



# Collaborative skills in language courses: how to support pupils?

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**Abstract.** The aim of this study is to examine how collaborative skills can be developed among secondary school pupils using digital tools (Word online, Adobe Spark Video) in the language classroom. Several types of data were collected: semi-structured interviews with teachers and learners, and observation of collaborative activities in the language classroom (video recordings, research log, observation notes, etc.). The case studies show different collaborative activities, which fall into three categories: coordination, articulation, and production. The analysis suggests that many factors can have an impact on collaboration between students, and this paper focuses on one in particular: digital tools. The findings revealed that digital tools can support collaboration if they meet the specific needs of the task (synchronous collaboration, asynchronous collaboration, or no collaboration) and its accessibility for the pupils (one tool for the group, one tool per student). Moreover, the analysis highlights the need to provide techno-pedagogical training (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013) to the pupils so that they are able to use the tool efficiently in collaborative activities.

**Keywords:** online collaboration, digital literacies, productive skills, secondary education.

## 1. Introduction

In a society where information and communication technologies increase the possibilities for collaboration, the question of the media and digital skills required for citizens in the 21st century becomes central (Voogt & Roblin, 2012). In foreign language teaching, collaboration enables pupils to be involved in communicative tasks and makes the latter meaningful to the learners (Council of Europe, 2001).

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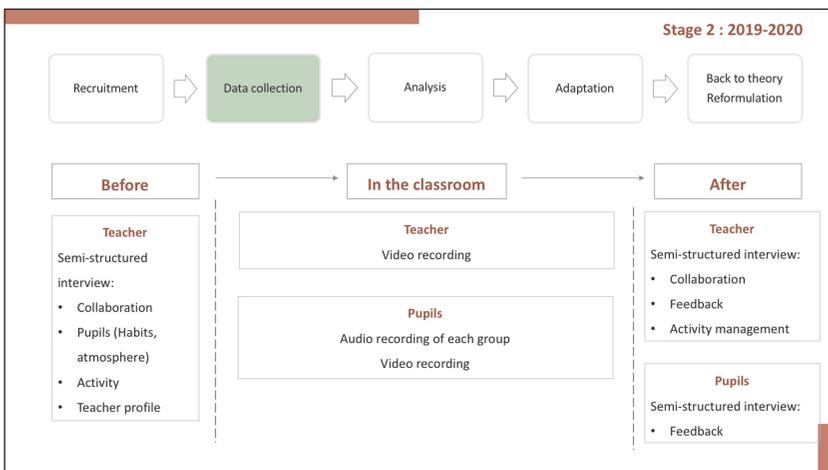
However, collaboration is not innate and requires specific skills (Hämäläinen & Häkkinen, 2010; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). As stated by Dillenbourg and Tchounikine (2007), collaboration relies on many external factors, including the ability of the students in the group to collaborate.

The aim of this study is to answer the following research question: how can collaborative skills be developed among secondary school pupils using digital tools in the language classroom? The final aim of this research is to provide language teachers or teacher trainers with guidelines for implementing activities that require collaborative skills from their learners.

## 2. Method and data collection

In order to build an in-depth understanding of the processes involved in setting up a collaborative activity, four iterative data collection and analysis phases were planned. This paper will focus on the research methodology and the results of the first two iterative phases, which took place in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. As shown in Figure 1, several types of data were collected in each phase: semi-structured interviews with teachers and learners, and observation of collaborative activities in the language classroom (video recordings, research log, observation notes, etc.).

Figure 1. Timeline and data collected



Based on all the data collected, categories were created using a qualitative methodology to identify factors that potentially influence collaboration skills.

Classroom observations during the first phase (2018-2019) highlighted three dimensions: the teacher (profile, framing of the activity), the pupils (profile and collaborative activity), and the context (classroom habits and atmosphere). This analysis served as the basis for the second phase (2019-2020) in which two classroom projects were analyzed. The first project was carried out with eight pupils in the first year of secondary school. The aim of the project was the in-pair collaborative writing of a letter in English with Microsoft Word online for synchronous collaboration. For the second project, 15 pupils in the fifth year of secondary school had to create in groups various short films in Spanish with Adobe Spark Video. This tool allowed everyone to have access to the edited videos but did not enable the pupils to collaborate synchronously on the interface.

### 3. Results and discussion

The analyses of the classroom observations revealed different collaborative activities, which we have grouped into three main dimensions presented in [Table 1](#). These dimensions and activities are inspired by the work of [Ligurgo et al. \(2019\)](#) and might evolve with the following phases of the research.

Table 1. Collaborative activities identified

Dimensions	Activities
Coordination	Establishing the rules of collaboration
	Distributing the sub-tasks
	Negotiating the general content
Articulation	Adjusting the rules to achieve the tasks
	Giving feedback
Production (collective, individual)	Negotiating the content
	Implementing tasks

We found that pupils' collaborative activities differed between projects, showing that, as stated by [Dillenbourg and Tchounikine \(2007\)](#), external factors influence collaboration. This allows us to formulate some hypotheses about factors that may or may not prompt collaborative work. In order to encourage collaborative work, digital tools have to be physically and cognitively accessible to all learners. The analysis shows that in the Spanish project, where the pupils had one computer per group, only one pupil – the one who considered himself the most competent – used the computer. Consequently, the other members of the group were not able to fully participate in the activity and showed a more passive behavior.

However, access to the digital tool is not enough to encourage collaborative work, everyone must also be able to use it. In the observed activities, the pupils did not have the same level of digital literacy, which played a role in the distribution of tasks and in the work performed by each member of the group. In seven out of the eight groups, the pupil who felt the most comfortable with the digital tool was the one who performed the digital tasks. In six out of these seven groups, this person became the leader of the group. In five out of the eight groups, the leader took over the work and strongly limited the collaborative tasks. In order to foster collaboration during the task, it is therefore recommended that everyone has been trained to use the digital tool (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013).

This training cannot be only technical (Hulin, 2013). The analysis of the two projects stresses the importance of specialized training in the expected use of the tool, which is confirmed in similar studies (Van de Vyver & Delforge, 2020). In the English project, the technical aspects of the digital tool were shown quickly before the activity (changing the font, etc.), whereas the collaborative use was explained orally. The analysis of the pupils' collaborative activities shows that the oral explanations did not allow the pupils to imagine what they had to do with the tool (e.g. copy and paste parts of the text, modify them on their own computer). Two groups out of four therefore copied the letter for most of the activity, as they would have done on a sheet of paper, without taking advantage of the technology. Mastery of the tool before the activity is all the more important because, if not, the language activity may take a back seat to the technical difficulties associated with the use of the digital tool (Van de Vyver & Delforge, 2020).

Finally, it appears necessary from the observations that the digital tool meets the specific needs of the task in order to support collaboration. In both projects, the collaborative activities took place in the classroom during class time; it was therefore necessary that the tool allows synchronous collaborative work. In the first project, the collaborative tool allowed for synchronous work and was used to carry out collaborative activities, thus prompting collaboration. In the second project, the tool was collaborative since the projects could be shared. Nevertheless, it did not enable synchronous collaboration. In this context, the pupil in front of the computer took over the work and no collaborative activities could be carried out.

## 4. Conclusions

Our research question was: How can collaborative skills be developed among secondary school pupils using digital tools in the language classroom? At this stage,

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it appears that learning to collaborate can be influenced by many elements. The access for each learner to the digital tool and the choice of a tool that corresponds to the context of learning (asynchronously or synchronously collaborative) are two conditions under which the digital activity fosters collaboration. Furthermore, it appears from the results that pupils need to be trained in digital collaboration, which includes showing the technical use of the tool and working on its collaborative features.

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