

# TILA Research Results on Telecollaboration<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter 10

### ANALYSIS OF TEACHER ROLES IN TILA TELECOLLABORATION

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#### 1 SUMMARY

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##### Research objectives

- To carry out a study on teacher roles in telecollaboration with a view to providing teachers with a guide on best practices in this type of foreign language teaching based on real teacher/student practice.

##### Approach

- A taxonomy of hypothetical teacher roles will be arrived at using state-of-the-art literature on teacher roles in telecollaboration.
- Once the pilot experience is over, teachers will be given questionnaires in order to determine the actual roles that they adopted and the approximate time spent on each during the different phases of the task.
- Teachers will also be asked to give their views on their roles in the piloting process.
- The results will be compared with our initial hypotheses drawn from Hootstein (2002), O'Dowd (2013) and Dooly (2010).
- Finally, the results will be used as input to suggest improvements, modifications of teacher roles and where further training for teachers might be needed.

##### Findings

Our results mainly reveal that the teachers in the project dedicate most of their time organizing tasks, solving technical problems and monitoring students' behaviour. Nevertheless, teachers also mediate to facilitate and improve students' interaction by resolving linguistic, interpersonal and intercultural problems (Hootstein, 2002; O'Dowd, 2013; Dooly, 2010).

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## 2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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The main objective of this study is to carry out an analysis of teacher roles in telecollaboration with the final aim of providing teachers with insights into what the best practices in this particular environment might be. We reflect on the different roles teacher may adopt in telecollaborative exchanges and try to find out which of those roles are considered most important according to the teachers participating in the project.

The methodological approach implemented here is based on a taxonomy of teacher roles adapted from the literature on the topic and the administration of questionnaires followed by the analysis of the responses by several teachers in our project. The results will also serve as input to suggest improvements, provide possible modifications of teacher roles and to improve teacher training by taking into account different variables such as pupils' needs, task requirements, learning environments, etc.

## 3 TEACHER ROLES

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The TILA project's main aim is to use telecollaboration to enhance secondary school students' language skills and for them to acquire competence in intercultural communication. The main objective of this study is, therefore, to explore the different types of teacher roles that exist in telecollaboration and particularly in the context of the TILA project. One of the most important tasks in the TILA project is to develop a series of mainly synchronous tasks to improve students' communicative ability in linguistic terms and also their communicative intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Müller-Hartmann, 2007). The main secondary school partners in our project come from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Holland and Spain. Students' ages range from thirteen to eighteen but most of the students are from fourteen to sixteen years of age. The partnerships are both of the lingua franca type (Seidlhofer, 2001) and of the tandem type. An interesting aspect of our project is that these lingua franca type exchanges include languages other than English, such as Spanish and French. It is also interesting to note that the Dutch students –as Dutch is not one of the target languages- always act as “false” natives when they do English/Spanish tandems with Spanish students. This is also the case with German students in partnerships with Spanish students.

### 3.2 TELECOLLABORATION

Telecollaboration in foreign language teaching involves the use of both synchronous and asynchronous tasks to facilitate cooperative work between students who are geographically distant (Dooly, 2010). In the telecollaboration context, it is obvious that the roles teachers have cannot be the same as the ones teachers have in more traditional settings (Hootstein, 2002; O'Dowd, 2013; O'Dowd, 2015). The onus is on the fact that students are now placed at the centre of the teaching-learning process.

There are other reasons to use telecollaboration. One of them is that to communicate through computers, mobile phones and other devices is becoming more and more important and also very common nowadays not only when it comes to talking to other native speakers of one's language, but

also in cases when people communicate using a foreign language. This has a direct consequence in teaching because both teachers and students need to adapt to this new way of communication and need to become familiarized with these new forms of communication. Indeed it would be strange for students not to have the opportunity of using the foreign language in computer and mobile-device mediated communication. Teachers are in charge of implementing and guaranteeing the acquisition of the new competences that have arisen in this new era of electronic communication. They need to transform their roles so that they can now become facilitators and mediators and thus move away from the rather authoritative, teacher-centred role they had in the past. However, we should not over-emphasise the difference between online and in-class teaching as many teachers use communicative and task-based learning in tradition classroom settings. However, blended learning does lend itself to an approach that centres more on the student. One way of putting the focus on this type of approach is to make use of the advantages brought about by telecollaboration. Individuals can learn language using computers, tablets and such to connect to the internet and platforms such as *Second Life* but the type of telecollaboration we are interested in here are in setting such as schools. In this sense, telecollaboration:

involves the application of global computer networks to foreign (and second) language learning and teaching in institutionalized settings under the guidance of a language cultural expert (i.e., a teacher) for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence (Belz 2003, 2).

According to Belz (2003), partners in a telecollaborative project are learners in different countries who, using the Internet, have common access to a great variety of communication tools (video chats, audio chats, blogs, wikis, forums, etc.) that will allow them to enhance “social interaction, dialogue, debate and intercultural exchange” (Belz 2003, 2). This is particularly appropriate for those students who do not have the opportunity to engage in face-to-face interaction with native speakers of the target language.

### 3.3 THE ONLINE CONTEXT

The Moodle platform is the environment where most of our work takes place. We have created different courses for all the exchanges taking place between the different schools. People visiting the page can also find a series of resources on online learning, teacher training, materials, tasks, etc. This environment is also used for the sharing of official documents and other materials. Some of the resources are open and available for the educational community even if they are not TILA members.

*BigBlueButton* (BBB) and *OpenSim* are the tools that we use for meetings between consortium partners and also for student interactions. BBB (<http://www.bigbluebutton.org>) is an online tool, embedded in the Moodle environment. It includes video, public and private chat and a space where documents can be shared. This tool is particularly useful for the purposes of our project since students can share the task on the screen at the same time as they are involved in oral and/or written interaction. We have also used this tool for meetings among teachers and in online teacher-training sessions. Finally, this platform allows us to record the telecollaborative sessions, which is essential for researchers to gather data that they can later analyse.

Lastly, our virtual world TILA, which is a part of *OpenSim*, offers a wide range of possibilities not only for the meetings with TILA staff, but more importantly for student interaction. We have created several

worlds to resemble the different regions participating in the TILA consortium. For instance, there is a recreation of an area in Valencia where avatars can sit down in a “horchateria” and try the typical “horchata” drink. They can also visit a typical Parisian café called Amelie Café. The objective of virtual worlds is to add authenticity to the online exchanges. We have found that students really enjoy visiting this world and that they like the type of tasks that they can carry out in this environment. When they take the form of avatars they can perform many different actions, like walking, running or flying around, talking to students from other countries. There are also many other activities they can perform like creating posters or other types of constructions that can enhance the tasks being carried out by making them more interesting and probably meaningful.

### 3.4 TEACHER ROLES

In the context of telecollaboration the main role of teachers is not to overtly teach a language; rather they provide the students with the opportunity to acquire it. They facilitate acquisition by giving students the chance to interact with peers from other countries and other cultures using a task-based learning approach. The production and implementation of tasks is an essential part of our project so their design is of the utmost importance for us. Our tasks are made up of three different phases:

1. the preparatory phase, where students are introduced to the topic and they work with the vocabulary and the structures they are going to have to carry out in the main phase of the task. This phase serves mainly to activate background knowledge, to prepare students to make predictions, to help to promote schema, to anticipate possible problems and, in sum, to prepare students for the telecollaborative exchange.
2. the main phase, where the actual online exchange takes place. This is when students take the main role, whereas the teacher is just the facilitator. Autonomous learning takes place in this phase and collaborative work is emphasized.
3. the post phase, where students and teachers analyse the results of the exchange. It is at this point when teachers can receive feedback from the students and when they provide students with their own feedback. Many often, teacher take the opportunity here to provide their students with some expansion work that can be carried out with the rest of the class, for instance, asking the students who participated in the exchange to report to the rest of the class what they did and what they learned. It is also in this phase when most of the teachers take the opportunity to raise awareness of intercultural aspects.

Following Hootstein (2002), the main role of a telecollaborative teacher is, generally speaking, that of a facilitator, a person who has an administrative, a technical, an academic and a social role at the same time. Nevertheless, it is clear that these roles are not and cannot always be delimited since sometimes a particular problem might need the intervention of the teacher making use of two different roles. For example, when a student is faced with a problem related with technical constraints of a particular piece of software, this might affect both the technological and the pedagogical parts of the interaction and therefore the teacher will have to look for solutions that might require performing both roles at the same time (the academic and the technical one).

We have adopted Hootstein’s (2002) distinction of teacher roles and also draw on those of O’Dowd (2013) and Dooly (2010), to create the following categorization:

- **The programme director or administrative<sup>2</sup> emoderator:** she directs the agenda, timetable, deadlines, etc. and has to decide on the types of tools to be used. Furthermore, she is in charge of liaising with other teachers, partners and students to promote and advance students' performance and of trying to avoid or solve problems. She must also keep students up-to-date and on course regarding deadlines. It is also her duty to modify task objectives and/or deadlines if problems arise. Finally the programme director is also in charge of determining levels and of organizing and maintaining peer exchange structures.
- **The technical director or technical emoderator:** he must help students to become comfortable with systems and software and also prepare learners to overcome technical difficulties. He has to instruct students in the use of platforms, systems and software and/or inform them where to find information from technical personnel or online. He must also guarantee students' safety and privacy by selecting the correct software and advising on its use. In order to do this, teachers must understand the affordances and constraints of specific applications (Compton 2009) and must become autonomous with regard to ICTs.
- **The instructor or academic emoderator:** she guides learning in a problem- and project-based learning environment (Dooly 2010, 294). Her main task is to facilitate communicative competence (Compton 2009, 81-84) in order to ensure high quality online interaction (Lai, Zhao and Li 2008, 90) and to provide authentic communicative input. She must make sure that pedagogy takes precedence over technology. At the same time, another one of her duties is to design tasks, activities and organize exchanges at the same time as she instructs learners on peer correction procedures. The academic role also includes helping students to reflect on cultural aspects of their interactions and facilitating intercultural understanding. One way to guarantee this is to identify the relevance of the task from both a cultural and a linguistic point of view and by providing students with the necessary communication strategies. Included in this role we also find the explanation of learning outcomes, rubrics and evaluation processes and objectives. This way, she can situate the tasks and the activities within the students' overall curriculum. Another facet of this role is to provide scaffolding for students, linguistic and cultural feedback and make sure she allows students' creativity and choice in use of language (Chapelle and Hegelheimer, 2004). Finally, she should monitor students' academic progress in order to pre-empt possible problems and assess their performance taking into account shared meaning construction and new communicative skills (Dooly, 2010, 295).
- **The social director or social emoderator:** he must create and foster a collaborative environment. His role is to promote "community building skills" (Compton 2009, 77) and enhance empathy between peers. At the same time, he has to make sure that the student is in the centre of the telecollaborative process and that intercultural issues are a central part of said process. This could be done by using strategies such as taking on board students' suggestions, opinions and criticism and acting as troubleshooter with regard to possible cultural misunderstandings.

### 3.5 TEACHER ROLES IN TILA

In section 1.3.4. we looked at the roles teachers may have to adopt in telecollaboration. Through our dialogue with our teachers in the Spanish cluster in meetings, teacher-training session and information gathered from reports and surveys we have found that the main roles teachers report having in the TILA

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<sup>2</sup> In each section we will use a different gender pronoun to refer to the roles.

project are as follows. We must take into account that the percentages refer to the time taken up by each role –which probably points to the relative importance of each.

Programme director or administrative emoderator:	40%
Technical director or technical emoderator:	15%
Instructor or academic emoderator:	30%
Social director or social emoderator:	15%

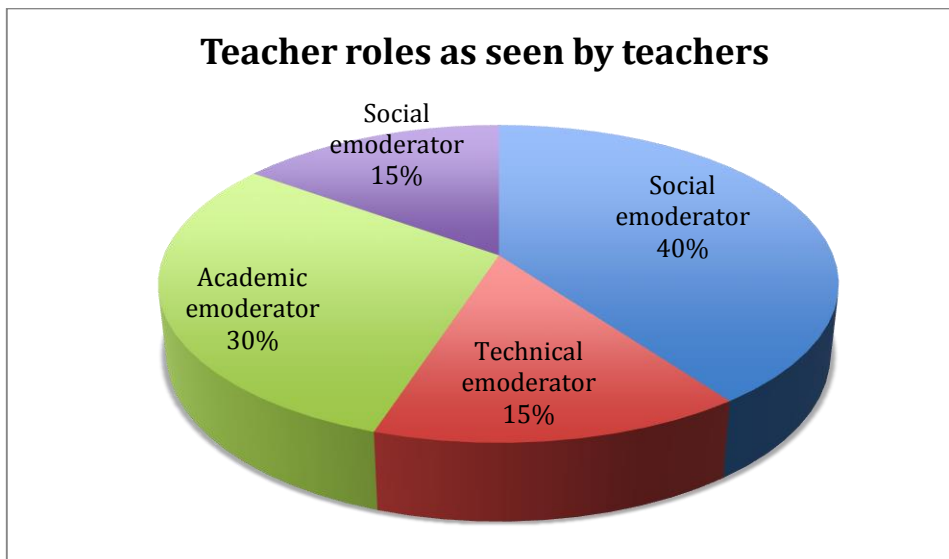


Figure 1: Teacher roles as seen by teachers

According to the teachers interviewed, administrative tasks take up most of the teachers' time. In particular, they mentioned the task of setting up of exchanges between students. The technical side of telecollaboration takes up less of the teachers' time as we had foreseen since on many occasions teachers are helped by their school technicians. The teachers recounted that the academic work they do consists mainly of creating tasks or modifying previously existing ones with an onus on highlighting intercultural aspects of communication and also on exploiting the results of the actual exchanges with the students in the post-task phase. As social emoderators according to the teachers, their main task is to maintain a communicative ambiance.

These results are backed up by our observation of recordings of student interactions. They show that most teachers try to keep a very low profile during the actual interaction between the students and that, especially at the beginning of the sessions, teachers are involved in technical troubleshooting. Basically, most of the academic work carried out by teachers takes place before and after the exchanges in the preparation of tasks, preparatory phase and post-phase work with the students.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

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The results of our study demonstrate that teachers' roles in telecollaboration are quite different depending on the task phase. The preparation of telecollaborative tasks would be very similar to the work teachers traditionally do to prepare their lessons, especially if the learning in these classes is task based. Preparatory phases and post-phases are also similar to the kind of work the teacher does in more traditional classes. In these two phases teachers and students are involved in something akin to traditional face-to-face interaction in the classroom. In the pre-phase handouts need to be prepared and the students need to become acquainted with the language they might need or might encounter. In the post phase teachers might give feedback to students or receive it. Sometimes students might be required to produce work that has to do with their encounters with their foreign peers such as blogs or reports. Of course, these phases may be carried out online occasionally. In those cases the setting and the interaction is obviously different from more traditional settings. However, the main difference between telecollaboration and traditional language teaching is found in the main phase, that is, when online exchanges actually take place. In those cases teachers are never at the centre of the process: rather, their main role is to facilitate and monitor to guarantee high quality online interaction.

The results we gathered using our short questionnaire were acquired during the piloting phase of the TILA project. It may be that, as the project has evolved from a mainly synchronous approach to a more balanced synchronous/asynchronous focus, things will have changed regarding this role. Indeed, the burden of technology is much greater in synchronous communication compared to the asynchronous type. So, the time taken up by technical issues might be less than we have found. Also, the administrative role can fluctuate quite a lot depending on how easy or difficult or easy it is to find partners and set up a partnership. Here personal issues may help or hinder the setting up of the partnership. We hypothesise that teachers involved in a partnership with another school without the extra work inherent to belonging to a project will have considerably less administrative work. In the follow-up phase of our project secondary school teachers have been given a greater role in the creation of tasks and so this would also affect the amount of time used in academic tasks. More research needs to be done on the social facilitator/moderator role as not enough credit is given to teachers as cultural experts who can defuse cultural misunderstandings, among other facets, rather than just language teachers. However, we can see that at the moment this role is on a par with what might be considered a secondary role for teachers, that is, technical facilitator/moderator. We are already carrying out further research into teacher roles to see if there are differences between the pilot and follow-up phases.

Telecollaboration is a perfect opportunity for highlighting intercultural awareness and above all intercultural communicative competence. Students can be made aware of intercultural issues (the intercultural dimension) without actually meeting people from other cultures (Belz et al. 2002, 10). Intercultural issues can be discussed in class and differences between cultures can be reflected upon. This type of learning, however, is unlikely to involve the students and would be just seen as another academic subject without much linkage to real life and real people. Thus, it is our view that the only way to acquire intercultural competence is by meeting and communicating with speakers from other countries. Only by actually experiencing the challenges that interacting with people from other cultures involves can students learn to be more tolerant of other people's "beliefs, values and behaviours" (Belz et al. 2002, 9) and, what is more, to reflect on their own culture. Acquisition of intercultural competence may be guaranteed by meeting members of the target culture in their own country but this is extremely

expensive and only possible for a small number of students. The only other possibility is through telecollaboration which, although it might require a certain amount of expenditure on computers, is much cheaper than sending students abroad. We could say, thus, that telecollaboration is the only real and viable way forward if we want the majority of our students to have the opportunity to acquire intercultural communicative competence and at the same time improve their language skills. Therefore, the research we are carrying out may prove useful if we are to discover the most appropriate way of implementing telecollaboration in secondary schools and that means finding out what knowledge and skills teachers need to make telecollaboration a success.