

The TeCoLa project: pedagogical differentiation through telecollaboration and gaming for intercultural and content integrated language teaching

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Abstract. The Erasmus+ TeCoLa project (2016-2019) aims to develop and test innovative gamified telecollaboration approaches for secondary schools that address issues of learning diversity in intercultural and Content Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) and teaching. Authentic task-based transnational interactions among peers from different socio-cultural, educational and language backgrounds are at the very heart of the learning process, using telecollaboration as a way to communicate and collaborate. In this paper we will shortly describe the project's foci and will elaborate on the teacher training programme that has been designed on the basis of the teachers' needs and on a sound conceptualisation of telecollaboration tasks that are useful, enjoyable, and meaningful.

Keywords: telecollaboration, gamification, intercultural communicative competence, CLIL, teacher training.

1. Introduction

Experts in the fields of foreign language education, intercultural telecollaboration, teacher education, and technology-mediated pedagogy from six countries (Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and UK)³ collaborate in the TeCoLa project⁴ with the aim of developing and validating innovative gamified telecollaboration approaches for secondary schools. The main project focus

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4. <https://sites.google.com/site/tecolaproject/>

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is to address issues of learning diversity in intercultural and content integrated language learning and teaching. At the very heart of the pedagogical process are authentic task-based telecollaborations among peers from different socio-cultural, educational, and language backgrounds.

As described below there are several aims and objectives of this collaborative, international project:

(1) To empower pre- and in-service teachers to use telecollaboration and gamification, in order to:

- facilitate the development of intercultural communicative competence as a prime objective of foreign language learning and European citizenship-building;
- create conditions for real-life communication in a foreign language in lingua franca or tandem constellations;
- foster autonomous collaboration and authenticity as key principles of task-based learning;
- strengthen personalised learning and learner agency as part of a differentiated pedagogy approach.

(2) To internationalise education by integrating telecollaboration at schools to innovate, enrich, and make language teaching programmes more meaningful and effective.

(3) To contribute to the integration of all pupils regardless of their background by promoting intercultural dialogue in telecollaboration events among diverse populations of pupils from secondary schools across Europe.

(4) To exploit the possibilities that web 2.0 applications, virtual worlds, serious games, and gamification offer with a view of diversifying teaching and facilitating CLIL alongside intercultural dialogue and play in telecollaboration encounters.

2. Project activities

In the first project year we have:

- gathered relevant information on teachers' experience and perceived needs by conducting surveys and focus groups in relation to TeCoLa's foci: enhancing authentic intercultural communication among peers, promoting CLIL, addressing diversity, and digitalising education favouring internationalisation and EU citizenship building;
- created teacher training modules on gamified telecollaboration based on the information gathered on teachers' specific needs;
- developed a task design model and the first task prototypes for telecollaboration.

2.1. Measuring teachers' experiences and perceived needs

2.1.1. Method

A survey with 36 closed items was created to gather teachers' experiences and perceived needs. The survey covered: (1) background information; (2) the teachers' experience and perceived training needs regarding the use of digital communication tools and their perceptions of the usefulness of these across four parameters: learning challenges, intercultural awareness, communicative competence and CLIL; and (3) information about the context in which teachers work.

A five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) was employed with additional space to provide open-ended comments for each section. The survey was distributed by email via SurveyMonkey to teachers in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and the UK. A total of 177 responses were received.

Additionally, six focus groups (semi-structured group interviews) were carried out in all project countries either face-to-face or via Skype with a total of 29 teachers to gain more focused and in-depth information on the issues addressed in the survey.

2.1.2. Results

Table 1 below shows the mean score of each construct. The diversity and learning challenge results showed a mean score of 3.9, intercultural awareness and

competence was 4.1, and communicative competence was 4.5. Both were relevant or extremely relevant to the teacher’s teaching practice. On the contrary, CLIL did not seem to be as relevant to the teachers (3.0). One possible reason for this outcome could be that most teachers who completed the survey may not be familiar with this methodology.

Table 1. Relevance items for language teaching

To what extent are the following issues RELEVANT in your teaching practice? (1=not at all relevant, 5=extremely relevant)		
	Mean	St. Dev.
Diversity and learning challenges	3.9	0.9
Intercultural awareness and competence	4.1	0.8
Communicative competence	4.5	0.7
To support CLIL	3.0	1.4

Regarding the issues that are problematic for their teaching experience, promoting communicative competence is perceived by teachers to be a difficulty (Table 2).

Table 2. Problematic issues in language teaching

To what extent are the following issues PROBLEMATIC in your teaching practice? (1 = not at all problematic, 5 = extremely problematic)		
	Mean	St. Dev.
Diversity and learning challenges	2.7	1.0
Intercultural awareness and competence	2.2	0.9
Communicative competence	3.5	1.1
To support CLIL	2.3	1.3

In terms of teachers’ experience with TeCoLa’s main digital tools, teachers have little experience with all the tools mentioned (video communication mean 2.3 and online games mean 2.12) but particularly little with virtual worlds (mean 1.4).

As to the perceived usefulness of these tools to deal with diversity, promote intercultural awareness and communicative competence, results show that teachers identify video communication as the most valuable (Table 3). This might be linked to familiarity issues with the tool.

Table 4 shows how much training teachers believe that they require to be able to use each tool, which is higher for the more unknown virtual worlds (mean 3.8).

Table 3. Teacher beliefs on tool affordances

Do you think the following tools in international school collaboration would help ... (1 = not at all, 5 = a lot)		
	Mean	St. Dev
to better deal with LEARNING CHALLENGES due to cultural, cognitive, or social DIVERSITY among your students?		
Video communication	3.8	1.1
Online games	3.1	1.2
Virtual worlds	3.0	1.2
to promote your students' INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS and COMPETENCE?		
Video communication	4.2	0.9
Online games	3.0	1.2
Virtual worlds	3.1	1.2
to promote your students' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE?		
Video communication	4.3	0.9
Online games	3.3	1.2
Virtual worlds	3.2	1.3
to support CLIL		
Video communication	3.6	1.2
Online games	3.0	1.2
Virtual worlds	2.7	1.2

Table 4. Perceived training needs

How much TRAINING do you think you would need to be able to use the following tools as a teaching resource? (1 = none, 5 = a lot)		
	Mean	St. Dev.
Video communication	3	1.1
Online games	3	1.2
Virtual worlds	3.8	1.2

With regards to the focus groups, responses showed that the participating teachers value telecollaboration as a way to provide their students with much needed opportunities for authentic interactions. Such interactions can have a strong motivational effect on learners and also improve their intercultural competence. They also commented on the differentiation possibilities that can be demonstrated by having a range of tools to choose from. Teachers acknowledged, however, a number of barriers that will need to be overcome. Several teachers indicated that they lacked the technical equipment for these practices, and also the time to organise

them in their busy schedules, as they are increasingly burdened with administrative duties. They also highlighted issues around fitting them in the curriculum.

2.2. Teacher training modules

Based on the information gained from the teachers' experiences and needs survey, and from the focus groups, teacher training modules have been developed. The main topics addressed are:

- general introduction to telecollaboration and gamification for foreign language learning;
- telecollaboration and gamification for intercultural communication development and European citizenship building;
- telecollaboration and gamification for subject integrated and vocational language learning;
- telecollaboration and gamification for differentiated pedagogical practices;
- learner preparation for pedagogical telecollaboration and gamification;
- gamified telecollaboration and assessment.

These modules will be used for teacher training in the second project year and will be available on the project's site in due course.

2.3. Task design model and task prototypes

TeCoLa's task design model is underpinned by different theories and pedagogical experiences, in particular, task based language teaching (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), motivational theories (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), and knowledge gained through previous European projects (TILA⁵ and NIFLAR⁶). A main concern in task design relates to the need to address learners' interests and motivation in order to be able to create meaningful, enjoyable, and usable telecollaboration tasks while addressing diversity in the language classroom. Based on this design concept, some task prototyping templates for task examples have been created and will be validated in future studies.

5. <http://www.tilaproject.eu/>

6. <http://niflar.eu/>

3. Conclusions

In the initial year of this TeCoLa project, we have established the basis for the creation of teacher training programmes and a model for the elaboration of meaningful gamified telecollaborative tasks that address diversity in different educational contexts. In the second and third years, this model will be validated in several case studies and online pedagogical guides created for stakeholders interested in integrating gamified telecollaboration in their teaching. All materials will be available at the TeCoLa's Open Educational Resources Pool.

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