

27 Searching for telecollaboration in secondary geography education in Germany

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Abstract

The majority of studies on telecollaboration for educational purposes focus on language-related aspects. Therefore, a qualitative explorative research project was set up at the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany, dealing with telecollaboration from the perspective of a non-language discipline; it is based on the approach of transferring telecollaboration to content subjects, more precisely to geography education in the context of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). In this paper, the proceedings and main findings of the preliminary study of the research project are presented. The aim of the preliminary study was to learn more about the extent to which telecollaboration existed in geography education in the whole of Germany and in particular in the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW).

Keywords: telecollaboration, CLIL, geography education, content subject teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Research on telecollaboration for educational purposes has produced a substantial amount of publications. The majority of these publications focus on language-related aspects (cf. Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012, pp. 7-8), especially

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on Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and on the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (cf. O'Dowd, 2013, pp. 123-126). Accordingly, the term telecollaboration often refers to “telecollaborative language learning” (cf. Dooly, 2008, p. 15). The strong connection between telecollaboration and language-related aspects surprises because telecollaboration offers opportunities which are also relevant to non-language subjects, i.e. content subjects. Most notable is its motivating effect achieved by putting students in touch with peers outside of their classroom. However, telecollaboration may also be defined without any connection to a specific subject area: It may be understood as a teaching method enabling students in distant locations to learn together, usually with the help of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (cf. O'Dowd, 2013, p. 123).

The study presented in this paper was based on this broader understanding of telecollaboration. Its objective was to learn more about the extent to which telecollaboration existed in the teaching practices of the content subject geography in Germany. Geography was chosen because it is a space-related subject (DGfG, 2014, p. 5): by letting students at distant locations collaborate, the discussion of regional similarities or differences as well as the students' personal or local perspectives may be included into the teaching. Geography is also a subject which makes use of a great variety of media, e.g. charts or maps (DGfG, 2014, p. 6). As learners may select or create media to exchange topic-related information, telecollaboration offers a goal-oriented way for developing method skills. Furthermore, geography is a subject typical for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)² in Germany (KMK, 2013, p. 13). By integrating telecollaboration in geography education into CLIL settings – i.e. by adding the use of a target language – the amount of possible partners and consequently of geographical topics which can be dealt with is increased. Also, students may benefit from the authentic language-use resulting from the fact that the target language becomes the only means to exchange content-related information with their peers. For the study, English

2. It is important to differentiate between the acronyms CLIL and CBL (Content-Based Language Learning). Although both approaches combine language and content learning, the pursued teaching aims are crucially different: whereas CBL aims at developing language-related skills (Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2004, p. 152), CLIL aims at developing proficiencies in the content subject (cf. Eurydice, 2006, p. 7).

was chosen as a target language because it has the status of a world language and is most commonly used for CLIL in Germany.

2. Proceedings and findings

In the beginning of this study, only a small number of publications on telecollaboration in geography education could be found (e.g. Schuler, 2001). However, because of the above-mentioned opportunities offered by this method, it was assumed that at least some telecollaborations existed in the teaching practices in geography education. Consequently, an extensive search for telecollaborations was conducted.

In a first step, E-Twinning and PASCH – two of the largest web portals supporting telecollaborative activities in Germany and offering search engines for a partner- and/or project-search – were searched for telecollaborations in geography education in Germany. The search on these web portals proved to be inefficient partly due to the fact that the search engines did not support the search for telecollaborations in specific content subjects.

In a second step, ministries, educational institutions and educational and/or geographical societies in the 16 federal states of Germany were asked if they knew of the existence of telecollaborations, i.e. projects which fulfilled all of the following criteria: integration into the geography curriculum, collaboration between students in Germany and abroad, and communication with the help of digital media and English. Responses to this survey came from seven federal states, but no report on any such project was received.

In a third step, it was decided to search in more detail in one of the federal states. NRW was chosen as a research area because it has a high population density and the highest density of schools offering German-English CLIL-programmes in Germany (DIPF, 2006, p. 58). About 900 secondary geography teachers at about 550 schools were questioned if they had conducted – or were about to conduct – a project fulfilling all of the above-mentioned criteria. The response

rate of this survey was approximately 20 percent and seven teachers reported on having conducted eleven such projects altogether. These seven teachers were interviewed and it was found that none of the projects fulfilled all of the criteria: in two projects there was no collaboration with partners abroad and in five projects the collaborations took place fully or partially as face-to-face meetings. While two of the projects were set in geography classes but dealt with topics which did not form part of the official geography curriculum, the other nine projects took place as extracurricular activities. The extracurricular projects can be characterized by either addressing topics of world-wide relevance such as sustainability or tourism or by being held open as regards content. Interestingly, three were funded by national or international educational organizations. The findings are presented in more detail in [Deutscher \(forthcoming\)](#).

The projects found were not of interest for this study because it was assumed that extracurricular projects usually address a small number of (intrinsically) motivated and – in the case of funded projects – select students. In order to reach a larger number of students, it was regarded as essential that telecollaborations are set in regular classes and are integrated into the curriculum.

3. Conclusion

The findings imply that – if at all – only a small number of telecollaborations in geography education existed in the teaching practices in NRW and in the whole of Germany. This lack of telecollaborations is a possible explanation for the small amount of publications dealing with this topic from the perspective of geography education. Although none of the eleven projects found fulfilled all of the criteria regarded as relevant, the findings show nevertheless that telecollaborations on geography-related topics are in fact realizable, especially in CLIL-settings, and may contribute to education in non-language subjects.

The study presented in this paper forms part of a qualitative explorative research project which was set up at the Ruhr-University Bochum and deals with the approach of transferring telecollaboration to secondary geography education.

The findings led to a still ongoing follow up study which explores subject-related characteristics of telecollaborations set in CLIL-geography classes in NRW. For the follow up study, secondary geography teachers were encouraged to set up a telecollaboration according to their needs and facilities available and which fulfilled the above-mentioned criteria. This resulted in ten telecollaborations with partners in different parts of the world (cf. [Deutscher, forthcoming](#)).

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