

# Integrating telecollaboration for intercultural language acquisition at secondary education: lessons learned

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**Abstract.** The TILA<sup>2</sup> project originated from the need to explore whether and how telecollaboration affects language learning processes for communication, intercultural understanding and motivation of youngsters learning foreign languages at secondary schools and to empower teachers to pioneer meaningful pedagogical innovation in the curriculum of foreign languages at secondary schools. In the 2,5 year project, 837 pupils, 300 student teachers and 48 teachers participated in telecollaboration exchanges. The results show that task-based telecollaboration can be successfully integrated in the foreign language curriculum by blending different pedagogical activities. These exchanges can contribute to enhance pupils' communicative competence, intercultural awareness and motivation.

**Keywords:** telecollaboration, multimodal interaction, intercultural competence, motivation, teacher training, tasks.

## 1. Introduction

Much has been written about telecollaboration projects and how they contribute to shape the development of communicative competence (Guth & Helm, 2010; Canto, Jauregi & Bergh, 2013), intercultural awareness (Belz & Thorne, 2006; O'Dowd, 2007; Canto, Graaff, & Jauregi, 2014) and motivation (Jauregi, Graaff, Bergh, & Kriz, 2012) of those engaging in telecollaboration tasks (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Jauregi et al. 2011; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). But most of these studies report on experiences carried out at tertiary education (Pol, 2013). The question is whether these results are transferable to secondary education where

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young pupils have to learn foreign languages in quite different circumstances. But very little is known about it.

The TILA project (Jauregi, Melchor-Couto, & Vilar, 2013) originated from this very specific need and aimed at exploring how telecollaboration may affect language learning processes for communication, intercultural understanding and motivation of youngsters at secondary schools. One of the ambitions of TILA has been to design a model for sustainable integration of telecollaboration activities in blended pedagogical approaches at secondary education.

## 2. Data and methodology

837 learners, 300 student teachers and 48 teachers participated in different pilot experiences using synchronous (chat, videocommunication and 3D virtual worlds) and/or asynchronous (wikis, blogs and discussion forum) communication tools between November 2013 and June 2015. 55 tasks for different target languages, proficiency levels, interaction tools and communication constellations have been developed<sup>3</sup> for telecollaboration exchanges (Jauregi, 2015).

Pupils participated in dyadic or small group interactions either using the target language as *lingua franca* (a foreign language for those pupils collaborating in the exchanges) or in a tandem constellation, with pupils interacting with a native/expert speaker of the target language, alternating languages (French pupils learning Spanish who communicate in French and in Spanish with Spanish pupils learning French). Although in the first pilot experiences most teachers preferred the tandem communication constellation (60% of all exchanges), in the follow up sessions the *lingua franca* constellation was the favourite one (72%).

In the initial pilot experiences telecollaboration exchanges were organised at school, mostly in the computer lab, but as many technological problems were experienced with the school hardware and internet connections, and because of lack of privacy for pupils when conducting the conversations, in the follow up many of these exchanges were carried out quite successfully, from home by flipping pedagogies.

Data from surveys, recordings and interviews were gathered for our mixed method research approach to studying the effects of telecollaboration on youngsters at secondary schools.

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3. Tasks are all available at the project site: [www.tilaproject.eu](http://www.tilaproject.eu).

### 3. Findings

In the following, the main findings of the study will be presented focusing on the impact of telecollaboration on pupils' intercultural communicative competence and their motivation.

#### 3.1. The development of intercultural communicative competence

Results on the analysis of chat logs and video communication recordings indicate that telecollaboration exchanges have a positive impact on pupils' intercultural communicative competence as pupils are provided with opportunities for spontaneous and authentic written and spoken communication with real peers. The telecollaboration tasks seemed to enhance intercultural competence and awareness as pupils engaged in conversations, exchanging their opinions on cultural similarities and differences, and reflected upon rich intercultural points that emerged in discourse. In this sense, tasks that are close to pupils' lives, where they can draw on their own experiences and opinions seem to work best in telecollaboration exchanges. Pupils were curious about other ways of organising lives, of doing things; they succeeded in showing openness and interest to know more about the *Other* and resorted to meta discursive conversational devices to clarify intercultural meaning (Kroon, Jauregi, & Thije, 2015). An overall cooperative communication attitude seemed to prevail in the exchanges analysed.

It was observed that the various tools greatly differ in their communication affordances. Chat discourses were found to be quite fragmentary, highly task driven, with few instances where pupils truly engaged in topic co-creation and negotiation of meaning. Communication patterns in BigBlueButton (video communication platform), on the contrary, were far more complex, with pupils being more engaged in elaborating topics, in sharing personal experiences and in negotiating meaning. Because of the speakers' visual presence and the immediacy of spoken language, interactions in BigBlueButton seemed to be more conducive to enhancing intercultural openness curiosity and awareness (Tró Morató, 2015). The favourite interaction tool for telecollaboration exchanges was video communication (the open source BigBlueButton) both in the pilot (64%) and the follow-up activities (83%).

The differences in communication patterns that tools allow for should be seen as an opportunity for complementary pedagogic use. "A multi-modal telecollaboration approach offering tool options from virtual worlds and video communication to

chat and forum is ideally suited for providing practice opportunities for all skills relevant in foreign language learning from reading and writing to listening and speaking” (Hoffstaedter & Kohn, 2015, p. 5).

### **3.2. Impact on motivation**

Within the TILA project, a study was carried out to explore the motivational dimension in secondary school pupils. A total of 202 foreign language learners from Spain, France, the Netherlands and the UK took part in this study between September 2013 and June 2015.

All participants completed an average of four foreign language interaction sessions either by written chat or by video communication. They worked in either *lingua franca*, tandem or mixed constellations. After every session, pupils completed a questionnaire including 21 items to be rated on a 5 point Likert scale. The data collected shows relevant findings that provide new insights to this particular field of research. Pupils that interacted via chat and in tandem constellations tend to show higher self-efficacy beliefs than those engaged in *lingua franca* exchanges using video communication. With regards to anxiety levels, they seem to decrease significantly as sessions progress. In addition, statistical differences were found according to the communication constellation used, with the *lingua franca* group presenting systematically the lowest anxiety scores. Similarly, the chat environment turned out to be less anxiety-provoking than the video communication platform. Regarding the use of webcam, participants seem to feel more at ease when their partner cannot see them through the webcam only during the first sessions.

## **4. Conclusion**

TILA has pioneered a pedagogical innovative change in secondary education by looking at sustainable ways to integrate telecollaboration in foreign language curricula, while studying the effects that such exchanges may have on the intercultural communicative competence and motivation of pupils.

A wealth of data has been gathered for analysis. Initial results show that task-driven telecollaboration exchanges do have a positive impact in the development of intercultural communicative competence of pupils and on their motivation. Video communication seems to stimulate more complex discourse production than chat encounters and might be more useful for stimulating richer intercultural exchanges than chat. Yet, chat and *lingua franca* communication constellation seem to trigger

less anxiety than video communication. Additional research will be needed to substantiate these findings.

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