35 Cooperative autonomy in online lingua franca exchanges: a case study on foreign language education in secondary schools

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Abstract

We report on a case study on pedagogical affordances of intercultural telecollaboration for authentic communication practice and competence development in the local foreign language. Focus is on spoken and written conversations involving pairs of secondary school pupils of different linguacultural backgrounds. Particular attention is given to three task design features: multimodal home access to telecollaboration, lingua franca use of the target language, and soft intercultural topics addressing pupils' everyday concerns and experiences. Performance analyses of recorded conversations and reflective interviews reveal significant pedagogical advantages of the chosen task design features. The online lingua franca conversations are marked by a high degree of cooperative autonomy with an emphasis on creating common ground, negotiating a shared line of argumentation, ensuring a supportive and consensual atmosphere, and solving communication problems on the fly.

Keywords: learner autonomy, communicative language teaching, cooperative autonomy, intercultural telecollaboration, lingua franca pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language crucially involves developing communicative competence for intercultural encounters. Considering this objective and orientation, the traditional foreign language classroom is faced with the serious challenge of providing learners with opportunities for authentic communication. To enable secondary school pupils to engage in communicative interactions with peers from other countries and cultures, the EU project *TILA: Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition* (Jan 2013 - June 2015) explores the pedagogical affordances of online exchanges for intercultural foreign language learning in secondary schools (www.tilaproject.eu)[3]. For more information on intercultural telecollaboration see O'Dowd (2012). The environments used in TILA include 3D virtual worlds (OpenSim), videoconferencing platforms (BigBlueButton, Skype) as well as chats and forums in Moodle. TILA's pedagogical approach is characterised by small group or pair interactions implemented in tandem or lingua franca constellations and embedded in blended learning task ensembles. In a lingua franca constellation, pupils communicate in their common non-native target language (Kohn, 2015). Because of a widespread preference for native speaker target models, most TILA teachers initially opted for tandem constellations. Gradually, however, lingua franca constellations became more accepted and teachers appreciated their pedagogical validity.

2. Case study approach

Our case study is part of the TILA research activities (http://bit.ly/1XuaI1I) and focuses on telecollaborative conditions that are expected to facilitate authentic intercultural communication in the foreign language outside of and complementary to regular classroom settings (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2015). Special attention is given to cooperative autonomy as a key to successful intercultural communication

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and learning. The exchanges under investigation involve pairs of pupils in spoken (video communication, virtual world) or written (text chat) interactions and are crucially characterised by three task design features:

- multimodal home access to the respective telecollaboration tools;
- lingua franca use of English and German as target languages;
- soft intercultural topics addressing pupils' everyday concerns and experiences.

Performance data from 8 oral conversations (36 min. and 4025 words on average) and 3 written conversations (53 min. and 670 words on average) are complemented by reflective feedback interviews with selected pupils. The analyses help to better understand the pedagogical effects of the chosen task design features; they also provide insights into manifestations of collaborative autonomy.

3. Task design features

Multimodal home access helps to avoid frequent shortcomings of computer labs in schools regarding poor communicative privacy and network overload. Pupils also feel on their own turf and act more naturally than in school. The different telecollaborative options are used according to preference or availability and allow for pedagogical scaffolding.

The **lingua franca condition** makes pupils feel in the same boat with their peers, which enables them to lower their communication apprehension, focus on the communicative task, and develop non-native speaker confidence. They communicate spontaneously, negotiate meaning, solve communication problems, and learn from each other.

Soft intercultural topics about everyday issues are well suited for enabling non-native speakers to engage in authentic conversations based on everyday knowledge,

beliefs, and attitudes. Focus is on the roots of intercultural communicative competence in ordinary communication. Soft intercultural topics provide a safe ground for developing communicative attitudes and skills needed for intercultural topics that require special expertise or are emotionally loaded. In addition to the assigned conversation tasks, pupils also introduce their own personal topics, particularly in spoken communication. This is arguably an indicator of increased authenticity and a move beyond school towards real-life communication.

4. Cooperative autonomy

Pupils' conversations show evidence of cooperative autonomy in three respects: third space development, exercise of empathy, and handling of communication problems.

In our study, **third space development** (Kramsch, 2009) concerns an emphasis on creating a common ground of knowledge and attitudes. Pupils repeatedly use phrases for confirming, agreeing and disagreeing, or adding their own views, e.g. "Yes, I think so too", "Yeah, but I don't think…", or "Yeah, but scientists have found…". An English chat conversation between a German (A) and a Spanish pupil (B) illustrates steps in cooperative argument development:

> A: Do you think… social media are a blessing or a curse?
>
> B: In my opinion it's blessing because… but it's also a curse because…
>
> B: What do you think?
>
> A Yes, I have exactly the same opinion. It's very useful but you can… become addicted
>
> B: Yes and if you post a picture…
>
> A: Yes

B: Yes there is no more privacy because…

A: Yes and so much information about people are safed on the internet…

A: I meant saved.

All in all, pupils' interactional strategies are predominantly supportive and consensual rather than confrontational, which is a key quality of their unfolding intercultural competence. In particular in oral conversations, students show a **high degree of social presence by exercising empathy**. When his German partner is unable to express what he wants to say, the Spanish pupil shows empathy ("Doesn't matter") and uses a face saving strategy: "I know we are beginners (laughs) of English, we haven't got such a level to speak about everything we want". Empathy is also combined with encouragement:

A: I mean, I haven't idea for this but the only thing I can say is I wish you a luck… I hope you win.

A: Just think maybe we are not the best but trying to do our best. This is what you must be thinking.

Other examples from oral conversations between pairs of Spanish and German pupils illustrate how **communication problems** are addressed on the fly and in highly cooperative and efficient ways, always drawing on the pupils' ordinary communication skills. A raising intonation ("Blessing or – ?") is, for instance, used to signal a lexical comprehension problem, which in turn elicits a reply in which the unknown word is repeated ("A curse") along with a paraphrasing meaning explication ("like if it is good for us, or if it is bad"). Examples of co-construction of meaning can be found as well: pupil A explicitly states a lexical production problem, pupil B offers a lexical option with rising intonation to request confirmation ("Annoying?"), A does not understand, and B repeats the word in a full sentence ("They are annoying") combining it with a clarifying paraphrase.

In our lingua franca conversations, the pupils' attention is on ensuring successful communication: they want to be understood and convey their message. Focus on form plays a role too, but clearly serves the communicative purpose.

5. Conclusion

Our TILA case study demonstrates that an intercultural telecollaboration approach combining a multimodal home access with a pedagogical lingua franca constellation and soft intercultural topics is highly suitable for enabling pupils to develop their intercultural foreign language competence through authentic communication outside classroom constraints. Beneficial pedagogical effects show in pupils' focus on empathy and support and in the strategic skills they use for third space development and handling communication problems. All this helps them develop their sense and ability for cooperative autonomy and activate their ordinary communicative competence for intercultural communication.

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