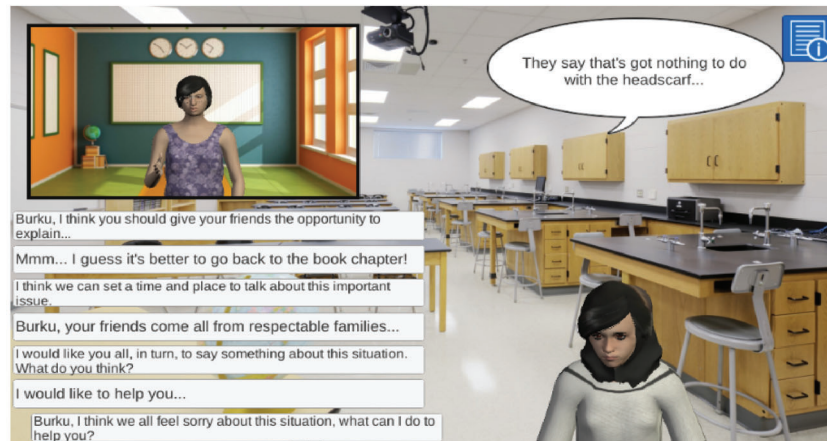


Figure 3. User-bot interaction

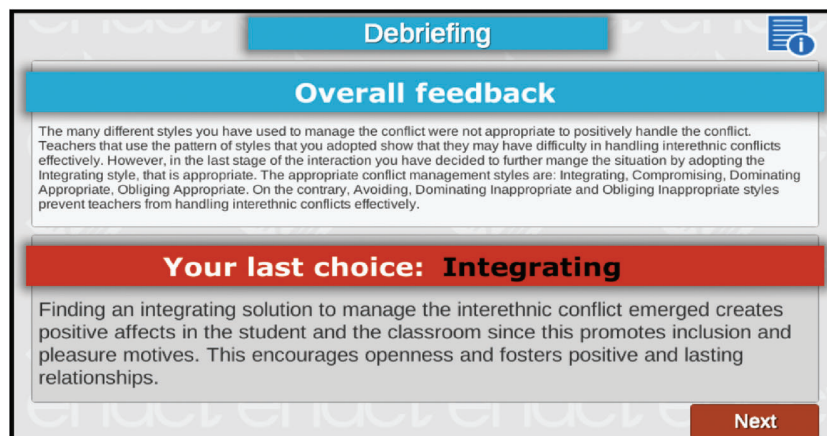


Figure 4. An example of feedback

Once a scenario has been completed the teacher is given an overall feedback made of: 1) a debriefing regarding the main path of negotiation styles adopted during the games; and 2) a profile based on the Rahim model that is related to the specific situations she played and

the efficacy of the communication style acted throughout the exchange with the student. The user is also provided with an outline regarding the history of all the choices made and guided through the understanding of different aspects of the negotiation (Figure 4).

In short, playing the virtual learning scenarios in classroom has as main objective to boost awareness around effective intercultural communication in order to help teachers to experience how to manage conflict constructively, so to create positive learning environments and facilitate students in developing conflict resolution competences too.

5.3 Preliminary Validation Phase for Accord Game

Before testing the ACCORD overall methodology and in the EU project countries, a preliminary validation test of the five game scenarios has been run involving 35 subjects (secondary school teachers $n = 16$; teachers in training $n = 19$). The first demo of the ACCORD Game was presented, and feedbacks were collected in the form of questionnaires administered right after the game sessions, rating their game experience (on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “Extremely bad” to 5 “Extremely good”) with respect to the technological dimension of the game (quality of the interface and virtual agents) and to the potential of the game as learning tool. The overall feedback was positive, considering that the average rating for each of the question scored was always over 3 points and that 85.6% of the subjects ($n = 30$) showed an overall interest in the future development of the game.

6. Conclusions and Future Research

The ACCORD project is currently developing and implementing an open online learning platform providing pedagogical resources and activities based on GBL and SBL approaches in order to prepare secondary school teachers to constructively manage intercultural conflicts which may arise in the classroom, as well as to create positive learning environments and to address intercultural diversity in the classroom.

The ACCORD project methodology will be tested with secondary school teachers across the five different project countries. More specifically, for testing the learning effectiveness of both the ACCORD interethnic simulation scenarios and the overall training process will be conducted various rounds of user trials in the five partner countries by involving 1000 secondary school's teachers. We are interested to investigate whether the ACCORD tool is considered as able to engage in critical reflection on their experiences and to lead to a perspective transformation. Teachers' experiences will be assessed in terms of promoting conflict awareness, reasons interethnic conflicts may arise, dynamics involved, potential sources of conflict, stages in the conflict process, ways to deal with conflict situations, ways different handling conflict styles may determines interpersonal or intra-group interactions and even student's performance, individual characteristics affecting the choice of conflict resolution style, and possible interventions for managing a conflict. Users' experience will indicate the potential of ACCORD as a learning method able to be employed in educational contexts as meaningful learning tool.

We are confident that the use of the tool may be able to create engaging and motivating experiences able to raise awareness and develop intercultural and interethnic conflict management competences that may be transferred to situations in real-world school contexts at European level.

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