

18 Telecollaboration in secondary EFL: a blended teacher education course

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Abstract

Telecollaborative research often focuses on intercultural objectives rather than language learning, and highlights limitations due to technical difficulties and poor task design. This study redresses the balance by focusing on language and learner interaction in an exchange involving the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners of 35 secondary school student-teachers in two European countries. The teachers were enrolled in courses on technology for language education, and collaborated in a virtual environment to devise interactive tasks for their learners. Analyses of student-teacher course contributions, the teaching/learning materials they designed, and their reflections on this work shed light on the affordances of telecollaboration from a task-based language teaching perspective.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, teacher education, interaction, telecollaboration.

1. Introduction

O'Dowd (2016) identifies two purposes for telecollaborative exchange: “‘authentic’ interaction with native speakers or with learners from other countries”

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and “first-hand experience of ‘real’ intercultural communication” (p. 275). Much work (Guth & Helm, 2010; Kramsch, 2014) has focused on the second goal, while projects focusing on the first highlight difficulties due to technical constraints and task design (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Hanna & de Nooy, 2009; O’Dowd & Ware, 2009). However, telecollaboration offers unique opportunities for purposeful interaction in a communicative context with interlocutors outside the classroom as recommended by second language research (De Bot, 2007). It thus merits further attention.

The present study involved secondary school EFL classes taught by 35 student-teachers in France and the Netherlands. The teachers were enrolled in courses on technology for language education in their respective institutions, and collaborated in a virtual environment to devise learning tasks involving interaction between their learners.

2. Methodology

2.1. Teacher education course

Masters in Teaching English students at two universities took a blended course in their second (final) year of graduate studies (eight hours in the Netherlands, 12 in France). The Dutch teachers taught some 20h/week, while the French trainees had a 9h/week placement plus academic and pedagogical training. After an online kick-off meeting, participants completed introductory tasks, then formed nine cross-cultural teams of three to five teachers. The six to eight week course included weekly face-to-face meetings plus group work using Google applications; teams’ results and reflections were shared in a final joint session.

2.2. Participants

A pre-course questionnaire on background profiles and attitudes to language learning/teaching and technology use yielded the information in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Background data on FR and NL teachers

		FRENCH % (N=20)³	DUTCH % (N=13)
L1	national language	85	69
	English	10	23
AGE	27 or under	50	38
	over 37	15	38
TRAINING	EFL	3	77
	English studies	65	0
EXPERIENCE	under 5 years	85	54
	over 10 years	5	31

The French participants thus formed a younger, more homogeneous group, with less specialised training and experience than the Dutch. Attitudes to foreign language teaching and learning were tested on nine questionnaire items from [Lightbown and Spada \(2000\)](#), using a 5-point Likert scale where scores over three reflect conservative/misguided beliefs. The French group displayed slightly more conservative attitudes than the Dutch (3.18/2.89). Scores on a further 14 items concerning self-efficacy perceptions with respect to technology use also revealed a slight advantage to the Dutch (3.92/4.15, scores > 3 reflect greater confidence).

2.3. Teaching/learning activities

[Table 2](#) gives details of the activities designed by each team. The majority used e-mail communication, and met only some of [Erlam's \(2015\)](#) four task criteria in terms of (1) focusing on meaning rather than linguistic form, (2) closing some kind of gap in understanding or knowledge across learners, (3) requiring learners to use their own linguistic resources rather than pre-taught structures or expressions, and (4) leading to an outcome other than language use. Successful accomplishment of task criteria is indicated in boldface in [Table 2](#).

3. In the interests of focus and space, only the most important figures are reported (so percentage totals do not always equal 100).

Table 2. Teaching/learning tasks by team

Team	Learner activities	Task criteria			
		1. Meaning focus	2. Gap	3. Own resources	4. Outcome
1	group e-mail exchange (Skype)	No	Information exchange	Pre-task	final message, presentations
2	e-mail exchange in self-selected pairs (video selfies)	Yes	Information exchange	Pre-task	e-mail summary
3	exchange video presentation in groups to devise quizzes (learner videos)	Yes	Reasoning gap	Pre-task	class quiz
4	e-mail exchange for hotel reservations (tourism vocational education) (YouTube)	Yes	Information exchange	Pre-task	e-mail confirmation
5	group e-mail exchange (separate final quiz/ video presentations) (learner video)	Yes	Information exchange	Pre-task	e-mail feedback, learner presentations
6	e-mail in pairs to plan weekend in partner country	Yes	Information exchange	Yes	written reports
7	e-mails in groups for writing skills (digital poster, slides)	Yes	Information exchange	Pre-task	learner presentations
8	common production in groups (Padlet)	Yes	Reasoning gap	Pre-task	A4 poster presentation
9	collaborative short story in groups (Google Docs, Padlet, website)	Yes	Reasoning gap	Yes	class discussion

Teachers had most difficulty meeting the third criterion, with many pre-teaching the required material instead of encouraging learners to rely on their own resources, and the fourth, with most teams failing to plan a collaborative outcome beyond language use. Interestingly, the most successful teams were among either the most motivated (Team 3) or least engaged participants (Teams 8 and 9) at the start of the project.

3. Participant reflection

Teachers' reflections on their telecollaborative experience, derived from a summary of French class discussion with reactions from the Dutch group, are shown in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Themes in teacher reflection

	FRENCH	DUTCH
learner perspectives	pupils enjoyed exchange	same opinion
	parents/schools also supportive	same opinion
social relations	greater learner freedom in project activities allowed more personalised teacher-learner relations	same opinion
intercultural concerns	some reticence about non-target cultural exchange	no such reticence
	pupil insights about own culture and similarities with Dutch	greater experience with English as Lingua Franca (ELF) exchanges
classroom management and discipline	concerns about lack of motivation and/or inappropriate behaviour	novice teachers agreed
	difficulties concerning grading (usual incentive)	others underlined difficulty of implementing task-based language teaching without good class management
using versus learning English	difficulties deciding when to correct learners	focus on meaning rather than accuracy
	limited exploitation of learner productions	desire for outcome (joint production)
	satisfied with process rather than product	
technical issues	minor difficulties	avoidance of interactive tasks due to lack of internet access and privacy issues
	choice of familiar tools	
	anticipation of problems	
transitions from digital to face-to-face environments	teachers spent time reformatting/printing online work for classroom exploitation	no reformatting
	some found Padlet collaborations 'messy'	untidiness viewed as part of learning process

teacher collaboration	difficulty of scheduling and updating planned activities	success attributed to similarities in goals and attitudes (e.g. creating fun activities)
	some misunderstandings only apparent once activities were underway	less successful teams were imbalanced, with one side more committed
innovation and project-based learning	not always easy to fit telecollaborative tasks into ongoing teaching units	greater interest/experience/incentive for innovation and project-based learning
	not immediate professional priority	would have preferred more flexibility regarding timing

In sum, for the more successful teams whose classroom projects met more task criteria and who reported greater satisfaction with the telecollaborative experience, pupils were enthusiastic and sought to extend contact via additional tasks or independent means. Technical problems were minor, perhaps because teachers deliberately limited risks. While some French teachers expressed concerns about language accuracy and reported difficulty fitting project activities into ongoing teaching units, the Dutch teachers focused more on communication and did not see errors as problematic. Some French teachers felt it was not intrinsically useful to focus on Dutch/French culture, though the Dutch, with greater ELF experience, disagreed. Teacher perceptions seemed to reflect the perceived success of class exchanges. Those involved in less successful telecollaborations cited difficulties in coordination; some felt that projects of this type did not reflect their priorities for professional development. Those teachers who ‘clicked’, or worked together well, cited factors such as good communication, effective feedback, common aims and an open attitude.

4. Conclusion

The study revealed wide variation across participants, consistent with their different training, experience, and beliefs. The value of (inter)cultural exchange seemed to be different for English studies versus EFL graduates, and learning tasks were also evaluated differently by novice and experienced teachers. Some of the cross-group differences may stem from institutional factors: Dutch

universities combine in-service and pre-service teacher education, and teachers are offered incentives for project-based learning and innovation. In France, the integration of university and school-based components of teacher education is more recent and there is less practical support for task-based language teaching or innovation in general. The project goals were partially met in the sense that teachers did focus on language use, although their tasks generally offered limited opportunities for interaction. To technical difficulties and task design problems, which were already identified in the introduction as challenges for telecollaboration, we can add teacher beliefs and the wide variation therein which this study has revealed. For some teachers, the project raised questions about the role of telecollaboration in formal teacher education programmes and how much can realistically be achieved in pre-service versus in-service training. For others, the experience was the occasion for rich, nuanced reflection on telecollaboration as an irreplaceable component of technology integration training.

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New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education
Edited by Sake Jager, Malgorzata Kurek, and Breffni O'Rourke

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