

Understanding the many steps for effective collaborative language projects

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New technologies are increasingly becoming a component of education, as computers are integrated into both students' lives and as a teacher's tool of management and teaching. At the same time, constructivist learning theories have had extensive effects at the level of learning paradigms and in prescribed education goals. Yet there are worrying gaps between theory and practice, especially in the use of the Internet and language teaching. Among the many possible roles of the Internet, there is the obvious appeal of direct linkage to the target language by way of collaboration amongst international language learners. However, as with any pedagogical resource, a close and critical look at the potential of the Internet for implementing a constructivist-based learning environment is imperative. This article, based on the results of an international telecollaborative project between six countries, addresses the reality that there must be more emphasis on raising teachers' awareness and knowledge about online educational project management, rather than simply focusing on basic ICT training in the foreign language classroom. The article delineates practical considerations for setting up and then managing online language learning projects, with the focus being on the teachers' role in the overall process of socially embedded, shared learning.

Introduction

Two heads are better than one if, and only if, the two heads agree on what they're doing and on how they're going to go about doing it. (Bruffee 1995, 1)

The use of the Internet in education is receiving more and more attention as an effective resource for teaching, and especially as a means of creating new opportunities for constructivist approaches. However, the Internet as a pedagogical resource must be clearly defined in its role in promoting the construction of shared knowledge, not simply as a repository of available information to be downloaded and consumed uncritically. This implies taking a close look at its potential as a pedagogical tool and the way in which this potential relates to the paradigm of the learning process which underlies its use.

This article, based on the results of an international project¹ aimed at teachers interested in online collaboration, addresses the reality that there must be more emphasis on raising teachers' awareness and knowledge about online educational project management, rather than simply focusing on basic information and communication technology (ICT) training for teachers. The article delineates practical considerations for setting up and then managing online language learning projects, with the focus being on the teacher's role in the learning process – a learning process embedded in the social context of online

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collaboration. An essential factor for effective collaboration in language learning is to provide computer-supported 'links' between learners so that each participant benefits from the knowledge and contributions of the other learner(s). Teachers must aim to facilitate carefully planned exchanges for their students, based on mutually shared learning goals: moving beyond a simple 'hook-up' between two learners carrying out rote tasks.

A constructivist framework for computer-supported collaboration

Many educators highlight the potential of the Internet for supporting constructivist teaching approaches because it requires exchanging and processing of information, can promote abstract thinking, can be used to focus on problem-solving and can help promote constructivist learning processes (Baskin 2001; Fujike 2004; Leask and Pachler 2001; Warschauer and Kern 2000). Although constructivism can be said to cover several different approaches, the use of the term in this article refers to an underlying assumption that individuals are active agents who are purposefully seeking and constructing knowledge within a meaningful context. This implies that knowledge cannot be understood as a fixed object; instead, knowledge is constructed by an individual and stems from his or her own experience of that object.

A further element of *socio-constructivism* which is important to this article is the process of learning through *shared* knowledge-building – a process which emphasises a joint effort (Mercer 1995) of knowledge construction. Understandably, along this line of shared knowledge-building, many authors and educators have begun to call attention to the potential of network-based tools as a means of support for collaborative learning (Stacey 1999; Rogers 2000; Warschauer 1997). The potential for computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) was already being explored by some researchers 10 to 15 years ago (Dede and Palumbo 1991; Edelson et al. 1995; Ellis et al. 1991; Scardamalia and Bereiter 1994), but it has recently received a further boost with the increase in the numbers of technologically supported classrooms.

In particular, network-based projects provide excellent possibilities for elaborating student-centred, collaborative language learning. This premise is based on the idea that computer-supported systems can support and facilitate group interaction and group dynamics in ways that are not always achievable in face-to-face interaction. Of course, online collaborative activities are not designed to replace face-to-face communication, rather, they are designed to enhance the opportunity for discovering multi-perspectives and for knowledge sharing with other students outside their everyday context (typically in another country and with a shared target language). This new knowledge can then be tied in with the students' prior knowledge. Effective online interaction requires distanced learners to construct joint intelligence through geographically distributed work or tasks that will lead to problem-solving, reflection and assimilation of new knowledge.

This growing interest in network-based collaborative learning implies a need for more teacher knowledge about setting up and managing this type of collaboration between distanced school partners. As Leask and Pachler (2001) have pointed out, there is a need for both teachers and teacher trainees to be technologically aware and competent. Designing, setting up and implementing these learning opportunities require the same amount of time and attention to be spent on teacher-partner collaboration as is spent on the learner collaboration; in short, *project management between teachers* is an essential part of effective online collaboration between language learners. Online *shared knowledge-building* will not happen simply through online contact between language learners. While it is true that language learners are given the chance to use the target language with others for purposeful communication that reaches far beyond the classroom walls (indubitably

this can be a very motivating factor for setting up telecollaborative language projects), inevitably such exchanges will fall short if the purpose of the contact is limited to only 'using the language' as the target of online interaction. As Pachler and Daly (2006) have pointed out, the social and psychological dimensions of network-based exchanges are highly complex and require adequate understanding of this complexity in order to properly facilitate learning through online collaboration.

The factors outlined above, coupled with the awareness of a general lack of teacher experience on how to develop online collaborative projects (Balanskat et al. 2006, 4) served as the impetus for the development of the project discussed here. The project provided technical and pedagogical support to language teachers in 13 different education centres (located in six different countries)² who were interested in incorporating network-based collaborative projects into their language teaching. The focus of this project was not on ICT training (as it is felt that ICT tools are constantly changing), instead the emphasis was on 'hands-on' experience and exchange of knowledge between the teachers in order to construct new ideas and understandings for working in network-based environments. This helped demonstrate to the participants that the Internet could, indeed should, become a part of their teaching resources, thus encouraging them to see network-based interaction as a key practice for their job as language teachers. Some ideas and guidelines on setting up collaborative language learning projects, gleaned from the project experience, are outlined in this article.

The project and its participants

The ideas and examples presented here concerning the setting up and carrying out of network-based collaborative language learning projects stem from the input of 23 teachers from six EU countries. Following the orientation of Burniske and Monke (2001), the goal of the project was to create a virtual environment and provide technical support to allow teachers and teacher trainees to learn from one another through dialogic interactions. The project took Burniske and Monke's (2001) distinction between telecomputing and telecollaboration as a starting point. Telecomputing is seen as the provision of networked computers with an accompanying assumption that learning will occur through this network. On the other hand, telecollaboration is described as a networked learning scenario with genuine interaction between participants. Instead of relying on a network of computers to produce interaction, or simply having interpersonal exchanges or information collection, telecollaboration aims at providing problem-solving projects that will facilitate genuine interaction with students in which they share the learning process.

First, the project partners worked together to develop a Web portal that matched their specific needs for exploring the possibilities of online collaborative projects (briefly, these were 'micro-projects' carried out within the wider scope of a European Comenius Project). The portal, based on a role-based, open-source platform, was highly customisable, and allowed for the self-designing of the diverse collaborative projects set up between the partners. The project partners had individual workspaces with homepages that provided options they could activate or deactivate, such as an online WebQuest editor, and personalised communication and publication tools, e.g. weblogs, forums, wiki pages and chat. The partners could then create virtual classrooms and project spaces for starting and managing telecollaborative projects, using whichever formats they felt best matched their projects.

By working in the portal in co-authored, co-directed school projects, the project partners were given the opportunity to bring personal and professional experience to the fore and thus reflect on the process of designing, managing and evaluating network-based

projects in school practice. This meant that the partners were involved in the different experiential phases of telecollaboration – pre-design, design, implementation, assessment and closure – throughout the three-year period of the coordinated projects. Questionnaires, self-assessment and partner-assessment reports, student feedback and partners' emails pertinent to the projects' development and implementation comprise the data corpus of the three-year project. These data provide the basis for the observations herein.

New strategies for online collaboration in language teaching

The teacher's theoretical framework of learning – that is, their basic approach to understanding how learning takes place – has been found to have a direct link to the way in which teachers incorporate computer use into their teaching. To cite one example, a study conducted by Becker and Reil (2000) found that there was a clear relationship between teachers with constructivist principles and the way in which computers were used for facilitating knowledge. Becker and Reil's study showed that not only were these teachers 'more likely to have their students use computers on a regular basis during class time' they also engaged in more communicative, collaborative activities such as communicating with other people, analysing data or learning to work collaboratively.

This proved to be the case for two primary education centres which were partnered in an online 'environmental' project. While one teacher actively engaged her students in helping to design and develop the online formats and content to be used in the project (e.g. a webquest to measure the students' impact on the environment), the partner students' online activity was limited to posting the 'end-product'. This resulted in disappointment and frustration in the students who had designed the original activities, since they were unable to participate in (or even observe) their partners' interaction with their activities. Perhaps not surprisingly, a discussion between the two teachers during the design phase of their project highlighted the fact that the second teacher took a quite prescriptive and linear approach to language teaching.

Given the fact that network-based teaching approaches can build upon collaborative efforts that focus on dialogue, interaction and shared knowledge between learners, the need for the development of strategies which will enable language teachers to enhance learners' opportunities through the potential of online collaboration is highlighted in this anecdotal case description. Indeed, the need for new strategies is not simply to innovate educational practices; it is a requisite for preparing students for modern society. Students' future employability may well require, rather than standardised test performance, both language skills and knowledge of effective collaborative efforts as part of teamwork performance (Gallagher 1997; Johnson et al. 1991; Salpeter 2003).

Effective collaboration begins with negotiation and discussion

Many times when thinking about or discussing a collaborative online project, the collaborative process *between the teachers* is ignored or does not receive as much attention in terms of planning as the student interaction, when it is, in fact, one of the essential factors for setting up and implementing effective network-based collaboration between classes. Indeed, it seems almost ironic that getting the students to work with others located in another country is quite often the easy part – but the teachers frequently have a hard time collaborating with their counterparts! The need for experience in collaborative work, for careful planning and negotiation, and for commitment from the participants is as applicable to the partner teachers as it is to the learners involved in the project, perhaps even more so.

Just as there may be cultural differences in learning processes carried out through online interaction (Smith 2000; Turner 2000), there are also cultural differences in teaching processes involving online interaction (as exemplified in the description of the environmental project in the previous section). There are different styles and preferences for online communication and this can have an effect on the way the partners respond to each other (Iivonen et al. 1998; Kim and Bonk 2002; Liang and McQueen 1999). It has been demonstrated that length of texts and time taken for responding to correspondence can vary according to different cultures (Cuthell 2006; Rosen et al. 2005). This can produce long-term and sometimes devastating effects on the way in which online collaboration occurs. For instance, if a teaching partner does not answer an email within the expected amount of time (each individual's perception of the correct amount of time to be allowed varies), the other partner might assume there is no interest, or may become angry or frustrated. This is exemplified in the following email discussing one partner's negative feelings about the response she finally received from her partner after a period of several weeks without any contact.

Hello Miranda,³

Pekka has finally sent us an email today. I'm really put out because after all of the elaborate texts I have sent her, she simply sends me this with just these few words:

Hello,

we are going to send the e-mails.

In the attachment, there are addresses (sic) for sure.

Greetings

P

As they say in Spanish... you can get more out of a rock. Anyway, everything is still going and we do and un-do the project as we like. No problem!!!⁴

As can be seen from this example, the length of time allowed between answering emails has created tension for the first partner. In her email she implies that she will no longer take the other partner's participation seriously; she will adapt the project to her liking. As a consequence, there was very little sense of collaboration between the teachers by the end of the project.

Of course, each project will obviously be planned under different circumstances, and the characteristics of collaborative teaching partners cannot be generalised. In some cases, the partners may know each other personally and may have even worked together before, and in other cases they may have 'found each other' through online partner searches or through contacts both partners have in common and so on. Similarly, the way in which the collaboration begins will be particular to each case. If partners have the opportunity to meet face-to-face, then that is always a good time to begin planning, although this may not always be possible. If not, it is essential that the partners take the time to get to know each other before beginning the project, via online communication such as chats, emails or audiophony (Salmon 2000).

Following this, and before beginning the project plan, partners should discuss and decide on the means and frequency of contact they will maintain throughout the project, and each teaching partner must do their best to meet the agreements – especially bearing in mind the problems which can stem from lack of communication. Arguably, teachers have a responsibility to commit themselves to providing an e-learning environment for their students – an environment which positions themselves and their students as active agents engaged in knowledge-sharing with others. Without minimal commitment to communication with the other members of the project, this premise is nullified.

The sections below provide a review of some of their reflections concerning the process of designing a network-based project, starting with how to create a 'project map'.

A recommendation for initial planning is to go from general to specific so that you end up with a 'project map'. (The concept of 'project map' was suggested by one of the partners and is taken from business management terminology.) Project maps should outline the three main phases of projects: (1) planning; (2) tracking and managing; and (3) closing the project. Going from the general to the specific is especially helpful in the planning stage. The first phase will ideally include the definition of the project, plans of the activities, plans for procurement of resources needed, contingency plans (risk control) and plans for implementation. Here is a possible outline for the planning stage:

General

- Make sure you can summarise in your own words what the project is about. Exchange your summary with your partner to see if you both have the same understanding of the project.
- Identify the main learning aims of the project (two or three main ideas; more than this probably indicates an overly ambitious project).
- What are the skills the students will need in order to carry out the project (e.g. typing skills)? Do they need to acquire these skills before/during the project or will they be using skills they already have? (Language targets are mentioned in the specific items below.)
- What will be assessed in the project and how? Do all the partners agree to this assessment?
- Describe the planned outcome(s) of the project. What impact will it have and on whom (students, parents, community, school, partner school, etc.)?

Specific

- Make a list of the activities and output for different stages in the project.
- Make of a list of the language areas the students will need (e.g. specialized vocabulary, specific target language structures, greetings, vocabulary for the Internet modes, etc.).
- Add a list of the resources and timeframe for each activity.
- Combine this with a list of the assessment criteria for the output.
- Exchange your 'definitions' of the project with your partner again (see the first point) and discuss any differences in your definitions. 'Fine-tune' the definition and outline with the partner(s).

This final point is an especially important one. In the following example, the teachers in the project managed to avoid a potential problem by taking the time to revise their understanding of how the project would go forward. By doing so, the partners realised that they had not conceived the project in the same way and adjustments were quickly made to remedy possible misunderstandings. Just as students working within a socio-constructivist framework are required to give public accounts of the different stages of their learning, the need for open accounting of how they conceived the different features of the project meant the teachers were able to refine their mutual understandings of how to carry out their project.

Active agency in planning the project

Once the partners have agreed upon the initial idea for the project, it is necessary to ensure that all the partners recognise their responsibility as agents in the success or failure of the collaboration. This includes fully informing each other about local circumstances, because local factors can often have a significant influence on the outcome of the project. Some factors to bear in mind are:

- The teachers involved (Is there only one? Is there a substitute to stand in if needed?).
- What are the ages of the students involved? The number of students? (If the numbers do not match, it will be necessary to think carefully about how to create the online collaborative groups.)
- Interests?
- Language level?
- What *must* the students study (e.g. curriculum requirements, administrative restrictions)?

Just as learning is embedded in a social context which is developed through communication, collaboration and negotiated activities, so collaborative teaching projects (even online projects) are also embedded in a social context. This makes open discussion between the teachers about personal and professional experiences essential to the entire process. There are many questions which will need to be discussed, concerning the availability of computers, the amount of time which can be spent on the project during class time etc. Each partner should think carefully about all the factors that might be relevant and discuss them with his or her partner(s).

This does not mean that there must be an absolute consensus on how to implement the project, but this exchange of information is vital for negotiating the different possible meanings that can emerge from individual interpretations of the interaction to take/taking place. Moreover, this can provide the teachers with an important opportunity to learn from others' professional activity as well as ensuring support for teachers who are less willing to carry out lessons that entail socio-constructivist principles (Bullough 1987; Kagan and Tippins 1992).

For instance, more open communication and negotiation may have helped avoid the following peer evaluation:

After the evaluation of all accessible materials, after discussions with all people who participated in the MICaLL project between the Dutch and Czech students we came to the conclusion that the biggest fault lies with the Dutch side, specifically in the approach taken by the teacher. Whether it was caused by the Dutch school system or not, the Dutch teacher did not manage to dedicate more than two hours to the project [during the entire term]. As he said, he did not manage to motivate the Dutch students and he failed in setting an example for them. ... he considers it just as an 'optional way to spend his students' free time'. Though this approach could be considered as a kind of a modern 'relaxed' approach, it was a deterrent to the others [Czech students] and blocked the primary sense of this project – international communication among students.

Co-constructing new knowledge about telecollaboration

All the teachers worked together in the final phase of the project – which aimed to co-construct an artefact (compilation of guidelines) that reflected their new knowledge and understanding of telecollaboration through the mediated interaction with their peers.

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(Email 1)

Cher Jacques,

First of all I would like to wish you all a happy new year! We played around with a few ideas of how to continue from here. . . . We would like to run these ideas by you to see what you think and whether this is manageable in the rest of the time:

1. At the moment the last task is under way is in terms of having the students get to know each other by drawing the partner based on the description. . . .
2. We envision the target task as follows: Each group (French/German) designs one small group website/homepage, maybe in the form of a wiki (the tools can be chosen once we know what students want to represent online) so that at the end we have got eight websites. Content of the websites would be findings from class surveys every group does with all the children. Here it is a bit more in detail: Students list all the questions they have about the other culture, their individual or group partners etc. . . . Once every class has done such a collection, the list is put on the portal and then the other side can try to find answers to the questions. All questions should be allowed. This would form the basis of the cultural enquiry for the following survey. . . .

(Email 2)

Dear Max,

Thanks for your email and happy new year to you, too!

I have seen that my ideas of doing the project is different from your. I not put students drawings on webpage and now will do it. . . .

The project map should also provide a sketch of the activities to be carried out, the timeframe for them, the resources needed at certain points in the project, the skills the students will need, and due dates and an accurate description of possible risks, along with an alternative plan in case of these risks materialising. This might be in a flow-chart format or any other format the teacher is familiar with. It should be made available to all the partners as it can serve as both a checklist and a reminder of previously made commitments. It can also become part of student monitoring of the project's progress.

Promoting positive interdependence

When writing the activities for the project, the partners should keep in mind that collaborative learning promotes positive interdependence. This means that the design of the activities goes beyond the exchange of personal or cultural information. While it is indeed enriching for students to get to know each other on a personal and cultural level, this is only the beginning of a collaborative learning project. Many language learning projects stop at the phase of students' exchange of information rather than attempting to get the students to work together in a learning project. Students' interaction must be linked to the others in such a way that the success of the planned activity can be achieved only by everyone contributing their part – knowing that their participation is essential for the whole group can be a powerful motivational factor for the students. It also means that the students will need to use the target language to coordinate and monitor their different collaborative activities.

This may mean that the design of the activities, indeed, the design of the whole project, can include assigning each member of the group a different role, but each role must be crucial to the overall activity. Inevitably, this may require prompting and preliminary exercises in vocabulary and phrases for lower levels of language learners, but the students will have the possibility of putting this knowledge to use in authentic texts and in their communication with their partners. It can also allow the teacher(s) to distribute the tasks according to each student's individual abilities: students who enjoy doing research can be assigned this role; students who like to write summaries may be assigned to the role of 'reporter'; and so on. The teachers should try to find the best strategies for promoting

interdependence with their group. Interestingly, this complexity in the project design brings the project full circle – the designing of the project involves the same type of collaborative work between the teacher partners that is being required of the students.

On the home front: getting yourself and your students prepared

One of the factors which the teachers in the project highlighted as essential for preparing an online collaborative project was to carefully consider each stage so that the teachers are ready to give support whenever needed and can ensure that the project will fit into their already established curriculum. This includes considering how best to organise the students' learning through online discussion and interaction. As Cohen and Mankin (2002, 118) explain it in their five-step action framework for distributed collaboration, there is a need for 'proactive structuring of collaborative work'. The following questions can help with this proactive structuring:

- Will the students do the group work during class time, outside of the class, or a bit of both?
- Is this work included in the regular teaching plan?
- What is the overall the scope of the project?
- Has this been discussed with the project partner?

As Cohen and Mankin point out, 'a preexisting supportive culture can help set the stage for a successful project ... but that may not be the situation when the project is initiated' (118–9). If teachers are starting from 'zero', they need to begin with some basic questions. For instance, when deciding the scope of the project, the teachers will need to consider the duration (e.g. a week to a month or most of the semester) and the breadth of the project (will the project cover one topic or several integrated topics?). The scope will help determine the number of stages which must be planned with the partners. The importance of negotiation and discussion about planning, even the seemingly minute details, were mentioned in several self-assessment reports:

The time management in general, speaking about the cooperation of the two countries, was not so well. We should have focused earlier on the time problems and should have structured the periods differently.

More contact between pupils before the actual project phase should have been arranged [time management again], this would be better for collaboration.

A good timetable should be arranged, to allow at least 1–2 whole days a week to work on project rather than just hours spread over some weeks or months.

Same lesson hours should be set up to give pupils on both sides the chance to chat with each other.

More contact (emails, skype) between the teachers to avoid misunderstandings.

Early timetable planning could have helped avoid stress in the end.

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Socially embedded: locally and globally

Despite the emphasis on sharing knowledge and information with geographically distributed partners (both students and teachers), successful network-based interaction

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cannot ignore its own social embedding. The teachers involved in the project soon discovered that the day-to-day interpersonal interactions in their own classrooms could not be ignored. They found that the following factors needed to be planned and incorporated into the regular contact time with the students.

- (1) *Explanation of the project*: It is imperative to let the students understand why they are being asked to participate in an online project. Simply sitting the students in front of computers to contact someone 'across the globe' can be exciting at first, but this may soon wear thin – especially with students who regularly use the Internet outside of the school. This means planning time into the beginning of the project to explain the project to the students so that they can see they are using the computer for educational purposes, not just 'making contact' with someone.
- (2) *A meaningful framework for the learning goals*: While it may be true that many students already feel that learning a language is important, this is not necessarily true for them all. Discussing the learning opportunities with the students can include getting them to add their own ideas of what this means for them.
- (3) *Practice*: Students do not necessarily know how to work collaboratively. They may have experience 'dividing tasks' and working individually, but this does not necessarily induce collaborative learning. There are numerous resources available for training in collaborative learning, but this must be worked into the regular class time.
- (4) *Coordination of activities and objectives*: Students, even young students, usually know when they are doing 'busy work'. Language teachers can easily be misled when implementing online projects because they may think that the fact that the students 'are using the language' is a goal in itself. While this may be so at first, the novelty of online work will soon lose its appeal if the students do not see a reason for continuing. However, if the students are using the language to build or discover new knowledge with their online companions, they will be motivated to continue and to take more and more risks with the target language.
- (5) *Adaptation of the activities and tasks to the students' skills and abilities*. This can be more difficult if the partner classes have different skills and abilities (especially in the target language), but it does not have to be an obstacle for collaborative learning. Collaborative learning can mean *teaching each other*, so different skills and abilities can be incorporated into the activities. Activities should also be scaled – students should start with relatively easy tasks at the beginning and then gradually increase the difficulty level as they progress in their knowledge in both the topic and ability to collaborate. Above all, if the students are going to teach each other, the timeline and activity plans should be worked out carefully with the project partner.

Facing the challenges of new collaborative opportunities

In order to facilitate dynamic, dialectical tensions wherein students are actively engaged in learning together, students may need to 'adjust' to the idea of collaboration. This is supported by some of the comments from the teachers' assessment reports:

Students need some provision for internationalization once a week as part of the timetable.

[Our] students are not used to working in groups – they need an opportunity to change their approach to learning. This means the results are 'up and down'.

In the final work session, the teachers organised their thoughts about preparing students for collaboration into different phases or steps.

- (1) Establish the collaborative groups early and have them work 'locally' first. Collaborative online projects may be designed in different ways, but one possibility is to have students work in groups face-to-face on specific tasks which are part of a bigger collaborative project. These groups would then combine, compare, discuss their 'local' output with their online group to come up with further knowledge.
- (2) Give some input on how to organise the tasks. If students are given the autonomy to decide their own tasks, they will need time to negotiate their tasks, both with their local group and with their online group. Written commitment from each group is highly recommended (this might be in the form of a contract). If students do not have the language skills necessary to negotiate the tasks with their partners, it may be necessary to assign them different 'roles' that will help them to work together to construct knowledge (e.g. each group can have a motivator, reporter, researcher, secretary. These roles can change throughout the course of the project).
- (3) Give students 'social time'. Despite the emphasis on collaboration and online communication, teachers cannot expect even the most autonomous students to 'pick out' their own online partner or to simply go to work with an assigned partner. This implies planning time and activities for the students to get to know each other before they have to begin working together. This is vital to the well-being of the project.
- (4) Insist on reports. Groups should regularly report on their progress. Ideally, reporting will be done both face-to-face and online. This can be in the form of outlines, drafts, worksheets to fill out, 'newspaper' articles, discussion board reports, group minutes, oral presentations, or many other methods, which not only help the teacher to be informed about the groups' progress but allow the students to learn or assimilate skills (presentations, article writing, etc). The progress updates should be shared online. The collaborating teachers should also make sure that they maintain open communication about progress and/or problems in each participating class.

Which activities promote online collaborative language learning?

Ideally, activities which encourage students to reflect and discuss 'why' – that is, activities which encourage the students to reflect on how they came to their solutions of each problem they encountered – should be incorporated into an online collaborative project. WebQuests are good examples of these type of activities (For a more thorough explanation of WebQuests see The WebQuest Page at <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/>). Getting students to engage in this type of activity can help them learn to listen carefully to comments, opinions, suggestions and criticisms from other members of the group, while engaging in use of the target language. The previously mentioned environmental project integrated the use of WebQuests to help guide the students to critical thinking about the way they interacted with the environment and to consider ways to interact more ecologically.

Ideally, the activities should provide students with opportunities to analyse, synthesize, and evaluate their ideas together, so that they are not only engaging with the target language but are also engaged in 'critical thinking'. (For a more detailed analysis of how to

foster critical thinking through the web, see MacKnight's 2000 article at <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM0048.pdf>.) The teaching partners should try to facilitate discussion and interaction so that students are forced to go beyond mere statements of opinion. Getting students to write opinion essays can be a starting point for online discussion – whether through a forum or chat or a mutually constructed web page. The teacher should remember, however, that the best method for exchanging information and opinions as well as the choice of Internet format for doing this will depend on the group personality, local constraints, age of students, objectives of the overall project and many other contextual factors.

It is highly advisable to consult previous projects online and to find as much information about online collaboration as possible before embarking on your own project. There are many available sources on the Internet. Some sites about collaborative learning which can be helpful to begin with are Central Queensland University's Collaborative Learning Project; University of Maryland University College's Virtual Resource Site for Teaching with Technology; The University of New South Wales Educational Development and Technology Centre (EDTeC); and the Global Virtual Classroom. (The URL addresses are listed in the reference section.)

There are several websites designed as portals for schools looking for Internet partners. Many of these portals provide examples and reports about successful projects, which can inspire new ideas for other projects. Some excellent examples are iEARN; NickNacks Telecollaborative Projects; Kidlink and Kidproj. For information about online science projects in a very large network, see Global SchoolNet Foundation. Although this site is mainly dedicated to science projects, it provides information about collaborative learning, examples of successful projects and access to possible partnerships. It can be an interesting source for language teachers interested in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) projects.

A few 'last words'

It is imperative that the teachers involved in the online language project are self-critical. The difficulty of integrating an online collaborative project into the objectives of a language course may be compounded by the fact that the teachers are working with one or more partner classes at a distance. Inevitably, the class objectives in each case will be different. It will be necessary to find an online project that is relevant for all the classes involved. Perhaps the best way is to practise what you preach. Teachers will need to learn to collaborate with other teachers – this will mean negotiating the activities, the design of the project, the methods, the assessment, the timetable and deadlines, etc. – even before the project begins. In short, carrying out an online collaborative learning project requires the very same knowledge and awareness that teachers endeavour to instil in their students. Such a project can be a learning experience for everyone involved.

Notes

1. The project, entitled Moderating Intercultural Collaboration and Language Learning (MICaLL) 118762 CP-I-2004 COM C2, is a Socrates-Comenius 2.1 project, partially funded by the European Union (<http://micall.net>).
2. The schools involved in the project were: St Gregorius School (NL), Základní škola Ústi nad Labem (CZ); Gymnázium Severní Terasa Ústi Nad Labem (CZ); Grund- und Hauptschule mt Werkrealschule Neckargemünd (DL); Kooperative Mittelschule (AT); CEIP Emili Carles i Tolrà (ES); CEIP Josep Orriol (ES). The Universities involved were: Faculteit Educatieve Opleidingen, Hogeschool van Utrecht (NL); Pedagogická Fakulta, Universita J. E. Purkyně

(CZ); Technologie et Sciences de l'Homme/COSTECH (FR); Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg (DL); Pädagogische Akademie des Bundes in Wien (AT). The project was coordinated by the Faculty of Education, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ES).

3. The names in the examples have been changed.
4. The original text read as below (translation by author).

Hola Miranda,
Finalment avui la Pekka m'ha enviat un correu. Jo flipo perquè després dels rotllos que jo li "fotu" m'envia un correu simplement amb aquestes paraules:

Hello,
we are going to send the e-mails.
In the attachment, there are addresses for sure.
Greetings
P

Com diuen en castellà... menos da una piedra. Però vaja, la cosa continua endavant i nosaltres anem fent i desfent el projecte a la nostra mida. No problem!!!

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Websites

- Central Queensland University's Collaborative Learning Project: <http://clp.cqu.edu.au/>
- Global Schoolnet Foundation: <http://www.gsn.org/index.html>
- Global Virtual Classroom: <http://www.virtualclassroom.org/>
- iEARN: <http://www.iearn.org/projects/>
- Kidlink: <http://www.kidlink.org/english/general/overview.html>
- Kidproj: <http://www.kidlink.org/KIDPROJ/index.html>
- NickNacks Telecollaborative Projects: <http://nshubert.home.mchsi.com/>
- The University of New South Wales Educational Development and Technology Centre (EDTeC): http://www.edtec.unsw.edu.au/inter/dload/flex_ed/resources/collaborative_learning/CL_resources.htm
- University of Maryland University College's Virtual Resource Site for Teaching with Technology: <http://www.umuc.edu/virtualteaching/module1/collaborative.html>