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Task development for telecollaboration among youngsters

Bio data

Kristi Jauregi is Professor of Language Education at Fontys University of Applied Sciences and Lecturer-researcher at Utrecht University (The Netherlands). Her main area of research is on CALL, particularly on Telecollaboration carried out with synchronous applications (video communication or 3D virtual worlds). She has been engaged in different European projects (NIFLAR, Euroversity) and is project leader of the TILA project (www.tilaproject.eu) funded by the European Commission.

Current research

The TILA project (Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition) aims (1) to innovate, enrich and make foreign language teaching programmes more meaningful and effective by encouraging the implementation of telecollaboration activities in secondary schools across Europe and (2) to study the added value that telecollaboration may bring to language learning in terms of intercultural understanding, motivation and communicative growth amongst younger learners (Jauregi et al., 2013).

Different telecollaboration tools are being used within TILA for both synchronous (chat, video communication and 3D virtual worlds) and asynchronous (forum, wiki) communication modes.

One of the main areas of research within the project refers to the development of tasks and the relationship between the developed tasks and the activity that learners carry out in telecollaboration sessions.

Task design & language learning and teaching

Task development is a key issue within the TILA project. Our main concerns are:

- (1) how can tasks that are authentic, meaningful, useful and enjoyable be developed for younger learners who are learning foreign languages in a very specific context, that of secondary education; and
- (2) how can tasks contribute to the development of intercultural competence of these younger learners.

We approach tasks as "an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language" (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 4). Essential components of tasks in our approach are: meaning-orientation, intercultural-orientation, goal-orientation and real-world relationship mediated by technology.

Based on TBLT (Ellis, 2003; van den Branden, 2006; Willis, 1996), research into Intercultural Communication (Byram, 1997; 2014; Hinkel, 2004; Müller-Jacquier, 2003) and CALL TBLT (Canto et al., 2014; Chapelle, 2001, 2014; Doughty & Long, 2003; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Hampel, 2006; Hoffstaedter & Kohn, 2014; Jauregi et

al., 2012; Müller-Hartman & Kurek, 2014; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009) we have developed a task grid for task development and assessment that focuses on six categories: task design, intercultural focus, communication focus, language learning potential, learner centeredness and technology.

Based on these criteria tasks have been developed and telecollaboration sessions carried out. Results on questionnaires and interaction analysis show that when technological preconditions are met tasks do prompt meaningful sequences of (intercultural) information exchange among peers and that learners experience tasks as relevant, useful and fun.

Short paper

Introduction

The TILA project (Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition) is a European educational project that aims (1) to innovate, enrich and make foreign language teaching programmes more meaningful and effective by encouraging the implementation of telecollaboration activities in secondary schools across Europe; (2) to empower teachers in their efforts to integrate innovative telecollaboration activities in their teaching and assist them in the development of digital, intercultural, pedagogical and organisational competences; and (3) to study the added value that telecollaboration may bring to language learning in terms of intercultural understanding, motivation and communicative growth amongst younger learners (Jauregi, Melchor-Couto & Vilar, 2013).

Telecollaboration has been defined as: "internet-based intercultural exchange between groups of learners of different cultural / national backgrounds set up in an institutional blended-learning context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence" (Guth & Helm, 2012: 42).

Different telecollaboration tools are being used within TILA for both synchronous (chat, video communication and 3D virtual worlds) and asynchronous (forum, wiki) communication modes.

One of the main areas of research within the project refers to the development of tasks and the relationship between the developed tasks and the activity that learners carry out in telecollaboration sessions.

Theoretical framework

The starting point in the process of task development within the TILA project derives from Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Within TBLT tasks have been defined as "an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language" (Van den Branden, 2006: 4). According to this broad definition, tasks could be almost anything. Clearly, we need a more detailed approach to tasks to enable educational experts to design and implement meaningful tasks for teaching and researchers to study task performance (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014: 4; Chapelle, 2014). Long (2015) includes the concept of "real-world" authenticity as one of main characteristics of TBLT, whereby learners' needs analysis would constitute the core endeavor in the process of task development within TBLT (González-Lloret, 2014; Long, 2015). Other essential components of tasks within TBLT (Ellis, 2003; 2012; Long, 2015) would be:

1. Meaning-orientation: tasks should stimulate information or opinion exchange as well as meaning negotiation.
2. In order for tasks to enhance this meaning-orientation, there should be some kind of gap (the need to convey information, to express an opinion).

3. Learners should use all (linguistic) resources available to attain the specific task goals.
4. Goal-orientation: tasks should have clearly formulated goals and outcomes 'other than the use of language' (Ellis, 2012: 198), as language should be used as a means to achieve the outcome, not as an end.

According to Long, TBLT should respect 10 methodological principles (see Table 1). These principles have been grounded on empirical results of SLA research (Long, 2015: 300-327) and refer to four categories: activities, relevance of input, learning processes and learner characteristics.

Methodological principles for TBLT	
Activities	MP1 Use task, not text, as the unit of analysis
	MP2 Promote learning by doing
Input	MP3 Elaborate input
	MP4 Provide rich input
Learning processes	MP5 Encourage inductive "chunk" learning
	MP6 Focus on form
	MP7 Provide negative feedback
	MP8 Respect learner Syllabi and developmental processes
	MP9 Promote Cooperative collaborative learning
Learners	MP10 Individualize instruction

Table 1. Methodological principles of TBLT proposed by Long (2015)

When looking critically at this major scholarly work within TBLT, we miss specific references to key aspects of foreign language teaching in the 21st century: digital learning and the "intercultural turn" in language pedagogy (Thorne, 2010). Fortunately, several publications have started to fill in this gap recently (see González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Thomas & Reinders, 2010).

Task design in TILA

Task development is a key issue in the process of investigating how telecollaboration exchanges can best be integrated in foreign language learning. Since the tasks being developed within the TILA project are not meant for the traditional classroom but for pupils communicating with peers abroad through technology, three key aspects permeate the design and implementation processes: pedagogy, technology and interculturality. In this sense, the researchers' team engaged in TILA tackle the following questions:

1. how can tasks that are authentic, meaningful, useful and enjoyable be developed for younger learners who learn foreign languages in a very specific context, that of secondary education;
2. how can tasks be developed that take into account the specific affordances of the digital tools being used;
3. how can tasks contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence of these younger learners when they engage in telecollaboration encounters; and,
4. how can the different pedagogical phases, face-to-face sessions with the teacher and pupil to pupil telecollaboration exchanges, best blend in order to reinforce meaningful foreign language learning processes.

Based on TBLT (see previous section), studies into Intercultural Communication (Byram, 1997; 2012; Hinkel, 2004; Müller-Jacquier, 2003) and CALL TBLT (Canto, Graaff & Jauregi, 2014; Chapelle, 2001, 2014; Doughty & Long, 2003; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Hampel, 2006; Hoffstaedter & Kohn, 2014; Jauregi et al., 2011; Müller-Hartman & Kurek, 2014; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009) we have developed a task grid for task development and assessment that focuses on six categories: task design, intercultural focus, meaning focus, language learning potential, learner centeredness and technology.

Task Design

For tasks to be meaningful and useful, they have to have clear objectives, have to be clearly sequenced and integrated into the curriculum and all required resources and support must be made available for pupils. For adequate integration of blended approaches we address the task cycle in three phases (Willis, 1996):

1. The pre-task phase generally takes place in the classroom setting under the guidance of their teacher. Pupils receive information about the task they will be carrying out during the telecollaboration session and get prepared for it by working on linguistic, communicative, intercultural, interpersonal and/or technological aspects related to the specific telecollaboration task.
2. In the task-phase they perform the task with pupils abroad in a one to one setting using a given telecollaboration tool, that can vary according to the preferences &/or network robustness at schools.
3. The post-task phase generally takes place in the classroom. During this stage the task results are shared with the teacher and the classmates and reflection upon linguistic, communicative and/or intercultural issues of the telecollaboration session is stimulated.

Issues related to Task design
• Are the task objectives clearly formulated?
• Are task instructions clear?
• Are learner <i>handouts</i> and other necessary resources provided?
• Have intended task outcomes been clearly specified?
• Are task demands well addressed by providing enough support (linguistic, communicative, intercultural, interpersonal, ICT)
• Are the 3 task phases well integrated in a blended approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pre-Task: Preparatory stage ○ Task (telecollaboration exchange) ○ Post-task (product creation, reflection about intercultural, communicative, linguistics or ICT concerns, consolidation)

Table 2: Issues related to task design in TILA.

Intercultural focus

The traditional TBLT approaches neglect to a certain extent any intercultural focus on task development. Yet, different authors (Byram, 1997; Möllering & Levy, 2012; Thorne, 2010) refer to the shift that foreign language pedagogy is experiencing in the 21st century, which is moving away from a sheer communicative focus to fully embrace the intercultural component of human communication in a highly globalized society. In addition to learning how to exchange information in the TL, learners need to develop intercultural competence, which lays emphasis on the ability to decentre and take up the perspective of the other, as well as to establish and maintain relationships with speakers with a different cultural background (Byram, 1997: 3). The TILA project places the intercultural focus at the center of task development processes by stimulating learners to develop attitudes of curiosity, empathy and openness towards the Other, while developing awareness and knowledge of one's own and the other's culture and social practices (Table 3).

Telecollaboration tasks
1. Stimulate learners to address their partners in a way that supports openness and empathy and enhances curiosity for otherness
2. Prompt learners to acknowledge & understand others' values and perspectives
3. Support the learning of cultural knowledge and social practices
4. Prompt awareness about their own culture and social practices
5. stimulate the discovery of new, similar or different aspects of the participants' cultures
6. Prompt learners to compare and interpret artefacts from different cultures and discover relationships among them

Table 3. Intercultural focus in the tasks developed in TILA.

Communication focus

Following mainstream TBLT approaches, tasks in TILA are clearly meaning oriented and communication focused. Tasks stimulate information and opinion exchange as a result of inbuilt natural gaps. Participants in telecollaboration engage in the process of co-constructing discourse through interaction. This implies a two way approach to discourse construction, and the need to focus not only in what one wants to convey, that is on the speaker/writer, but on the receiver as well, who will need to capture and understand what the speech partner is conveying, react appropriately and use the information to jointly achieve the task goals. Pupils will collaborate with one another in pairs or group work across natural borders according to their specific idiosyncrasies (Table 4).

Telecollaboration tasks
1. Include an information and opinion gap
2. Require a two-way information exchange: learners need to use the information they receive from their peers to complete the task adequately and jointly achieve the task goals
3. Stimulate the learners to use the language to engage in activities involving real-world processes of language use
4. Prompt negotiation of meaning (see next section)

Table 4. Communication focus on tasks developed in TILA.

Language learning potential

The language learning potential of tasks has been broadly studied within the TBLT research field (see Ellis, 2012; Long, 2015). Discourse activities have been analysed where learners negotiate meaning or engage in language related episodes. However, much of this research has been carried out in laboratory settings, which calls into question the validity of such results for language education as 'laboratory studies omit all kinds of contextual factors that contribute very significantly to the impact of a task (Samuda & Bygate, 2008:261). The tasks within TILA are being developed and implemented taking into account the ecology of education in which they are used. These tasks aim to enhance language learning by offering rich input and prompting input elaboration by stimulating negotiation of meaning among other things (Table 5).

Telecollaboration tasks
1. Offer <i>substantial input</i> to learners (exposure to authentic, multimodal, and contextually relevant language)
2. Prompt learners to elaborate the input by means of interactional modification or negotiation of meaning
3. Stimulate some focus on form and promote the acquisition of useful chunks
4. Should stimulate learners to use the target language pragmatically and communicatively, instead of simply displaying knowledge of the target language
5. Should promote collaborative learning by assigning complementary roles, information and perspectives to the participants/learners

Table 5. Language learning potential of tasks developed in TILA.

Learner centeredness

When developing the tasks key attention must be paid to the learners' needs, interests, styles and background (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010). In order to meet these needs, telecollaboration tasks in TILA are being developed by teachers, who are typically the experts on local conditions and who have direct contact with pupils, and who are coached in the design, implementation and evaluation processes by an educational researcher (Table 6).

Telecollaboration tasks
1. Need to be relevant to the learners' needs
2. Have to be attractive, engaging and motivating for the pupils
3. Need to respect specific learner idiosyncrasies

Table 6. Learner centeredness in tasks developed in TILA.

Technology (affordances, robustness)

In order for telecollaboration tasks to be meaningful and useful at all, technological pre-conditions have to be met. One of the main challenges we are facing when carrying out telecollaboration tasks in the secondary educational setting relates to technology. Tasks might be useful, meaningful, engaging and fun on paper, but if technology does not work, tasks will lose all pedagogical potential. In order to address this technological issue, we are working on different scenarios: organizing telecollaboration sessions in classroom settings and piloting sessions at home (as homework), as the main objective within TILA is to look for pedagogical sustainable ways to integrate telecollaboration in the curriculum. When developing tasks the specific affordances of a given digital application will need to be optimally exploited (Jauregi et al., 2012). The technological issues we address are described in table 7.

Telecollaboration tasks	
1. Should exploit optimally the specific affordances of the digital environment or application being used	a) Are hardware & software up to date and are network connections robust enough to allow for good communication exchanges?
2. Should contribute to enhance learners' ICT-literacy skills	b) Are there enough computers / laptops for pupils to carry out the task?
3. Telecollaboration exchanges organised in the classroom setting: accessibility and usability	c) When using video communication or virtual worlds have measures been taken to facilitate qualitative sound exchanges (headsets, not too many pupils talking in the same physical space)?
4. Telecollaboration exchanges organised as homework and being carried out from home: usability	a) Have hardware and software been checked and are internet connections good? b) Has sound been checked and does it work properly?
5. ICT-literacy	a) Have learners learned (tutorial) how to use the specific tools? b) Have learners reflected about "netiquette" issues: how to communicate appropriately using technology?

Table 7. Technological issues addressed when developing tasks in TILA.

User experience with telecollaboration tasks

Using the above mentioned criteria telecollaboration tasks have been developed for the different target languages: English, French, German and Spanish and for language levels ranging between A1 to B2 (CEFR).

The results of the first pilots (December 2013-May 2014) as reflected by questionnaire results, were quite positive (Jauregi & Melchor-Couto, 2014).

In the follow-up sessions (November 2014 – April 2015) more learners participated in telecollaboration exchanges. From these 210 learners from different countries (see Figure 1) filled out a digital survey evaluating a range of aspects related to the telecollaboration practices: technical quality, suitability of the environment used, communicative performance, motivation and tasks. Telecollaboration sessions are still being carried out, consequently, we present here the preliminary results of an ongoing research and focus on how pupils perceived telecollaboration tasks.

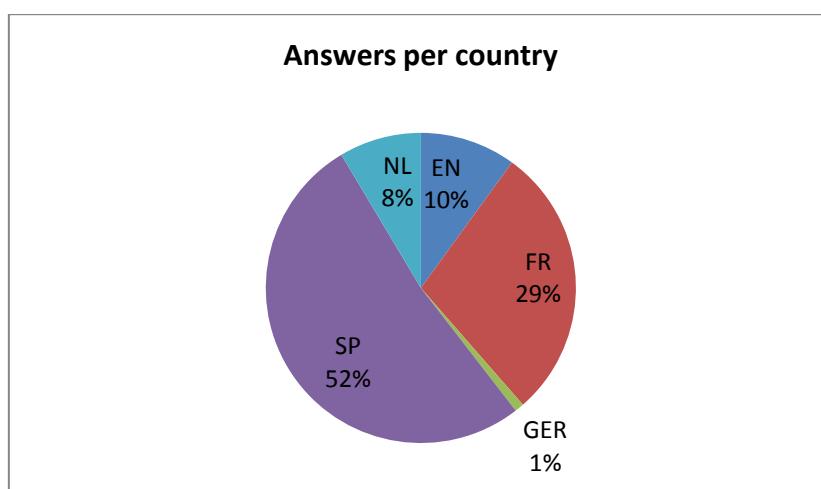


Fig. 1. Distribution of pupils that filled in the surveys in the follow up sessions (Spain, France, England, Nederland and Germany)

Although the majority of pupils used video communication software BigBlueButton to carry out their telecollaboration exchanges, a few resorted to 3D virtual worlds, chats or discussion forum (see Figure 2).

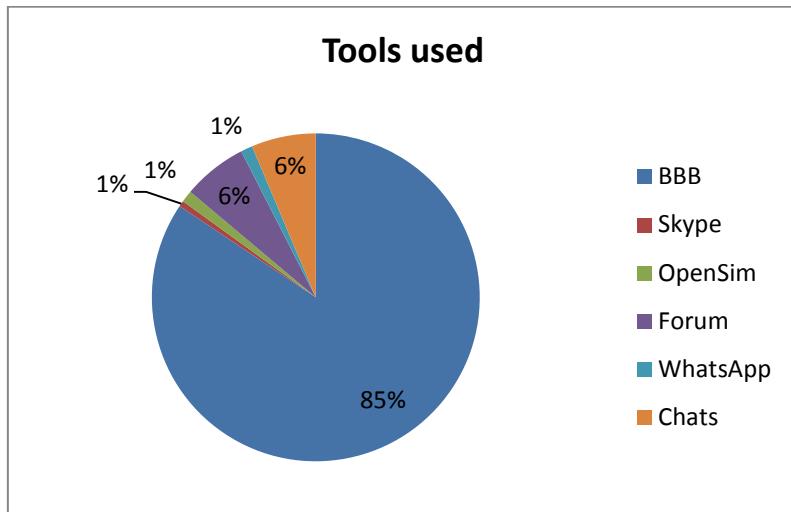


Fig. 2. Digital used in the exchanges (BBB: videocommunication open source; OpenSim: 3D virtual world open source)

For the closed items a 5 point Likert scale was used. As we can see in table 8, tasks were rated quite positively. However, pupils using audiovisual environments, particularly the video communication platform of BigBlueButton, experienced many sound problems due to bad internet connections and background noise, which probably influence the way they experience the telecollaboration exchanges.

Item	Mean	Sdev
SOUND was good	2.5	1.2
I enjoyed the online task	3,6	1.0
I found the online task interesting for interaction with peers of other countries	3,7	1,0
I found the online task useful for my language learning	3,7	1.0
The online task helped me discover new things about the other culture	3,3	1.0
I would suggest to a friend to take part in this kind of online collaboration	3.6	1.0

Table 8. Survey result on tasks (N:210 / 5-point Likert scale)

Conclusions

Based on criteria from TBLT, CALL and intercultural communication studies, telecollaboration tasks have been developed and implemented in several secondary schools, using mostly video communication applications (BigBlueButton) for conducting online intercultural exchanges. One of the categories for developing telecollaboration tasks refer to technology. The tasks developed might be meaningful, motivating and useful as workplan but if technology does not work, if pupils cannot hear each other, if there are problems with their microphones, there will be no place for information exchange, negotiation of meaning or intercultural development at all. The data seems to indicate further that when technological preconditions are met tasks seem to prompt meaningful exchanges and that learners experience tasks as relevant, useful and fun. However, additional in-depth analysis of the recorded data, triangulating results with

surveys and interviews is needed in order to compose a thorough picture of all aspects affecting task performance in telecollaboration exchanges.

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