

TILA Task Development – Principles and Suggestions

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The purpose of this document is to provide some common ground for the design and development of TILA telecollaboration tasks. It combines general principles for task development with suggestions for specific task design and implementation. The overall intention is to offer guidelines for flexible and local adaptation; not a blueprint to be strictly adhered to.

Feedback and suggestions are welcome.

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. Task-relevant insights into the nature of communicative intercultural competence and interaction can be gained from the communicative “can do” statements in the CEF and the intercultural “can do” statements in the ICC Assessment Rubric (see Moodle: Teacher Area in “Topics and Task Development”).

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.

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.

Blended learning

TILA tasks have their focus on communicative intercultural telecollaboration and language acquisition in the 3D virtual world of OpenSim and the web-based videoconferencing platform BigBlueButton; additional collaborative writing support is provided 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.

Task sequences

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'.

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;
- mock interactions with the country/culture group in preparation of intercultural interactions
- knowledge development within each country/culture group > classroom, homework; web quests, forum, wiki, blog
- 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

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.

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

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

Most of the work in the Post Phase will presumably happen face-to-face in class or at home. Depending on local pedagogical practices and technological access, it might be feasible to include telecollaborative activities as well, e.g. collaborative writing in a forum, wiki or blog; or even small group interactions in OpenSim or BigBlueButton.

Template for TILA task development

TILA tasks typically consist of blended learning sequences of subtasks organized in three phases: Preparatory, Main and Post (see “TILA task development - principles and suggestions”).

Title of TILA task	
Partner team (schools and teachers)	
Thematic description	
Target language	
CEF level	
Learning objectives (linguistic, communicative, and intercultural) See the CEF and ICC “can do” statements	
Description of blended learning approach	
Task outcome(s) (products produced by students)	
Technical specifications (tools that will be used)	

Preparatory Phase

Description of subtask(s)	
Learning objective(s)	
Environment and tools (classroom, homework, forum etc.)	
Form of interaction (pair work, small groups, teacher centred)	
Expected outcome(s)	

Main Phase

Description of subtask(s)	
Learning objective(s)	
Environment and tools: synchronous (e.g. OpenSim, BigBlueButton) or asynchronous (e.g. forum)	

Form and organisation of telecollaborative interaction: Number and size of telecollaboration groups; other participant roles	
Expected outcome(s)	

Post Phase

Description of post task	
Learning objective(s)	
Environment and tools (classroom, homework etc.)	
Form of interaction (pair work, small groups, teacher centred)	
Expected outcome(s)	