

# 23 What are the perceived effects of telecollaboration compared to other communication-scenarios with peers?

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## Abstract

What are the perceived effects of Telecollaboration (TC), compared to other types of communication-scenarios with peers (i.e. local peers in small groups and Erasmus students abroad)? This is the question this exploratory study tackles within a blended language learning course. The analysis of students' perceptions paints a rather contrastive picture of telecollaboration. While it stays in the shadow of interaction with Erasmus students, it is complementary to local small-group work and does sustain learning.

**Keywords:** communication-scenario, telecollaboration, interaction with peers, social presence, blended learning.

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## 1. Introduction

Interaction is of utmost importance within Blended Learning (BL) (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003), and contributes to the interweaving of face-to-face and distant learning modes. Interactions may not only embrace both modes, but also several communication-scenarios. Thus, in a course design integrating TC, two communication-scenarios are generally blended: one with distant peers and one with local peers (Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2012). In a

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Blended Learning Course (BLC), a pedagogical scenario – or learning design – combines face-to-face classroom sessions and online activities in a coherent way: they target, together, the achievement of the course’s learning objectives. A communication-scenario is part of the pedagogical scenario; it is defined here as interaction with specific types of interlocutors who play specific roles, and with a distinct set of goals (Nissen, 2014; Tricot & Plégat-Soutjis, 2003) it unfolds face-to-face, at a distance, or in both learning modes.

This exploratory study seeks to determine to what extent and regarding which aspects students perceive that telecollaboration with distant peers contribute to their learning in comparison to other communication-scenarios with peers (i.e. local peers and local Erasmus students) within the same course. The different types of issues the study examines concern *language learning*, *task accomplishment*, *intercultural issues*, and *relationship building*.

## **2. Methodology and learning design**

### **2.1. Methodology**

Data were collected within a blended language learning course that integrates three communication-scenarios with peers:

- local peers working in small groups of three, face-to-face and online;
- TC partners in an asynchronous distant mode;
- Erasmus students abroad, attending three face-to-face lessons.

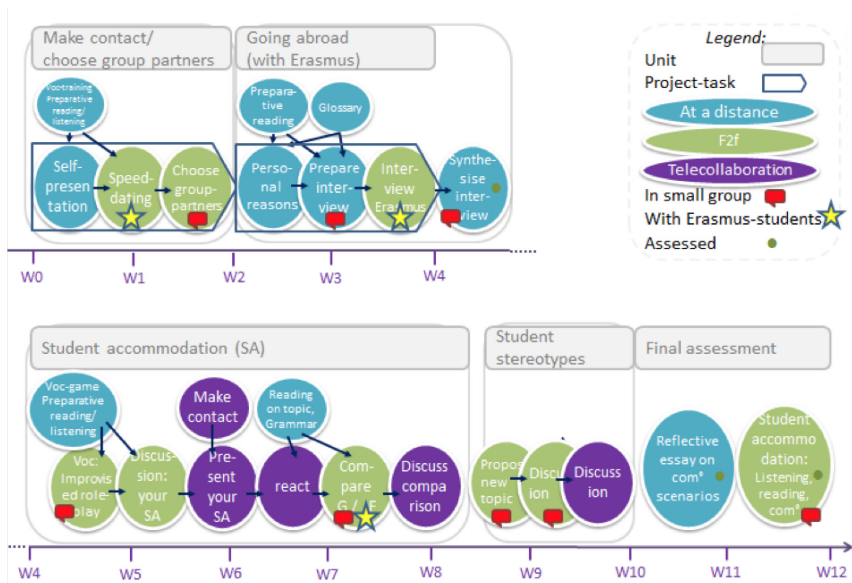
All three were oriented toward the accomplishment of the course’s successive tasks. The students (N=13) filled out a Questionnaire (Q) at the end of semester 1 2015/2016, and wrote a Reflective Essay (RE) on the different communication-scenarios within their course (N=9). Additionally, comparative data were gathered through the same questionnaire on:

- TC partners' perception of the same communication-scenarios (N=2);
- BLC students' perception of another TC project during semester 2 (N=5).

The RE were analysed by means of content analysis. Regarding every item, for each of the four issues and for each of the communication-scenarios, the arguments the students gave, and the number of students who gave that specific argument were counted. TC online interactions were counted separately in each of the forums and categorised regarding their content.

## 2.2. BLC learning design

Figure 1. BLC: learning design



The context of this study is a 12-week (24h-hour) intermediate (B1/B2) BL German course for non-language specialists consisting of several units. In each unit, tasks (represented as bubbles in Figure 1) are logically linked to one

another. The first unit aims at choosing partners for small-group work occurring later in the term; in the second, students interview German/Austrian Erasmus students. After presenting and comparing their accommodation with TC partners in Hannover in unit 3, students propose and choose the term’s last topic (student stereotypes).

In the course design, focuses and objectives of the two communication-scenarios with Erasmus students and TC partners are rather identical (see [Table 1](#)). Work within small groups targets the same aspects, but puts greater emphasis on language. Here, discussions on intercultural aspects are always linked to the exchange with students in Hannover and/or with Erasmus students.

Table 1. Focuses of tasks, in decreasing order of importance

	Within small groups	With TC partners	With Erasmus students
1.	Language (help & correct each other, practice communication)	Intercultural issues	
2.	Intercultural issues	Language (input & practice communication)	
3.	Make contact (relationship building)	Make contact (relationship building)	

### 3. Results and discussion

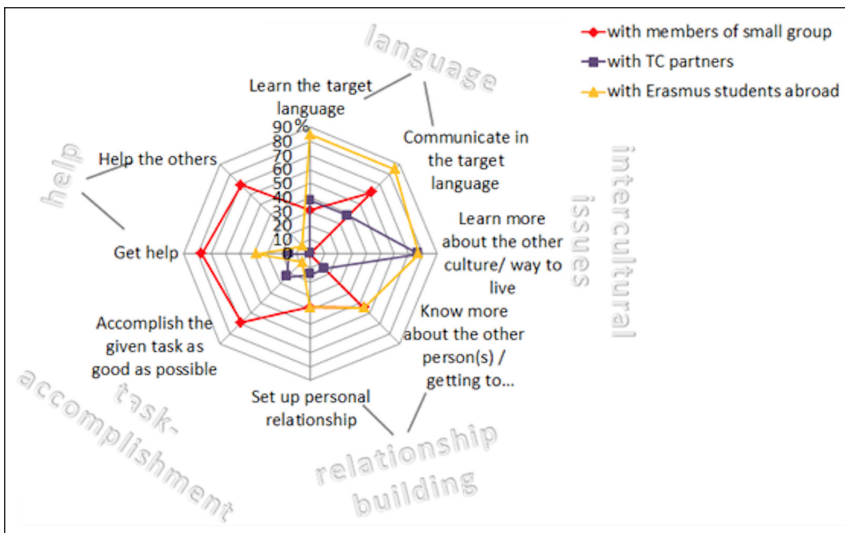
#### 3.1. Complementary issues

BLC students’ declarations on their own objectives related to each communication-scenario (yes/no items in Q; see [Figure 2](#)) indicate that there is only little overlap between working in small groups with students of the same course on the one hand, and working with students from the target country on the other hand. Hence, the communication-scenarios with local and with external partners complement each other rather well. With peers of the same course, students aim at accomplishing the given task(s) as well as possible, and the help they declare they give and get serves this goal, partly “in order to get a good mark” (Q).

### 3.2. TC in the shadow of interaction with Erasmus students

In accordance with the tasks' objectives, BLC students state (questionnaires, reflective essays) that intercultural aspects are an important issue for them when interacting with TC partners as well as with Erasmus students. However, besides this item, communicating with TC partners appears as a pale copy of interaction with Erasmus students, regarding all the other valued goals in these two communication-scenarios with external partners: language learning, task accomplishment, and relationship building (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Declared objectives



This contrasts with positive feedback on TC students gave within this course during the second term after another TC project, and from the TC partners in Germany.

Several reasons for this gap can be identified through the reflective essays and the online forum discussions.

1) The TC project was conducted exclusively asynchronously (via Moodle forums and Voicethread). This appeared, in the eyes of the students and in comparison to the more immediate contact with Erasmus students who attended 3 classroom sessions, as not interactive enough.

2) Interaction with Erasmus students mainly took place within the first part of the term, telecollaboration exclusively within the second. Still, students felt both scenarios were too similar objective-wise.

3) Only 3 German students participated in the TC exchange. Since course participation is not compulsory and enrolment takes place very shortly before the term starts, this was not foreseeable during the project planning phase. In addition, their level of participation was rather low (see Table 2), which discouraged several French students.

Table 2. Posts in TC online discussion forum

Discussion forum	Total number of messages	Messages from students in France	Messages from students in Germany	Type of message / production
Present yourself	15	10 3	1 1	Self-presentation Reaction
That's how I live. And you?	23	12 1 1 1	3 3 2 -	Simple link to Voicethread-presentation Reaction Attempt to draw comparison Summary of 3 groups' comparisons
Student stereotypes	7	5	1 1	Stereotype-statements Good-bye

4) One TC partner notes a discrepancy with the official aims of her course, which do not normally include much communication. This difference in classroom level (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006) could have affected learner motivation and expectation.

5) Predominantly, BLC students did complete their TC tasks (self-presentation, accommodation-presentation on Voicethread, indication

of stereotypes). However, despite contrary instructions, they most often simply deposited their productions on the forums. Almost no one initiated, or responded to, any online exchange.

### 3.3. Importance of social presence

Table 3. Items linked to social presence

	Within small groups	With TC partners	With Erasmus students
<b>Feeling of belonging to a group / community</b> <i>(Likert scale 0-5; average)</i>	3.8	1.2	3.0
<b>Feeling of being close to at least several partners</b> <i>(Likert scale 0-5; average)</i>	3.4	1.4	2.4
<b>Most interaction</b> <i>(declarations in Q; 8% gave no answer)</i>	69%	0%	23%
<b>Issue of relationship building</b> <i>(yes/no items in Q)</i>	46%	15%	46%

What likely determined the students' feeling of belonging to a group/community is regularity and synchronicity of exchanges. Students state it was with BLC peers they interacted most – and this communication-scenario was principally synchronous. At the same time, it is this communication-scenario that best allows them to feel they belong to a group/community, and to feel close to several partners (see Table 3). As Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p. 9) argued, social presence is important for community building and creating a sense of belonging to a group. On the contrary, TC gets the lowest scores, including for relationship building.

Regarding interaction with Erasmus students, BLC students claim that good personal contact leads to better work. Compared to the highly valued communication-scenario with Erasmus students, communicating exclusively asynchronously and receiving a low number of messages results in perceiving a higher interpersonal distance and being less engaged in TC, which is in line with Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance.

### 3.4. Learning within TC

However, the students perceive they learned rather well through interacting with TC partners; less than with Erasmus students, but more than with their BLC peers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Perception of learning through interaction

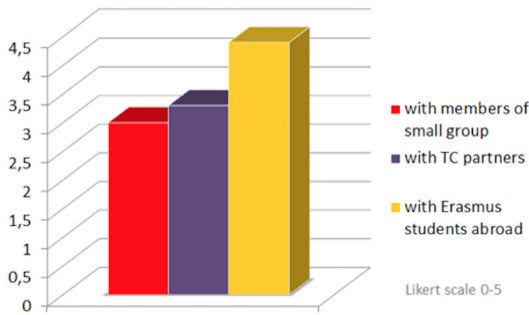


Table 4 shows BLC students consider exchange with TC partners mainly as an occasion to get language input, but also to increase intercultural awareness; with Erasmus students, the greatest outcome is intercultural issues. The communication-scenarios they value most for their learning are those with both external partners. Small groups are mainly dedicated to the completion of task completion (see 3.1) which prepare or use interaction with these external partners.

Table 4. Students' perception of what they learned (RE)

Within small groups	With TC partners	With Erasmus students
Task accomplishment (2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to work in groups</li> </ul>	Language (5) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocabulary (3)</li> <li>• Sentence structure (1)</li> </ul>	Intercultural issues (8) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See how students live in the other country (3)</li> <li>• See why the students chose Grenoble (3)</li> </ul>
Language (1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through correction</li> </ul>	Communication training (1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication training (1)</li> </ul>	See different study systems (2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See different study systems (2)</li> </ul>
	Intercultural issues (4) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intercultural exchange (3)</li> <li>• Good to see why the partners learn French (1)</li> </ul>	Language (2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pronunciation and vocabulary</li> </ul>



## 4. Conclusion

In this study, students value interaction with Erasmus students during face-to-face lessons much higher, mainly as far as language learning but also relationship building are concerned, than asynchronous online interaction with TC partners with low engagement on both sides. In addition, they perceive working within small groups of BLC peers principally as a way to complete course tasks, and getting/giving help in order to complete them. However, in their eyes, learning primarily occurs when interacting or at least exchanging information and getting input from students from the target country. This is why students nevertheless consider they learned quite a lot through TC.

This TC focuses on making contact and on exchanging information (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009), but has no proper collaborative dimension (i.e. jointly accomplishing a task). Still, learner engagement and social presence, which play a major role within more collaboratively oriented learning situations such as small learning groups (Pléty, 1998) and communities of inquiry (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), appear to also be crucial in this TC.

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