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*The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution*

## **Integrating cross-cultural interaction through video-communication and virtual worlds in foreign language teaching programs: burden or added value?**

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### **Abstract**

Organizing and implementing telecollaboration projects in foreign language curricula is not an easy endeavour (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Guth & Helm, 2010), as pedagogical, organizational and technical issues have to be addressed before cross-cultural interaction sessions can be carried out (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). These issues make many teaching practitioners reluctant to try to integrate telecollaboration in their teaching, as they are more aware of the burden such initiatives might impose than of the benefits they might have for language learners.

Within the European NIFLAR project we attempted to address the question under which circumstances and for what purposes integrating synchronous collaboration projects through video-communication or Second Life in language teaching might have an added value in language learning, taking organizational and technical issues into account. In order to answer this question different sources of data were gathered and analysed: questionnaires and interviews, oral pre- and post-tests and recordings of interaction sessions. Results show that telecollaboration experiences have an added value on cultural, linguistic, interpersonal and motivational issues.

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*Keywords:* NIFLAR, video-communication, virtual worlds, second life.

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### **1. Introduction**

The NIFLAR project<sup>1</sup> (Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research) was a two year project (2009-2011), that received a grant from the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme, aimed at enriching and innovating foreign language teaching and learning processes, by creating opportunities for enhancing authentic social interaction between students of foreign languages and native student teachers. Interaction tasks were developed for the project languages (Dutch, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish) with a focus on intercultural awareness.

The interactions took place in two digital environments: video-communication and voice-enabled 3D virtual worlds. The first one facilitates distant spoken and written interaction among dyads or groups of students. They work collaboratively, by sharing files (photos, presentations, films) while seeing each other. The interaction sessions were conducted in *Adobe-Connect*, which allowed for internal recording of the sessions for further analysis.

In the second environment, voiced-enabled 3D virtual worlds, students participate as avatars (participants cannot see the real "you"), can engage in textual and voiced interactions with other avatars

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<sup>1</sup> Links to the project sites: [www.niflar.eu](http://www.niflar.eu); [niflar.ning.com](http://niflar.ning.com)

and can undertake all kinds of actions (walk, sit down, dance, take and give objects, even build...), they can be teleported to different places, countries, cities or public and private spaces (a house, shops, restaurants, hospitals, hotels, courtroom, parliament, theatre, museum), just by a simple mouse click. These different scenarios and the possibilities of undertaking action while communicating with others, make 3D virtual worlds a potentially interesting environment for education in general, and foreign language teaching, in particular. Within NIFLAR experiences were conducted in *Second Life* (tertiary education) and *Open Sim* (teenagers).

Within the project different target groups, (pre-service native teachers and foreign language learners at tertiary and secondary educational levels) have been interacting with each other through these synchronous tools.

## 2. NIFLAR experiences

During the project 22 pilot experiences were carried out in both virtual environments, 60 interaction tasks for Dutch, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish were developed and tested and 430 participants carried out interaction sessions in dyads or triads, and data was gathered for research purposes.

## 3. Organising networked projects

In the NIFLAR project the main focus lay on investigating in which pedagogically sound ways synchronous oral interactions through videocommunication and/or virtual worlds can be integrated in our educational system at secondary and tertiary levels. The affordances such environments may offer to enrich and dynamise learning processes in combination with appropriate pedagogical approaches were taken as a starting point. On the other hand, specific organizational and technical challenges for *synchronous* telecollaboration were taken into account

Organising telecollaboration projects can be very complicated as O’Dowd & Ritter (2006) have shown. Problems can arise at individual, classroom and/or socioinstitutional levels (see Fig. 1).

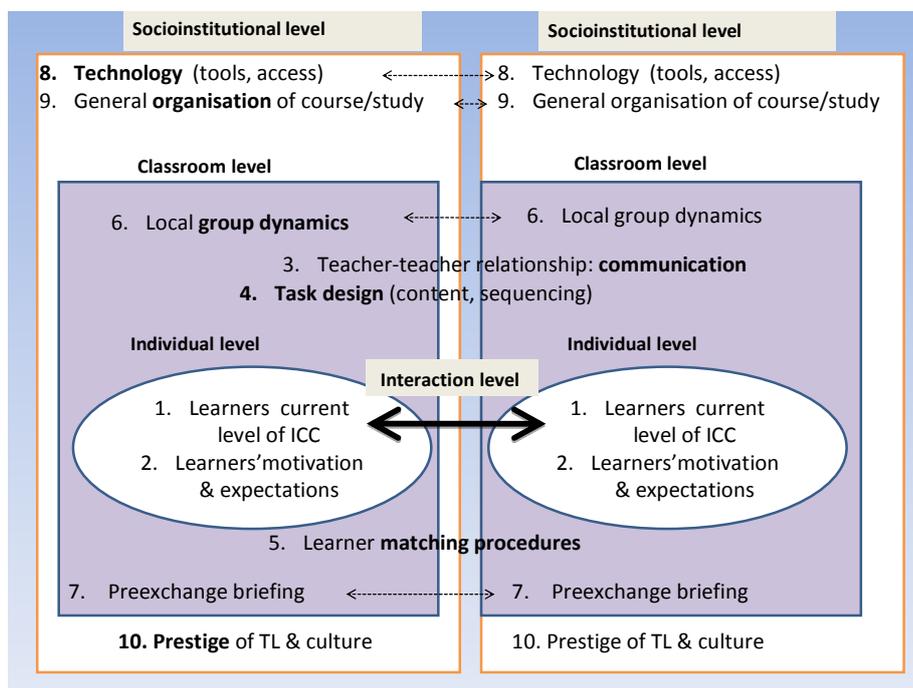


Fig. 1. Difficulties when trying to organise telecollaborative projects, based on O’Dowd & Ritter (2006).

This organizational burden increases when *synchronous* tools are being used in telecollaboration projects.

## 4. Research questions addressed in NIFLAR

The main research question directly relates to the previous point; that is, taking into account the organizational burden that organizing and carrying out synchronous telecollaboration projects demand,

we need to know whether there is an added value to it. In this context, the potential added value of telecollaboration practices within NIFLAR has been addressed through four research questions:

1. What are foreign language learners' experiences?
2. Is there any impact on motivation?
3. Is there any indication suggesting that learners learn more if they have the opportunity to engage in networked interaction with experts according to relevant tasks?
4. What happens during those cross-cultural interactions?

## 5. Methodology

Four sources of data have been gathered for analysis: pre-, mid- and post-surveys, interviews, pre & post oral tests and recorded interactions, among students, (pre-service) teachers and ICT administrators.

## 6. Results

The results with respect to the added value of implementing synchronous networked interaction with native speakers are presented here.

### 6.1 Language learners' experiences

The experiences were very positively evaluated, tasks were felt to be motivating and useful, interactions with pre-service native teachers highly contributing to enhance learning processes and motivation, and the environments, in spite of technical problems, described as being effective in enabling distant native non-native speaker interaction.

### 6.2 Impact on motivation

The networked sessions were found to have a positive impact on motivation, particularly on foreign language learners' willingness to communicate, as measured by repeated mid questionnaires (Jauregi et al, in press). Comparisons between experimental (Second Life and video-communication) and control groups (students taking regular language courses) showed significant differences for perceived competence in the target language (Figure 2), positive attitudes towards talking to native speakers, and decrease of speaking anxiety.

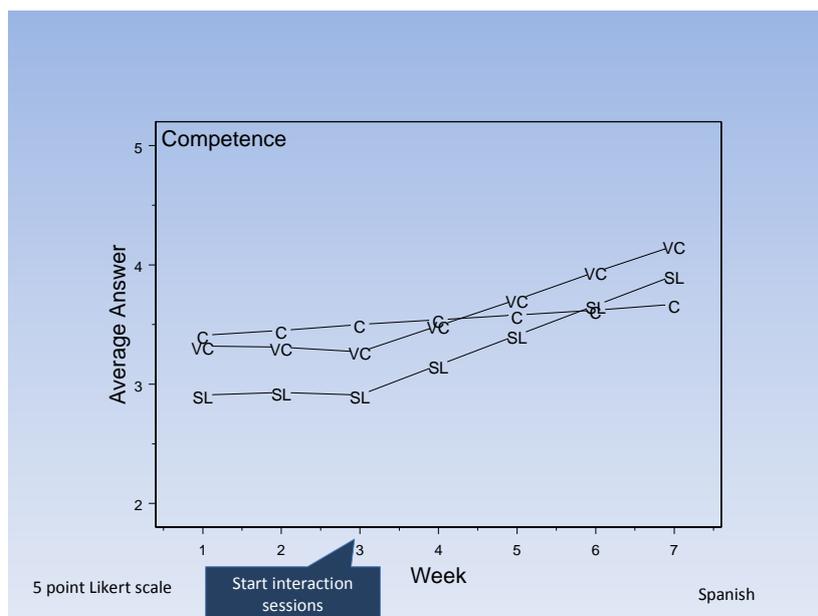


Fig 2. Values for perceived competence according of three research condition groups: VC: Video-communication group (N=13), SL: Second Life group (N=14), C: Control group (N=14).

### 6.3 Indicators of learning growth

The difference in pre- and post-oral tests taken by students in three research conditions (control group, experimental group video-communication and experimental group Second Life) showed a significant interaction effect between groups on pre- and post- oral proficiency tests, experimental groups outperforming the control group.

### 6.4 Cross-cultural interactions

Analysis of the interaction sessions showed that varied meaningful sequences arise. Participants spontaneously exchange social and cultural meaning. There are frequent instances of negotiation of meaning, both linguistic and cultural, as participants collaborate with each other reflecting upon and clarifying concepts, customs, styles or behaviors resorting to their personal knowledge and experiences.

The two environments elicited different types of interaction patterns. Sequences in video-communication are more static, visual cues (facial expressions, body language, laughter) play a crucial role in the exchanges intensifying and clarifying meaning and contribute to enhance interpersonal relationships. Sequences in virtual worlds, on the other hand, are dynamic and action-related. Unpredicted context-specific sequences emerge, as avatars change their appearance or unexpected things happen, which occasionally elicit hilarious communication exchanges (Jauregi et al., 2011). There were many instances of laughter, with participants sharing empathy and working towards creating symmetrical relations during the interaction exchanges trying to strengthening interpersonal relationships and solidarity.

## 7. Conclusions

The added value of networked interactions points towards cultural, linguistic, interpersonal and motivational benefits. Within NIFLAR telecollaboration, in spite of the organizational burdens, was experienced as challenging, motivating and innovative. The synchronous learning environments used in conjunction with effective interaction tasks and the opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction with expert peers (native student teachers) contributed to empower intercultural learning experiences.

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