20 Getting their feet wet: trainee EFL teachers in Germany and Israel collaborate online to promote their telecollaboration competence through experiential learning

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Abstract

The paper presents a telecollaboration project between 54 pre-service teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) studying at a teacher training college in Israel and a university in Germany. The telecollaboration involved a collaborative Project Based Learning Task (PBLT) in which the students compared and evaluated the ways EFL is taught in their respective contexts. The purpose of this ongoing study is to provide pre-service EFL teachers with an apprenticeship of learning ways that technology can be used to transcend classroom walls for virtual mobility and cooperation. It specifically intends to determine how such an apprenticeship can strengthen student teachers' belief in their ability to implement telecollaboration in their own teaching. Data for the study were gathered through a pre-post quantitative survey. The findings indicate that telecollaboration experience integrated into teacher training can raise students' perceived self-efficacy to implement telecollaborative exchange projects into their future teaching.

Keywords: telecollaboration, teacher education, project based learning tasks, PBLT, self-efficacy.

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1.   Introduction

Despite some criticism (Hanna & De Nooy, 2009; Kramsch, 2009), telecollaboration is acknowledged as a versatile tool which foreign language educators can implement to encourage not only the practice of language skills, but also to raise intercultural awareness, enhance collaborative learning practices, and increase learner motivation by providing opportunities for authentic language use through the activity of online task collaboration.

While telecollaboration is becoming an established tool in higher education, it is found less commonly in K12 educational contexts, mainly because school teachers lack the experience, competences and confidence to integrate telecollaborative projects into their teaching. Teacher confidence or self-efficacy "relates to the beliefs teachers hold about their perceived capability in undertaking certain teaching tasks" (Bandura, 1997, reported in Pendergast, Garvis, & Keogh, 2011, p. 47). "Supporting the development of teachers' self-efficacy is essential for producing […] committed and [pioneering] teachers" (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001, reported in Pendergast et al., 2011, p. 47) who are willing to take creative steps like introducing telecollaborative exchanges into their own classrooms. However, telecollaboration projects rely heavily on instructor guidance (Belz, 2003). Furthermore, multiple skills are necessary to organize, design, assess and run a telecollaborative exchange. As a result, self-doubt regarding these competences may pose an obstacle to pre-service teachers entering the field.

O'Dowd (2015) has defined the mind-set for running telecollaborative activities in a model comprising 40 descriptors defined mostly in terms of 'can do' statements. These statements refer to organizational, pedagogical, and digital competences as well as attitudes and beliefs of the telecollaborative teacher (O'Dowd, 2015, pp. 67-68). This model has informed our study, in which we created an apprenticeship of the skills necessary for the telecollaborative instructor through systematic learning in practice.

This study was guided by the main research question: does experiencing a telecollaboration enhance the pre-service teachers' self-efficacy to facilitate

telecollaborative projects? The original study contained additional questions, but due to limited space they cannot be discussed here.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants were 54 pre-service teachers of EFL studying at a teacher training college in Israel and university in Germany. Participants from Israel were 33 student teachers in the third year of their Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program. The Hebrew and Arabic mother tongue participants had high English matriculation scores, and had passed English proficiency exams to be accepted to the English teaching program. Three participants were native English speakers who had immigrated to Israel as adults.

Participants from Germany were 21 student teachers of EFL (primary and secondary). They were either in their third or fourth year of study. 19 students were German natives, two students had a migrant background. The overall language competence is proficient, i.e. C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). Apart from one student, none of them had been in contact with Israeli students before.

2.2. Telecollaboration project

The telecollaboration was integrated into the student teachers' SLA courses in both institutions. Implementation followed the design constructed by the Israeli researchers in an earlier project between Israeli and American students (Waldman & Harel, 2015). It included three stages: information exchange, comparison, and collaboration. Information exchange about personal details and aspects of home culture took place at the beginning of the process so the students could get to know each other. Over the following weeks, student teams comprising three Israeli and two German students worked collaboratively on a PBLT comparing and critically analyzing the ways EFL is taught in Israel

and Germany. Finally, they co-constructed electronic posters showcasing their findings.

The first synchronous videoconference was carried out using Skype and a projector and screen. The participants discussed their career choice of becoming EFL teachers; the status of bilingualism and multiculturalism in their respective countries and educational systems, as well as student life. Between the first and the second synchronous videoconferences, the student teams worked on their projects communicating on a regular basis. They chose the digital tools themselves, both synchronous (Skype and WhatsApp) and asynchronous tools (e-mail and Google Docs). We encouraged their independence so that they would look for ways to solve problems as they encountered them. The main goal of their collaboration was to compare and evaluate teaching EFL in the Israeli and the German education system. The student teams decided amongst themselves which aspect of teaching EFL to focus on for the creation of an electronic poster which was presented in the second video conference. We deemed this project relevant to the participants to raise awareness of alternative methods of teaching EFL to those used in their own communities. Furthermore, it is likely that in today's global society, trainee-teachers will find themselves teaching abroad, hence, they should be aware of multiple pedagogies.

2.3.   Data collection

In order to answer the research question, the students completed a pre- and post-collaboration survey, which we designed based on a number of the descriptors provided in O'Dowd (2015). The Cronbach's alpha for the survey was 0.84, indicating high levels of internal consistency. The survey questions reflected the construct of self-efficacy within the domain of telecollaboration. We asked the students to assess the degree with which they agreed with eighteen statements, ranked from disagree (1) to fully agree (5). Some of these statements targeted factors relating to capability e.g. "I can organize an online exchange between my pupils and other pupils". Other statements targeted beliefs about the value of telecollaboration in EFL classrooms, e.g. "Telecollaboration plays an important role in language learning". We think that belief in the positive value

of telecollaboration is a motivating factor for the student teachers to achieve empowerment through perceived self-efficacy.

We analyzed the survey quantitatively based on group comparisons between the means in the pre- and post-survey.

3.   Results

The findings from the quantitative analysis are presented below, see Table 1.

Table 1.   Comparison of student responses in the pre- and post-collaboration survey

	Pre-survey			Post-Survey		
N	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
54	3.90	0.40	1-5	4.09	0.42	1-5

Table 1 shows the number of participating students (54), the mean, standard deviation and range of pre- and post-collaboration survey scores. A paired t-test showed a significant difference between the mean scores in the pre- and post-survey ($t(53)$= -3.07, $p<0.01$). In other words, the mean score in the post-survey was significantly higher than the mean score in the pre-survey. Perceived self-efficacy was higher among the students following the telecollaboration experiential learning.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

Results show that the student teachers' telecollaboration experience was meaningful within the process of their teacher training. Following the telecollaboration experiential learning, the students' post-survey results revealed a higher sense of self-efficacy originating from their experience. The survey showed raised feelings of competence in designing, organizing, running and assessing an online exchange with their future pupils. Moreover, it showed

willingness to cooperate with partners and capability in choosing appropriate digital tools. The initial results from this ongoing study support the notion that telecollaboration exchange deserves a place in pre-service EFL teacher education programs. By equipping future teachers with telecollaboration knowledge and skills, there is hope that there will be an eventual backwash effect and telecollaboration exchange will be applied to EFL curricula.

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