



# Best practice

## Telecollaboration for Intercultural Communication



Lifelong  
Learning  
Programme

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## Telecollaboration for Intercultural Communication

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## Pedagogical affordances and challenges of telecollaboration

Telecollaboration is the oral or written online communication and interaction between internationally-dispersed learners. It offers opportunities for **authentic communication** in a foreign language and **contact with peers from different countries and cultures** to support social interaction and intercultural exchange.

### Synchronous and asynchronous telecollaboration

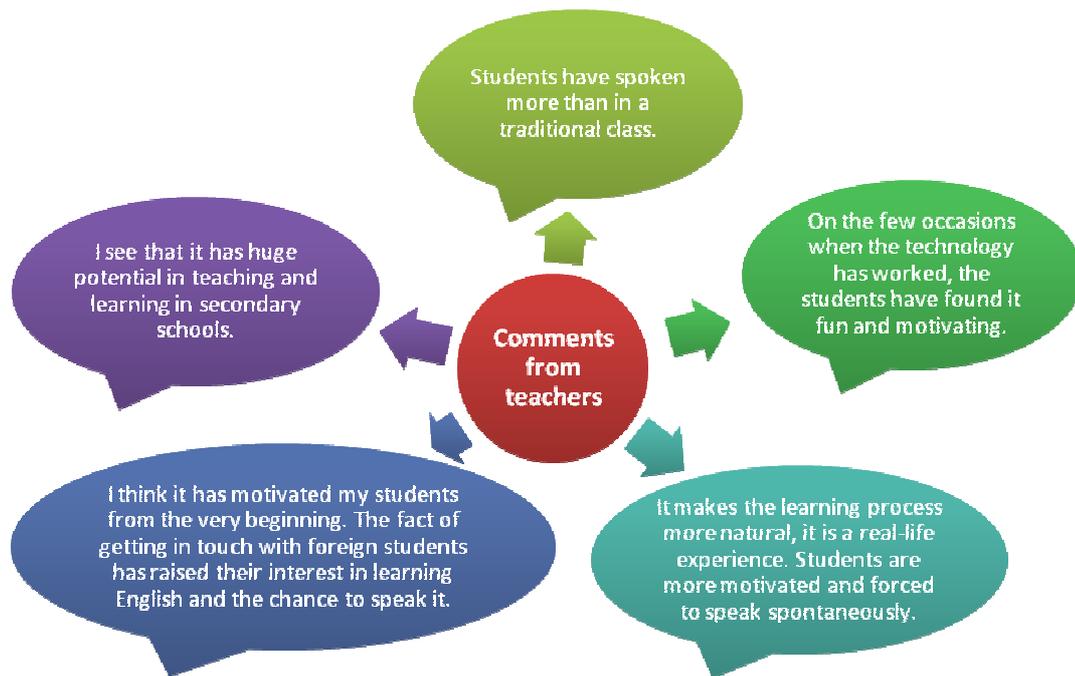
Focus in the first TILA piloting phase was on *synchronous oral communication* in the videoconferencing environment BigBlueButton and virtual world OpenSim. Teachers and students were very enthusiastic about trying to communicate with these tools, but unfortunately during the piloting phase their enthusiasm was tempered by a number of problems.

First there was the challenge to find a partner class with a matching time table, age, and proficiency level. In many cases additional school internal rearrangements were necessary to ensure that the computer lab was available at the required time slot. The main challenge, however, was a technical one. Despite the support of school internal IT support and previous successful technology and sound checks, the sound quality in most of the sessions was at least very shaky or connections broke down completely.

Synchronous oral telecollaboration	
<b>Affordances:</b>	
	Natural, spontaneous oral communication
	Practice language skills in a natural way through interaction with peers from another country
	Very motivating environments
<b>Challenges:</b>	
	Time table coordination: same-time participation → conflicting schedules
	Availability of computer lab at the required time slot
	Unstable connections and sound or video problems (due to lack of required bandwidth and hardware)
	Limitation regarding number of participating students

Despite considerable technical problems, students' reactions were surprisingly positive and teachers saw the potential of these fascinating communication environments (see comments from teachers below). In the long run, however, you can only use this technology if it works in your school and in the partner school you are collaborating with. In the next pilot phase, we TILA team will therefore continue to investigate the technical problems and look for solutions.

Comments from teachers who used with synchronous oral/video communication environments:



Tools for asynchronous written communication like forums, blogs or wikis offer a more reliable alternative to synchronous communication. In addition, asynchronous telecollaboration does not require matching time tables as the interaction does not take place at the same time.

Asynchronous written telecollaboration	
<b>Affordances of asynchronous telecollaboration with forums, blogs, or wikis</b>	
✚	Opportunities for motivating tasks for written communication and collaboration including pictures and embedding or links to audio and video recordings
✚	Results accessible to all participating students (students write for themselves and for each other and not for the teacher)
<b>Challenges and solutions:</b>	
✚	Sometimes difficult to ensure coherent interaction and negotiation → instruct students how to react to each other's posts
✚	Time delays → make sure that the time between posts and reactions to posts is short

### Technological operability

It is of utmost importance that the telecollaborative environment and media used in the tasks are sufficiently reliable, accessible, feasible, and familiar; this needs to be carefully checked – continuously.

*Reliability* concerns whether the telecollaborative tools can be used without break/slow-downs; this will be influenced by group size. Synchronous oral/video communication environments need a strong internet connection. If several students are online at the same time, sound quality may be seriously reduced.

*Accessibility* concerns issues like whether the PC lab is available or how long it takes to move your class to the PC lab and back; or whether your pupils can use computers outside class hours, e.g. during free periods in school, or at home; or more generally, whether your students can actually use the technology the way you want them to use it, e.g. using audio/video in a PC lab might cause the different groups to disturb each other.

*Feasibility* can be seen as the balance between cost and benefit. This might concern whether the effort required for successfully completing a certain telecollaborative tasks yields sufficiently rich pedagogical gains. In this connection, the “first time” effect should be noted: more often than not, low initial feasibility improves with exposure and practice.

*Familiarity* (or lack of it) can be exploited pedagogically: e.g. more experienced students can be involved to help less experienced students (or teachers); part of the activities in the preparatory phase can be used to build up a sufficient balance of familiarity.

- ✚ Check which technology is available at and works well at your school.
- ✚ Check when the computer lab or laptops are available.
- ✚ Check whether your school internet connection is strong enough for synchronous oral/video communication.

## Pedagogic principles & approach

### Primacy of pedagogy over technology

In all TILA task development it is essential to put pedagogical considerations first. This concerns learning objectives and approach as well as pedagogical preferences.

### Intercultural communication first



Telecollaboration can concern many learning and language learning objectives. In TILA, key focus is on COMMUNICATION, i.e. more specifically on communicative interaction between students from different (European) countries and cultures, including both spoken and written communication.

### Blended learning

TILA tasks have a focus on communicative intercultural telecollaboration and language acquisition in the 3D virtual world of OpenSim or the web-based videoconferencing platform BigBlueButton and by forum, wiki, or blog tools. These web2-based environments and tools are ideally suited to support intercultural encounters through synchronous and asynchronous spoken and written communicative interaction.

However, even the best and most suitable technological solutions for language learning can only unfold their full potential when they are embedded in more comprehensive blended learning scenarios. In a nutshell, blended learning is about pedagogically harnessing different modes of learning and teaching – from classroom to homework to telecollaboration – in such a way that their respective strengths can be exploited without the handicap of their weaknesses. TILA tasks should thus be seen and designed as blended learning ensembles involving combinations of environments

and technological media from face-to-face in class to independent work at home to synchronous and asynchronous interaction in the web.



Implementation and pedagogical organization of blended learning activities across different environments and modes of learning and teaching is quite a challenge, in particular when interactions between groups of learners from different countries and cultures are involved. To facilitate the organization of blended learning activities, the TILA telecollaboration environment includes an installation of the e-learning platform Moodle with tools for course administration, written communication between teachers and students, management of resources, as well as learning and assessment.

- ✚ Primacy of pedagogy over technology: Always start from pedagogical considerations – what are your learning objectives and how do you want to achieve them
- ✚ Focus on intercultural communication, i.e. on the potential of communicative interaction between students from different countries and cultures
- ✚ Take a blended learning approach: Combine traditional face-to-face classroom activities, with synchronous or asynchronous interaction in the web (as homework or in computer lab).

### Language constellation

There are different possible language constellations a tandem and a lingua franca constellation.

“Tandem” refers to pairings of school classes in which each of two classes has the native language of the other as target language, e.g. a French class with target language German and a German class with target language French.

“Lingua franca” refers to pairings of school classes in which two classes with different native languages share the same target language, e.g. a Spanish and a Dutch class with French as target language. In this case, all pupils will communicate in French, i.e. they share the same non-native language (= French) as a lingua franca.

The choice of the language constellation will influence your partner search and task development.

### Teacher roles and tasks



One of your main tasks as a teacher will be develop a telecollaboration activity in cooperation with a colleague and to prepare your students for the telecollaboration task. The preparation includes

- the introduction into the topic
- selection or development of tasks that make students familiar with the relevant means of expression
- fostering openness and empathy

- making students familiar with the tools
- explain the telecollaboration task and the expected outcome of the telecollaboration

During the telecollaboration your role will mainly be to

- help students with technical problems
- provide linguistic help if necessary
- take care that the students focus on the task

## Task design

In keeping with the blended learning approach and also in order to ensure pedagogical integration into the overall curriculum, it seems highly advisable to design TILA tasks not as isolated units but rather as more complex sequences of (sub)tasks. In a general way, these subtasks can be characterized with regard to (a) thematic content, (b) learning objectives, (c) pedagogical environments and technological media, and (d) type of social interaction.

Regarding the organization of TILA task sequences, it might be helpful to distinguish between three phases: 'preparatory', 'main', and 'post'.

### Preparatory phase

The **Preparatory Phase** typically involves subtasks that help prepare the ground for the main telecollaborative task. This may concern e.g.

- getting to know each other and creating first connections between the two country/culture groups using asynchronous tools such as email and/or the Moodle forum;
- knowledge development within each country/culture group > classroom, homework; web quests, forum, wiki, blog
- mock interactions within each country/culture group in preparation of intercultural interactions
- exploratory discussions within each country/culture group > classroom, forum, BBB/OpenSim
- practising interaction modes that will be relevant in telecollaboration: pair work, small groups
- getting familiar with various aspects of the technological environment and tools > Moodle, BBB/OpenSim, forum, wiki, blog

### Main phase

The **Main Phase** focuses on (intercultural) communicative interaction in synchronous and/or asynchronous environments. Synchronous subtasks in BBB and OpenSim should be carried out in small groups of up to six students (e.g. 2 or 3 from each of the two countries) to make interactions more communicative and easier to supervise. Asynchronous subtasks with forum, wiki or blog are also suitable for interaction between larger groups.

The challenge of implementing and organizing synchronous telecollaborative activities is further increased by the additional challenge of making the telecollaborative activities pedagogically

manageable within the overall class-based organization. The crucial question is what happens with the rest of my class while one or maybe two small groups are engaged in a telecollaborative task?

One option is to assign all students to small groups and have them interact simultaneously. This, however, would result in too many groups for sufficient technical and pedagogical supervision; it would most certainly also cause a network overload. A more feasible and at the same time pedagogically interesting option is to work with a realistic number of small groups and involve all the other students, who are not taking part in the synchronous telecollaboration, to pedagogically meaningful “supporting” participant roles. This might include providing input and prompts, observing and analyzing the interaction (with regard to thematic, linguistic-communicative and intercultural aspects), providing feedback in the post phase. Participant roles could/should be swapped between telecollaborative events.

### Follow-up phase

During the **Follow-up Phase**, students typically engage in activities designed to securing learning results; this might include e.g.

- reporting back to the class
- follow-up discussions (in class or in a forum)
- individual and/or collaborative report writing
- Individual and/or group reflections on tasks and results (What did I/we learn? Which linguistic and intercultural aspects did I/we notice?)

Activities in the Post Phase may happen face-to-face in class or at home, but they could also include telecollaborative activities, e.g. collaborative writing in a forum, wiki or blog.



To plan your task, use the **“Task specification template”** provided on the TILA website (→ Select the dropdown option “Task development” from the menu item “Telecollaboration tasks & tools”)

## Pedagogical implementation

For the implementation of a telecollaboration consider the following steps or phases: You have to find a partner class, establish common ground with your colleague, develop the task(s), prepare your students for the telecollaboration, support your students during the telecollaboration and finally secure the learning results after the main telecollaboration session.

### Finding a partner class

**Finding a partner**

- Use the TILA partner database to look for a potential partner
- Decide whether you would prefer a tandem or a lingua franca constellation
- If you prefer a lingua franca interaction, make sure that age and proficiency level match
- If you prefer a tandem interaction, make sure students are in the same age group
- If you want to use synchronous communication tools, you need a partner class with a matching time table or you need to be able to arrange online session outside regular class hours

The first step is to find a partner class for your telecollaboration. Use the TILA partner database to look for a partner and consider the language constellation you prefer (i.e. tandem or lingua franca), the students proficiency level and age group, and your time tables. For a lingua franca constellation, the age group as well as the proficiency level of the partner classes should be similar. In a tandem constellation students' proficiency level in the two target languages can also be different.

	Lingua franca	Tandem
Age	Same/similar age group	Same/similar age group
Proficiency level	Same/similar proficiency level	Two different target languages; also possible with different proficiency levels

If you intend to use **synchronous** telecollaboration tools, you will need a partner class with a matching time table. As this is usually very difficult, you could consider to coordinate synchronous telecollaboration session outside regular class hours as part of the students' homework. **Asynchronous** telecollaborations options offer more flexibility and do not require matching slots in your time table.

	Time
Synchronous communication	Matching time tables or sessions outside regular class hours (homework)
Asynchronous communication	Flexible with regard to time tables

## Establishing common ground

**Establishing  
common  
ground**

- Meet with your colleague (e.g. in BigBlueButton, Skype, or OpenSim) and discuss your expectations, aims, and time frames
- Compare syllabi and decide on a suitable topic that is also interesting from an intercultural perspective
- Specify the approach for your chosen language constellation
- Talk about the tools you would like to use
- In case you would like to use synchronous oral/video communication, only some of the students will be able to collaborate online - discuss possible scenarios

To ensure a successful and telecollaboration it is important that you meet with your colleague from the partner class (e.g. in BigBlueButton, Skype, or OpenSim) to discuss your expectations, aims, and time frames. It is also important to find a topic that matches with both classes' syllabi and that is interesting from an intercultural perspective.

If you are working in a tandem constellation, you have to decide whether you want to use the same topic for both target languages or whether you prefer to use a different topic for each target language.

Example for a lingua franca constellation	Class A : German students	Class B English students
Target language: Spanish	Similar proficiency level recommendable	
	Students speak/write in Spanish	Students speak/write in Spanish

Example for German-French tandem constellation using two topics	Class A : Native language: French	Class B Native language: German
Topic 1 – in German	Students speak/write in their target language (German)	Students speak/write in their native language (German)
Topic 2 – in French	Students speak/write in their native language (French)	Students speak/write in their target language (French)

Compare class schedules, including holidays and exam periods and agree on a time frame for your telecollaboration.

Discuss which telecollaboration tools you would like to use and if you want to use tools for oral communication check whether they work between your schools and whether several students can use the environment at the same time without sound problems. Make sure to use the tools that best meet your pedagogic aims and learning objectives and that are at the same time accessible and as reliable as possible.

In case you would like to use synchronous oral/video communication, only some of the students will be able to collaborate online and you will have to discuss possible scenarios to deal with this restriction:

- If you can work with a teaching assistant you can split the class, so that a few students participate in the telecollaboration while the rest of the class works a complementary task. Later the students report back to the class.
- You can use the videoconference environment BigBlueButton with the whole class, using one computer in each country and a projector to project the computer image on a projection screen; students who want to say something sit in front of the computer and to talk into a microphone
- Organise synchronous telecollaborative as part of the students' homework

## Developing tasks



- Specify linguistic, communicative and intercultural learning objectives
- Specify/develop the main task together with your colleague and decide which telecollaboration tool(s) you want to use.
- If your students are meeting the partner class for the first time, start with a kind of ice-breaker activity where they get to know each other
- Specify preparatory task(s): Each teacher has to decide how he/she wants to prepare his/her students for the telecollaboration tasks
- Specify the organisation of the telecollaborative task(s)
- Specify a follow-up activity to secure learning results (e.g. telecollaborative written task, activity in class or homework)

Specify the learning objectives and the main task together for the telecollaboration together with your colleague. Decide which telecollaboration tool(s) you want to use and prepare the materials you need (e.g. worksheets with questions and instructions for oral tasks in BigBlueButton or Open Sim; posters for the OpenSim; forum or wiki activities in Moodle; etc.).

If your students are meeting the partner class for the first time, let students introduce themselves start with a kind of ice-breaker activity.

Each teacher also has to decide how he/she wants to prepare his/her students for the telecollaboration tasks and specify preparatory activities.

You might also need a follow-up activity to secure learning results (e.g. telecollaborative written task in a forum or wiki; reporting back to class or other in class activity; writing a summary of the oral communication; writing a entry into a learning diary; etc.).

	In lingua franca and tandem constellations	Only in tandem constellation
	Students using the target language	Students using their native language
<b>Preparatory tasks</b>	Use/create preparatory activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- introducing students to the topic</li> <li>- providing students with the relevant means of expression</li> </ul> If you are dealing with a topic that is covered in your course book, use the activities that are available in your course book.	Students have to be prepared to be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to talk about the topic</li> <li>- accommodate to non-native speaker proficiency level</li> <li>- help the partner e.g. by using shadowing techniques (repeating what the partner had said or repeating it in a modified way, etc.)</li> </ul>

	Prepare students for the intercultural, collaborative experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- foster openness and empathy</li> <li>- encourage students to help each other</li> <li>- make students aware that they can learn from each other</li> </ul>	
<b>Task for main telecollaboration session</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Think of simple and straightforward tasks</li> <li>- Make tasks personal</li> <li>- Design tasks where students can talk/write about things they are familiar with, they can identify with, on which they have personal opinions, which can be discussed controversially (for higher proficiency levels)</li> <li>- Think of tasks that can make students aware of individual and cultural differences and similarities (regarding their everyday life, schools issues, attitudes and behavior, likes and dislikes, etc.)</li> </ul>	
<b>Follow-up tasks</b>	Think of tasks that help students to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflect on the intercultural exchange: become aware of similarities and differences</li> <li>- Reflect their telcollaboration experience (what they liked, what they didn't like, what they learned, etc.)</li> </ul>	Think of tasks that help students to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflect on the intercultural exchange: become aware of similarities and differences</li> <li>- Reflect their telcollaboration experience</li> <li>- Reflect their role as a native speaker interacting with non-native speakers</li> </ul>

Here are some general recommendations of how to use of the different tools for telecollaboration activities:

<b>Open Sim</b>	Make use of the environment as it is. Students can e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• do a role play in a restaurant or cafe (look at the menu and talk about what they would like to eat and what you don't like etc.)</li> <li>• explore the town together and find certain places (shops or other buildings)</li> <li>• meet in a cafe and talk about a subject they have been prepared for and discuss particular questions</li> <li>• give directions and find the way</li> </ul>
	Create and add posters with text and/or pictures to the environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place different posters in several places in a TILA OpenSim town asks students to work in pairs and go from poster to poster and complete the tasks connected with the posters (e.g. describe and/or discuss the picture; answer questions or discuss statements, etc.)</li> <li>• Alternative: Place copies of the same poster in different places in the environment; students again work in pairs but they all work with the same poster; after completing the task all students could meet in a cafe in the environment an exchange their experiences; this exchange could also be moderated by a teacher</li> </ul>
<b>BigBlueButton</b>	Students can, for instance, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• talk about questions from a worksheet or questions they have prepared themselves</li> <li>• talk about uploaded pictures or posters</li> <li>• talk about likes and dislikes</li> <li>• discuss a controversial topic</li> </ul>
<b>Forum/Blog</b>	

For more task ideas, look at the descriptions of tasks developed and tested in TILA.

## Preparing students for the telecollaboration

### Preparing students

- Prepare your students for the telecollaboration task regarding knowledge about the topic and means of expression using the developed or selected tasks and activities (see task development)
- Prepare students for the intercultural collaborative experience; foster openness and empathy to enable your students to learn from each other and help each other
- Make sure students are familiar with the telecollaboration tool
- Find out whether there are students in your class who are more familiar with the technology and who can help their classmates
- Give students precise instructions for the telecollaboration (e.g. prepare worksheets)
- If you are using BigBlueButton or OpenSim, check the technology again before your online session and agree with your colleague on a plan B in case the technology does not work

Use the developed or selected tasks and activities to prepare your students for their telecollaboration. It is important for a successful and motivating telecollaboration that students are familiar with the topic and the means of expression required to perform the task and to communicate successfully.

It is also important to prepare the students for the intercultural collaborative experience. Make students aware that they need to be open and empathetic and willing to learn from each other and to help each other.

Allow enough time to introduce the telecollaboration tools you will be using to your students. You could for instance use the tool(s) already in the preparatory phase for a preparatory task. Find out whether there are students in your class who are more familiar with the technology and who can help their classmates.

Make sure that your students know what they are supposed to do during the telecollaboration task. They need precise instructions and it is recommendable to prepare worksheets or to write down guidelines for the completion of the task and to discuss the task before the telecollaboration. Students should also be made aware of what they will have to do with the outcomes of the online sessions (e.g. report back to the rest of the group, write a summary, write about their experiences in a forum/blog post, etc.).

If you are using BigBlueButton or OpenSim, you should check the technology again before your online session. It is also advisable to have a plan B ready in case the technology does not work (e.g. use Skype instead of BigBlueButton, or work with written chat or forum; for further information consult the document “**General procedure for synchronous telecollaboration sessions**”).

## During the telecollaboration

### During the Tele-collaboration

- Support your students during the telecollaboration if they need linguistic or technical help
- If you use a tool for synchronous communication, have a plan B ready in case there are technical problems

Support your students during the telecollaboration if they need linguistic or technical help (e.g. sound problem with BigBlueButton or OpenSim). You will, however, notice that if the technology works well and if your students are well prepared, they will be able to manage the interaction alone and they won't need any help.

If you use a tool for synchronous communication, have a plan B ready (e.g. use Skype instead of BigBlueButton, or work with written chat or forum), and make sure you apply plan B as soon as you encounter technical problems and that you don't waste too much time trying to make things work.

## After the telecollaboration

### After the Tele-collaboration

- If necessary, secure learning results in a follow-up activity (in particular after a synchronous telecollaboration task)
- Students could also write a learning diary with their experiences

After the main telecollaboration phase, it is relevant to secure learning results. After an oral communication in which only some of the students were involved, students could, for instance, report back to the class or write a blog or forum post about their experience. Students could also write a learning diary and it might be helpful to give them some guiding questions for this task.

Follow-up activities can be individual or collaborative activities, and they can be performed in class or at home.

## Summing-up

### Finding a partner

- Use the TILA partner database to look for a potential partner
- Decide whether you would prefer a tandem or a lingua franca constellation
- If you prefer a lingua franca interaction, make sure that age and proficiency level match
- If you prefer a tandem interaction, make sure students are in the same age group
- If you want to use synchronous communication tools, you need a partner class with a matching time table or you need to be able to arrange online session outside regular class hours

### Establishing common ground

- Meet with your colleague (e.g. in BigBlueButton, Skype, or OpenSim) and discuss your expectations, aims, and time frames
- Compare syllabi and decide on a suitable topic that is also interesting from an intercultural perspective
- Specify the approach for your chosen language constellation
- Talk about the tools you would like to use
- In case you would like to use synchronous oral/video communication, only some of the students will be able to collaborate online - discuss possible scenarios

### Developing tasks

- Specify linguistic, communicative and intercultural learning objectives
- Specify/develop the main task together with your colleague and decide which telecollaboration tool(s) you want to use.
- Specify preparatory task(s): Each teacher has to decide how he/she wants to prepare his/her students for the telecollaboration tasks
- Specify a follow-up activity to secure learning results (e.g. telecollaborative written task, activity in class or homework)

### Preparing students

- Prepare your students for the telecollaboration task regarding knowledge about the topic and means of expression using the developed or selected tasks and activities (see task development)
- Prepare students for the intercultural collaborative experience; foster openness and empathy to enable your students to learn from each other and help each other
- Make sure students are familiar with the telecollaboration tool
- Find out whether there are students in your class who are more familiar with the technology and who can help their classmates
- Give students precise instructions for the telecollaboration (e.g. prepare worksheets)
- If you are using are using BigBlueButton or OpenSim, check the technology again before your online session and agree with your colleague on a plan B in case the technology does not work

### During the tele-collaboration

- Support your students during the telecollaboration if they need linguistic or technical help
- If you use a tool for synchronous communication, have a plan B ready in case there are technical problems

### After collaboration session

- If necessary, secure learning results in a follow-up activity (in particular after a synchronous telecollaboration task)
- Students could also write a learning diary with there experiences