Task design for intercultural telecollaboration in secondary schools: Insights from the EU project TILA

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Abstract. Our contribution focuses on synchronous oral telecollaboration in secondary schools. With reference to the EU project TILA, aspects of task design and implementation are discussed against the backdrop of issues of technological quality in connection with class organisation in computer labs. Case study evidence is provided in favour of the integration of telecollaborative out-of-class activities.

Keywords: telecollaboration, intercultural communication, language learning, secondary schools, TILA.

1. Introduction

The EU project TILA[3] (www.tilaproject.eu) explores the use of telecollaboration for intercultural communication and language acquisition in secondary schools (Jauregi, Melchor-Couto, & Vilar Beltrán, 2013). Tasks are designed as blended learning "ensembles involving combinations of environments and technological media", including face-to-face interaction, independent work at home, and "synchronous and asynchronous interaction in the web" (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2014, p. 3). The project's innovative ambition, however, is clearly set on synchronous oral communication in the 3D virtual world of OpenSim and on the

videoconferencing platform BigBlueButton. This is in keeping with assumptions regarding crucial interdependencies between language learning, communication and telecollaboration. Following Sociocultural Theory (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2010), we posit that communication is more than a language learning objective; it is a mediating environment that fundamentally influences and shapes the direction of learning and the very formation of the learner's communicative competence. Successful language learning thus requires rich and authentic communication practice, preferably beyond the inevitable limitations of even the most communicative classroom. This is where synchronous oral telecollaboration comes in with its potential for intercultural contact and communication, and thus for authenticated and incidental intercultural language learning.

2.   The stony path from potential to reality

Turning potential into reality can be quite a challenge. The first phase of TILA pilot activities helped shape our understanding of some of the technological and organisational problems involved in implementing synchronous oral telecollaboration in secondary schools.

While the technological infrastructures available in secondary schools are sufficient for written synchronous (e.g. chat) and written asynchronous (e.g. forum, blog) telecollaboration (Kohn & Warth, 2011), the conditions for synchronous oral telecollaboration are far less satisfactory. Participant observation and teacher feedback made it clear that in many of the OpenSim and BigBlueButton exchanges, the sound quality was not sufficient to ensure pedagogically sustainable communicative interaction. In many cases, sound disturbances and breakdowns in both environments tended to reduce communication to 'survival exchanges' (e.g. "Can you hear me?"). The pupils' surprisingly positive feedback can be interpreted as encouraging evidence of the high motivational potential of oral telecollaboration; it must not, however, weaken our concern for technological quality, which is a necessary condition for the pedagogical success of any telecollaborative event.

The technological quality of synchronous oral telecollaboration is closely linked to issues of class organisation. Since learning and teaching in schools is traditionally based on class-size groups (with ad-hoc sub-groupings) in face-to-face mode at fixed times, organisation of telecollaboration exchanges between entire classes and within set class hours thus seems to be the natural candidate. However, forms of organisation geared to face-to-face classroom communication are not necessarily suitable for purposes of synchronous oral telecollaboration. Full-class meetings,

e.g. via videoconferencing, offer only limited options, in particular one-to-many or one-to-one with classmates providing background support. By contrast, communication in small groups or between pairs opens up a significantly richer array of naturally relevant types of communicative interaction. The obvious solution thus seems to be to 'shepherd' the pupils to the computer lab, where they team up with their partner class in small parallel telecollaboration groups. Such a set-up, however, often suffers from noise disturbances because of lack of communicative privacy and a temporary network overload with detrimental effects on sound/video quality. Shortcomings of parallel telecollaboration can, of course, be avoided by taking a few 'telecollaboration pupils' temporarily out of the class. But while this is feasible for exploration purposes in a project context, it cannot provide a model for sustainable pedagogical action. A more promising pedagogical solution would be to shift the focus of attention and extend telecollaboration to include homework and other forms of out-of-class activities.

All in all, the sound pedagogical integration of synchronous oral telecollaboration requires careful adaptation of concepts and strategies of class organisation. Easy and ready-made solutions should not be expected; there needs to be developmental room for 'learning to teach' and 'learning to learn'.

3.   Telecollaboration task design
and implementation

In keeping with the overall blended learning approach and also in order to ensure pedagogical integration into the overall curriculum, telecollaboration tasks in TILA "are not designed as isolated units but rather as more or less complex task ensembles organised in pedagogical macro phases from 'preparatory' to 'main' to 'follow-up'" (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2014, p. 3).

The preparatory phase typically involves subtasks that help prepare the ground for the main telecollaborative task. This may concern, for instance, getting to know each other, knowledge development, or making oneself familiar with telecollaboration tools. Preparatory tasks can be face-to-face or online, synchronous or asynchronous, individual or collaborative. The main phase focuses on intercultural communicative interactions in synchronous (BigBlueButton, OpenSim) and/or asynchronous (forum, blog) environments. These activities give the entire task ensemble its pedagogical and telecollaborative focus. In the follow-up phase, pupils engage in subtasks designed to secure learning results. They can again be face-to-face or online, synchronous or asynchronous, individual or collaborative.

In a first case study, pupils and teachers from a French and a German school[4] engaged in successive telecollaboration exchanges to explore the potential of OpenSim for intercultural communicative learning experiences. Each exchange was set around learning stations in the form of French or German posters and had a special thematic focus, i.e. waste disposal, vegetarian diet, fashion, or Europe. French/German pairs of pupils walked from one poster to the next; they discussed the pictures and questions presented in the language used on the poster.

The 'tandem' format enabled the pupils to help each other understand the message conveyed and to find appropriate expressions. Each event was supported by preparatory and follow-up activities in face-to-face and forum/blog/wiki modes. The assessment by teachers and pupils regarding the tasks' communication and learning potential was positive. The posters stimulated communication and discovery of intercultural differences. Pupils favoured topics like fashion where they were able to talk about themselves and their likes and dislikes. The developmental set-up enabled valuable insights and improvements from one exchange to the next. At the same time, however, class organisation proved to be complex and taxing; communication was impeded by low sound quality and background noise due to parallel telecollaboration pairs in the computer labs.

Because of these problems, a second case study with pupils and teachers from a Dutch and a French school[5] was conducted to explore telecollaborative out-of-class exchanges as part of the pupils' collaborative homework assignments. The exchanges were designed as pair conversations in 'lingua franca' format; pairs of French/Dutch pupils with German as the target language met in BigBlueButton, each from their home PCs, to discuss topics such as 'drinking age', 'dress code in school', 'a day without mobile phones', or 'where our clothes are made'. Pupils who felt uncomfortable with this task or did not have the required technological infrastructure at home discussed the same topics with a peer in a Moodle forum. In a follow-up activity, the pupils were asked to write a summarising protocol in a wiki as input for the final discussion in class. The outcomes were highly encouraging. Natural and fluent conversations conforming to the pupils' respective levels of proficiency clearly demonstrate the pedagogical validity and technological feasibility of the homework approach.

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4.   Conclusions

Synchronous oral telecollaboration has a promising potential for intercultural communication and language learning in secondary schools. In the commonly chosen in-class approach with parallel telecollaboration groups in a computer lab, communication is however often seriously handicapped by issues of class organisation, poor sound/video quality and too little communicative privacy. To ensure pedagogically sustainable implementation of synchronous oral telecollaboration tasks, it is thus of key importance to look beyond the computer lab and integrate out-of-class options, in particular collaborative homework activities. Evidence from our case study strongly supports this solution, which is also in line with a blended learning approach.

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