The European Project TILA

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Abstract. Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition (TILA), is an EU-funded project within the Lifelong Learning Programme that will run between January 2013 and June 2015. TILA's overall objectives are: (1) to innovate, enrich and make foreign language teaching programmes more attractive and effective by encouraging the implementation of telecollaboration activities in secondary schools across Europe; (2) to assist teachers and teacher training programmes in developing information and communications technology (ICT) literacy skills as well as organisational, pedagogical and intercultural competences to guarantee adequate integration of telecollaboration practices; and (3) to study the added value that telecollaboration may bring to language learning in terms of intercultural understanding and motivation amongst younger learners. Our aim in this (albeit short) paper is to introduce the project, its background and outline the specific teaching needs of our participants with regards to languages and technology.

Keywords: telecollaboration, TILA, teacher training, CMC.

1.   Introduction

The European TILA project (http://www.tilaproject.eu/) seeks to implement telecollaborative activities in secondary schools' foreign language curricula in order to make language learning a more authentic, attractive and relevant experience. Six countries are represented in the TILA consortium: France, UK,

Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and Czech Republic[4]. Each country collaborates with a secondary school and a teacher training institution.

1.1. Focus on foreign language learning at secondary education

TILA seeks to take full advantage of the capacity that younger learners seem to have to acquire foreign languages (particularly as far as fluency and pronunciation are concerned) (Muñoz, 2008) and to contribute to the research field on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), as most research has been carried out within tertiary education.

1.2. Focus on intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

The development of ICC of language learners is a core objective in the project. As we know, culture and language are inseparable and constitute "a single universe or domain of experience" (Kramsch, 1991, p. 217). Interacting with others in a target language involves more than just knowing the correct syntax and lexicon; it is also an issue of developing interactional competence (Hall, 2004) according to specific cultural values, as culture permeates social interaction (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Consequently, an important goal of foreign language teaching should be to make learners aware of similarities and contrasts between cultures and interaction styles, prepare students to understand them and, if possible, help them mediate between them (Byram, 1997). TILA's efforts will be geared towards the creation of materials and tools aiming at developing and assessing ICC.

1.3. Telecollaboration and teacher training

For educational changes to be successful, they have to be embraced by teaching practitioners. Although efforts are being made by scholars to put digital literacy (Dooly, 2008; Levy, 2009; O'Dowd, 2007) and intercultural and pedagogical competences high in the educational agenda, reality shows how difficult it is to introduce innovation in traditional educational settings. Few are the institutions that include telecollaboration practices in their teacher training modules, and still smaller is the number of schools experimenting with interactive communication tools. If innovative ICT-based content and pedagogies are to be introduced in

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4. The partner from the Czech Republic will be in charge of disseminating TILA experiences and results in the Czech Republic.

secondary education, teachers will have to be trained in CMC practices, and learn by doing, by experimenting with telecollaboration tools, reflecting about their experiences, analysing possible added-values, being aware of problems and developing strategies to handle them. TILA's efforts will be devoted to the development of teacher training components to improve teaching pedagogies and learning outcomes in secondary education.

2. Teachers' needs

As part of the TILA training stage, an electronic survey was circulated to the project teachers in order to determine what their training needs were. The survey included a total of 40 questions and it was distributed electronically through SurveyMonkey. A total of 210 secondary school teachers took part: 94 from Spain, 39 from the Netherlands, 31 from Germany, 32 from France and 14 from the UK. The data gathered shows the following conclusions.

2.1. Technology in the classroom

Of the total number of respondents, France (69%), UK (57%) and the Netherlands (51%) have the highest percentage of language teachers who use technology on a daily basis or very frequently. Spain (36%) and Germany (42%) have the highest percentage of teachers who rarely or never use technology. However, both countries also show an equally high percentage of teachers who sometimes use technology (29% of the respondents for Germany and 35% for Spain). YouTube is the most widely used tool across all countries. It is worth mentioning that mobile phones are regularly used by 28% of the Dutch teachers and 16% of the German ones, and that Facebook seems to be used reasonably frequently in Spain (24%). Other tools such as wikis, blogs, chat applications, Twitter, Skype and virtual worlds are reportedly used, although only marginally.

2.2. Why are teachers not using technology more frequently?[5]

Most teachers stated that they like using technology in the classroom; only 19% of the French respondents, 17% of the Spanish, 16% of the German, 7% of the British and 5% of the Dutch teachers expressed a dislike towards doing so. Only a minority of them reported not to feel confident enough to do so. The main deterrents seem to be of a technical nature, as described below.

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5. The data gathered for this question comes from answers to open-ended questions. Therefore, the information included here reflects only what teachers felt that was relevant to report for every question.

2.3.   Availability and appropriateness of the facilities

In Germany and Spain, the main limitations reported by the respondents are that there are few computer suites per school and they have to be booked in advance, which means that they may not always be available. Incidentally, this issue is described as the main difficulty in all the project countries, although to a lesser extent.

Not having enough computers for all the students is also a problem reported by 48% of the German respondents and 46% of the Spanish. This seems to be less of an issue in France (19%) and the UK (14%). In the Netherlands, 36% of the respondents mentioned this problem.

A bad Internet connection also seems to be a powerful deterrent for using technology more frequently in the classroom for Spanish teachers (34%), only mentioned by 19% of the German teachers, and 13% of the French and Dutch teachers.

2.4.   Technical assistance

There seems to be a split between countries where the school's technical support is reportedly available and those where it is not. On the one hand, the UK, the Netherlands and Spain seem to have a majority of respondents who reported to have some kind of technical assistance. Germany, on the other hand, seems to have a mixed picture with 52% of the respondents reporting to have technical assistance and 48% who reported the opposite. Finally, in France a majority of teachers reported not to have technical assistance (59%).

It is important to note that the technical assistance available to teachers across most of the countries analysed here is arguably limited, as most respondents state that technicians are hard to find when they are needed. This situation is particularly acute in Spain and Germany, where 30% and 32% of the respondents for each country respectively reported that the role of the technicians is in fact undertaken by fellow teachers who may have some expertise in ICT or who teach IT. This obviously involves a workload issue, in addition to the inability to attend to technical problems that occur during class times, as those colleagues will be teaching themselves. This has not been reported as a problem in the Netherlands or the UK and only to an extent in France (13%). In any case, limited availability of technical staff is one of the main issues flagged in all countries (35% in Germany, 21% in the UK, 19% in France, 15% in Spain and 13% in the Netherlands) be it due to a work overload in Spain and France or to an insufficient number of technicians per school in the other countries.

3.   Conclusions

The focus of telecollaboration, and TILA for that matter, is on students' collaborative construction of knowledge with the aid of technology. More importantly perhaps, it teaches students 21st century skills in the form of languages, intercultural competence and digital know-how, as well as content.

As it has been discussed here, an initial needs analysis revealed that attitudes towards technology amongst the secondary school teachers surveyed are positive and that some tools, although scarcely in some cases, are already in use.

The UK and the Netherlands seem to be at the forefront of technology use in the classroom, but also seem to be better equipped for it, both in terms of the facilities and technical support available to them. The main challenge seems to be that the resources available are not sufficient, both in terms of the number of computers per student and computer rooms per school. In addition to this, Internet connections are generally perceived to be unreliable, which is an added difficulty for the successful development of telecollaborative activities. Finally, the lack of readily available technical assistance seems to be a problem across the board, particularly so in Spain and Germany where the role of the IT specialist is often allocated to a fellow teacher. These conclusions suggest that additional investment is needed in this respect for telecollaboration to be a reality across Europe. A shift towards mobile devices might be an affordable solution to the logistics of accessing sought-after computer rooms, although it would also involve an investment in sound wireless networks. A more in depth analysis is underway and will also provide information about the respondents' context. The above-mentioned figures might not only be country specific but influenced by other factors.

Although still in the early days, we hope that TILA will inspire others to give conventional teaching a new, more authentic dimension. We are now in the process of training language teachers so that they can incorporate telecollaboration activities in their daily practices.

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