

Complexity and tool selection for purposeful communication in telecollaborative encounters

Kristi Jauregi Ondarra¹

Abstract. When organising TeleCollaboration (TC) encounters at primary or secondary schools, especially technological and organisational complexity, alongside pedagogical issues, plays an essential role in the degree of success of the exchanges. Within the European TeCoLa project, pilot experiences have been organised using innovative but ‘simple’ technologies, like Padlet or Voki to more demanding and complex ones like 3D virtual worlds in OpenSim. The present paper presents the experiences of three pilot exchanges differing in complexity and reports on learners’ experiences.

Keywords: telecollaboration, learners’ experiences.

1. Introduction

Task-based TC has been said to enrich foreign language curricula by providing learners with opportunities to get immersed in an intercultural dialogue with peers from other countries and in so doing develop intercultural, communicative, social, and digital competences (Canto & Jauregi, 2017, O’Dowd, 2016). The Erasmus+ TeCoLa project (2016-2019) originated from the wish to help schoolteachers to get familiarised with and learn how to integrate TC activities in their teaching in order to provide their students with these enriching learning opportunities. Teachers joining TeCoLa got trained and coached individually throughout the whole process of project preparation, execution, and evaluation.

1. Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands; k.jauregi@uu.nl

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2. From simple to complex TC exchanges

When referring to TC in primary and secondary school contexts, complexity is present at different interrelated levels: the school context, the IT level, and pedagogical approaches to language teaching (Jauregi, 2018). In this paper we present the experiences of three pilot exchanges which differ in complexity.

2.1. Creating vlogs in Padlet

This pilot is an example of a successful, straightforward, and easy to conduct project. Since one of the two participating schools had old computers, a bad internet connection, and no IT support, the interactive wall Padlet was selected for sharing learners' vlogs asynchronously. Seventeen Dutch learners from a bilingual secondary school interacted in Spanish with 22 primary school learners from Spain, who carried out TC activities in English. The Dutch and the Spanish learners had an A2 proficiency level in their target language. Five groups were created in each school and subsequently paired up with parallel groups from the other country (Dutch Group A paired up with Spanish Group A, etc.) and separate Padlet walls were created for each international team.

Learners created four vlogs in groups, one per week in a period of a month, and uploaded them in their respective Padlet wall for the international peer group to view. In the first task, they introduced themselves and their school. In Task 2, they provided general information about their country/region. In Task 3, they informed their peers about tourist attractions in their region. In the last task, they provided cultural information about their region/country (how people live, what a regular day looks like, how they celebrate their birthday, etc.).

Tasks 1, 2, and 4 were carried out in the target language (Spanish for the Dutch learners and English for the Spanish learners). The topic of the third task was more complex and it was carried out in Spanish for the Spanish learners and in English for the bilingual Dutch learners (Jauregi & Melchor-Couto, 2018).

2.2. Multi-tool approach

In this pilot, various technologies were used for the exchanges with high levels of engagement and enthusiasm. Two state primary schools, one from London with limited resources and with access to Spanish language lessons during 40 minutes per week throughout the year and one bilingual primary school from Valencia, participated in the TC project. The participants were learners of English (B2 level)

and Spanish (A1 level), ten to 12 years of age. The interactions took place between January and the end of June 2019, and age-appropriate and relevant topics were selected for each session, such as describing their own cities or favourite foods.

Different tools were used for the exchanges: Padlet to talk about topics such as Easter celebrations; Vokis for presenting themselves; and class-to-class video communication and weekly Moodle chat rooms.

Given the low proficiency in Spanish of the UK learners, it was decided to run the weekly chat sessions in English and allocate time at the beginning for these learners to be able to practise their Spanish by asking their peers to translate key vocabulary for them in Spanish. The tasks were carried out in school, either in lessons or at a dedicated time, even if this sometimes meant using the learners' play time.

2.3. TC in the virtual city of Saarburg

The third pilot was ambitious in many senses. It involved the use of the TeCoLa virtual world to facilitate synchronous oral communication in German among Dutch and French learners. Technologically speaking, the TeCoLa virtual environment is quite demanding. A viewer has to be installed and certain security ports opened in order to access and be immersed in the virtual world as an avatar and be able to speak and chat with other avatars. The interaction sessions were carried out at school. This implied finding a common time slot at both ends to be able to organise and carry out the weekly tasks, which proved to be quite challenging. The project was not viewed as an add-on activity, but as the main core of the curriculum.

Two teachers of German, one from a pre-vocational school in the Netherlands and the other one from a mainstream secondary school in northern France, offered their learners the possibility to experience TC in the 3D virtual world as a motivating way to work on their intercultural and communicative competences in German. Two full classes participated, in which 21 Dutch and 20 French learners all between 14 and 16 years of age and with an A2 proficiency level in German were paired up in international dyads (Figure 1). In the classroom, the teachers prepared the learners for the TC tasks, using pre-task activities: facilitating (new) vocabulary, practising communicative functions relevant for the tasks, and discussing communication and social strategies, etc. Then the learners carried out the TC tasks in international dyads. Finally, at the post-task phase learners and teachers reflected upon and evaluated the exchanges: what they had learned, the difficulties they had faced, etc.

Figure 1. International dyads



According to the carousel model we designed for the exchanges, seven international dyads met up in a given spot of the virtual Saarburg to carry out the task in time slots of 30 minutes (Figure 2). This model made it possible for all learners to participate every week during classroom hours (Dutch learners) or lunch break (French learners).

Figure 2. Seven meeting spots



In this first phase, learners carried out different TC tasks²: *Blind date*, *Frühstück*, and *Weihnachten in Frankreich und Niederlanden*. This first phase turned out to be quite challenging. Accordingly, the carousel model was adapted to make it more flexible: only seven dyads would participate per week for 45 minutes. The participating dyads would alternate per week. In this second phase, three additional tasks were carried out: *Gesund Leben*, *Meine Schule*, and *Carnival*.

3. Learners' experiences

Learners from the three exchanges were interviewed in their mother tongue at the end of the project. Overall, all the interviewed learners liked the TC exchanges, irrespective of their complexity. What learners liked most about the project was the possibility to meet with peers from a different country on a weekly basis and learn about their lives and culture. They also enjoyed the innovative character of the project: “to do other things than the typical classroom activities”. The students valued the intercultural dimension of the experience: “I learnt about English, about their cultures and their city, London”. Enjoyment was identified in the student interviews as a recurrent topic: “I loved the experience; it is very fun”. Some students also referred to the positive effect that the experience had in their confidence: “Boosting your confidence speaking in Spanish”. Learners reported to have learned about the other culture, to communicate in the target language, and to collaborate in teams. They would recommend the experience because “it is fun, interactive and they can learn lots of Spanish”. They would like to continue with these projects as they get the chance to meet other people and learn about their lives.

Although learners in the three cases were enthusiastic about their experiences, learners faced some challenges in the first and third cases. In the first TC pilot, the younger Spanish learners were more positive than their Dutch peers. The Spanish learners valued the project with a mean value of 8.2 versus 6.8 of the Dutch peers. The Dutch learners were concerned about the lack of clarity about what they had to do, lack of time to carry out the activities, and the lack of feedback from their teacher. This made them uncertain. The teacher had organised the exchanges as an add-on activity and provided little or no coaching to learners. This clearly influenced their general evaluation of the project.

Regarding the third pilot in the virtual world, most of the learners liked being an avatar. But some found it scary (“freaky”) and would have preferred to see their

2. Visit our TeCoLa Open Educational Resources Pool to access the tasks: <https://sites.google.com/site/tecolaprojectoer/tasks?authuser=0>

peer when carrying out the tasks. The technology did not always function properly, which was annoying for them. For the French learners, the time schedule was not satisfactory: they had to use their lunchtime break to carry out the TC tasks and in the long run they found it unpleasant.

4. Conclusions

One of the main conclusions of this paper advocates for the integration of TC exchanges in the languages curriculum irrespective of the IT situation of the school. TC does not seem to be more successful when complex technology, like 3D virtual worlds, is used. The lesson learned in these three exchanges suggests that learners appreciate more the possibility to engage and collaborate with peers abroad and carry out motivating tasks together than the sophistication of the tool being used for the exchanges.

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