

21 Teacher competences for telecollaboration: the role of coaching

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of coaching in enhancing teachers' key competences for integrating Telecollaboration (TC) in their language course. A total of 23 secondary school teachers participated in this case study as part of the EU-funded project TILA. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered via two surveys, the first one measuring coaching satisfaction and a second one tackling teacher competences. The results show that teachers highly value coaching to integrate complex pedagogical innovations in their teaching. Participants reported that coaching contributed to an improvement of key competences necessary to implement TC exchanges successfully.

Keywords: telecollaboration, teacher competences, coaching.

1. Introduction

The use of TC for language learning has increased considerably in recent years, however, it is still seen as an add-on activity (O'Dowd, 2011, p. 8). Teachers must be equipped with specific competences required for TC, which O'Dowd (2015) divides in organisational, pedagogical and digital competences and attitudes and beliefs. This contribution explores the use of 'coaching' to help

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teachers develop some of these key competences, which may ultimately lead to a sustained use of TC practices.

Coaching in education is a relatively new field of research (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p. 7). It has been defined as “focused professional dialogue designed to aid the coachee in developing specific professional skills to enhance their teaching repertoire. [...] For teachers, it often supports experimentation with new classroom strategies” (Lofthouse, Leat, & Towler, 2010, p. 8). The value of coaching has been highlighted by recent research, which indicates that, when training is complemented with coaching, teachers are significantly more likely to adopt and maintain the skills developed and have greater self-efficacy beliefs regarding the new practices (Driscoll, Wang, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2011; Forman, Olin, Hoagwood, Crowe, & Saka, 2009; Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009; Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012). Conversely, when training is provided in isolation, teachers tend to abandon the practices learnt (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Noell et al., 2005).

Coaching strategies focus on discussing with the coachee specific difficulties that may arise in teaching, planning and evaluating teaching activities jointly and reflecting on teaching practices in a critical but constructive way (McGrane & Lofthouse, 2010, p. 188). Taking these coaching principles as starting points, a number of secondary school language teachers were trained and intensively coached in the process of preparing, carrying out and evaluating TC exchanges in their language course.

2. Methodology

The participants of the study are 23 secondary school teachers who were involved in the TILA project (six French teachers, three Dutch, seven Spanish, three English and four German). All of them completed training on TC and were assigned to a coach that guided them in the design and implementation of TC activities in the classroom. An estimated 550 hours of coaching were provided in the form of weekly or biweekly remote meetings among the coach and the

two collaborating teachers. Pedagogical and technical guidance was provided before, during and after TC sessions in terms of:

- goal-setting: including agreement on the number of TC sessions to be completed throughout the term, scheduling tasks and choosing topics among other aspects;
- session planning: consisting of designing task sequences, devising supporting materials like worksheets, discussing pedagogical and technical considerations, namely student pairings or material upload, identifying potential challenges and solutions;
- in-session coaching and support: involving provision of remote troubleshooting during TC sessions, such as problems with log-in or *ad hoc* adjustments like regrouping students due to absences;
- post-session reviewing: taking place after each task sequence. Both the coach and coachees could view the actual student interactions, which were automatically recorded. This was a useful basis for discussions on what worked and what could be improved, and perceived degrees of success.

Two surveys were designed to evaluate the coaching experience and gather information about the teacher competences developed through the coaching. The latter is based on O'Dowd's (2015) model of TC teacher competences. Both surveys were available in the teachers' languages and disseminated via SurveyMonkey. The surveys included closed items with 5-point Likert scales (1: lowest score; 5: maximum score) and open questions. Frequencies were calculated and answers to open-ended questions and comments were grouped according to topics.

3. Results

Most respondents valued highly the guidance offered for task design (five points: 70% of the participants), the support to solve technical problems

(five points: 57%; four points: 26%). Positive feedback was also obtained in terms of the help provided to learn to use new platforms and with organisational issues, with a majority of five and four scores in both cases. Most teachers indicated that they feel prepared to integrate TC in their courses (five points: 30%; four points: 39%). The satisfaction with the coaching provided is extremely high, with 78% of the participants rating it with five points out of five; most participants state that coaching responded to their needs (five points: 35%; four points: 22%) (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Coaching survey results

Item	Mean	StandardDeviation
Help setting up partnerships	4.5	0.8
Help with task design	4.5	1
Help with technical problems	4.3	1
Help with platforms	4.3	1
Help with organisational aspects	4.4	0.8
Confidence for TC	3.9	1
Satisfaction with coaching	4.7	0.8
Coaching responded to needs	3.9	1

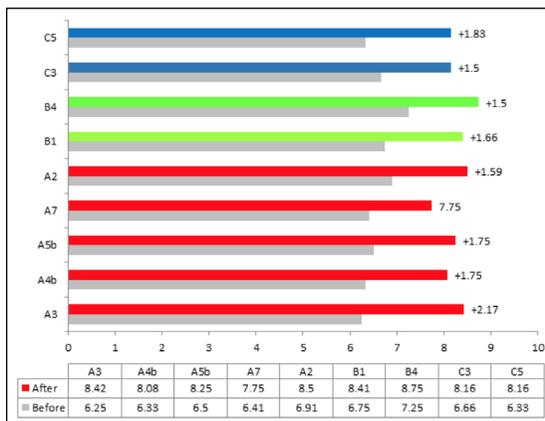
The quantitative data detailed above are accompanied by open-ended comments. Participants value greatly the support provided by coaches in terms of the encouragement and ideas offered. Practical aspects such as the coach’s role in keeping both parties to agreed deadlines were also mentioned. The coaches’ availability and the timeliness of their responses feature highly in the comments gathered. In terms of task design, teachers highlight the importance of their coaches’ input in creating and organising realistic tasks. Finally, the coach is also a valued guide when it comes to solving technical difficulties, something which is mentioned repeatedly.

With respect to teacher competences, the participants’ perceived telecollaborative competence increased after the TC experience across all items, particularly digital competence. Teachers also expressed considerable progress in organisational aspects and, to a lesser extent, pedagogical competences and attitudes and beliefs.

An item-specific analysis (see Figure 1) reveals that the most noticeable changes in teachers' perceived ability are in items related to the following³:

- implementing an exchange successfully [organising synchronous interactions (C5, +1.83); designing an exchange effectively (A3, +2.17); adjusting to changing conditions (A7, +1.34)];
- communicating with partner-teachers [plans and expectations (A2, +1.59); negotiating the specific aspects of an exchange for both institutional contexts (A4b, +1.75)];
- task design and task selection [identifying tasks that meet the curriculum's objectives (B1, +1.66); designing attractive tasks that lead to rich interaction (B4, +1.5)];
- working with students [creating effective partnerships (A5b, +1.75); explaining to students how to use tools (C3, +1.5)].

Figure 1. Items showing the most noticeable perceived improvement



3. The descriptor codes used in O'Dowd's (2015) model of competences have been included here. A2 to A7 refer to organisational competences, B1-B4 to pedagogical, C3 and C5 to digital and D3 to attitudes and beliefs.

Minor perceived improvements were reported in items relating to their ability to support students (B9), matching students (A5a), integrating TC topics into regular classes (B8) and willingness to reach a compromise in how the TC is designed (D3) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Least noticeable perceived improvement



When asked about the role played by their coach in the development of their TC competences, the participants highlighted the assistance provided in organisational issues and task design. In general, teachers seemed to highly value the support provided.

4. Conclusions

These results show that coaching has an exceptional value when it comes to implementing TC in the language classroom and supporting teachers. According to the teachers’ perceptions, coaching contributed to develop TC skills: teachers learned to (1) design an exchange effectively, adjust to changing conditions and difficulties, communicate with partner-teachers their plans and expectations and negotiate the specific aspects of an exchange, bearing in mind both institutional contexts; (2) design and select rich and attractive tasks that fit into the curriculum’s objectives and that lead to rich interaction, and (3) work with the students to create effective partnerships and explaining how to use a given tool.

No studies have addressed, to our knowledge, the role that coaching plays in developing pedagogical, organisational and digital competences for TC. It is hoped that the conclusions obtained in this first attempt to do so will help to pave the way for future contributions in this thriving field of research.

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