

## Chapter 4. Tips and suggestions to implement telecollaborative projects with young learners

### Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to provide teachers who are about to embark on the adventure of carrying out telecollaborative projects that involve young, beginner language learners with tips for guaranteeing success. As advocates and experienced teachers in the development of telecollaborative projects in the foreign language classrooms, we will provide tips for educators who want to learn from our adventures.

Most curricula around the world reveal there has been a shift in how learning is conceptualized today. Recommendations go from promoting teacher-centred to student-centred practices and to adopting a content-based input approach to a competence-based output approach. Competence-based curricula put forward innovative proposals such as the integration of content, linguistic and ICT education. Being competent means possessing the ability to put into play the resources necessary to solve the problematic situations one may encounter as a citizen in a ‘wired society’ (Dooly & Masats, in press).

Increasingly, this conceptual change entails the adoption of project-based syllabi at school, as it encourages learners to take an active role in their own learning process and to learn how to collaborate successfully with others in order to solve real world challenges. Problem solving tasks require students’ development of their mastery of linguistic, interpersonal, intercultural and cognitive abilities necessary for their participation in meaningful social practices. Moreover, it can be argued that Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an ideal tool teachers have at their disposal to get their students to “connect the dots” between content, language use,

the construction of knowledge and the development of 21st century skills (Dooly, Masats & Mont, 2012).

PBL is not a new methodology or a new phenomenon in the field of language learning, in fact it is was popular at the beginning of the 20th century thanks to the work of John Dewey. Yet, until recent years, it was often met with scepticism, especially by novice teachers. The Buck Institute of Education (BIE, 2003:4) defines PBL as a “systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquired process, structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks”. Almost a decade later, Patton (2012) claims ‘project-based learning’ refers to students designing, planning, and carrying out an extended project that produces a publicly-exhibited output or final product (a video clip, a digital magazine, a poster, a marketing campaign, an e-book, etc.). Projects that are structured through goal-oriented tasks offer a great opportunity to integrate learning as a social practice (collaborating, co-constructing knowledge, communicating, developing critical and creative thinking, etc.) and as a means to favour the development of life skills (leadership, social skills, initiative and flexibility), while learners develop linguistic competences, audiovisual competences, digital competences and the competences linked to the acquisition of knowledge related to specific areas of study (Masats, Dooly & Costa, 2009; Dooly & Masats, 2011; Dooly, 2016).

However, its adoption in the foreign language class presents the challenge of finding a context in which the use of the target language among learners is a *sine qua non* condition. Here is where telecollaborative projects, also referred to as Virtual Exchanges or Online Intercultural Exchanges, can come into play (Dooly, 2008; 2015; 2017; O’Dowd, 2016; Sadler & Dooly, 2016). When a project is developed in joint collaboration by groups of students who do not share the same language, opportunities for using the common target language become real. Dooly (2017) defines telecollaboration in education as the use of computer and/or digital communication tools to promote learning through social interaction and collaboration, thus moving the learning process beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom. As telecollaboration involves interaction between students from different places, telecollaborative projects are very powerful tools for the development of students’ intercultural competence. Students have a chance to see the world from someone else’s perspective and this can be done even with primary students with limited communicative abilities in the target language.

In the following section, we will briefly describe two telecollaborative projects, carried out in the English class, during two school years with a group of 6/8-year olds. Following that, we will list the steps teachers should follow to design a successful telecollaborative project. While doing so, we will identify the main challenges we encountered along the processes of designing, implementing and evaluating the two described projects and we will present and reflect upon the solutions we adopted.

The first project, *Travelling through Arts*, aimed at getting students to recognize the work of two painters, be able to reproduce one of their paintings and create a narrative in the format of an e-book based on a fictional encounter between the two artists in the various scenarios depicted in their work. The second project, *Healthy Habits*, made use of various avatars on Second Life to illustrate unhealthy behaviours (watching too much tv, not having showers often, eating junk food, playing video games for too long), as an excuse to set learners the challenge of adopting the role of scientists who had to observe and analyse the behaviour of these avatars and produce a scientific video report with suggestions to modify the observed behaviours. The telecollaborative partner schools changed between year one and year two, and design of the projects were very different in nature. However, the English teacher in Catalonia and her students were the same, so the tips provided in the second part of the article are supported by the experience gained by them.

## General overview of two real life classroom projects carried out by two groups of young learners of English

The projects we will briefly present here were addressed to two groups of students from a public school in Mollet del Vallès, Catalonia, during two consecutive school years. The same group of students in Mollet del Vallès was involved in both of the projects described here during two consecutive years. As first graders, they were involved, together with a second grade class from a school in Toronto, Canada, in a project entitled *Travelling through Arts*. As second graders, they joined a second grade class from a school in Vienna, Austria, to take part in a project named *Healthy Habits*. Both projects were interdisciplinary, since they related topics

across subjects and presented the students with the demand of learning to work in groups, both face to face in their physical classroom, but also in virtual environments or through video chats. As we will see, the projects always presented students with an enquiry, whose resolution posed them the challenge of creating together a tangible final product and occasionally other sub-products.



Fig. 1. One of the groups<sup>1</sup> involved in the project and the scientist avatars in the second project

In the following sections we will shortly describe the two projects, paying special attention to the demands teachers had to confront and how they met them.

## Travelling through Arts. Year 1

*Travelling through Arts* was a four-week project designed to achieve unity in cross-curricular classroom practices. The proposal involved four subjects (Arts & Crafts, English, ICT and Social Science) and aimed at getting children to appreciate art through the work of two local painters, Joan Abelló and Rob Gonçalves. The project allowed learners to compare two artistic styles and created the context for combining project-based learning with Web 2.0 (for instance, students had to locate the works of each artist displayed in a virtual gallery in Second Life). In the case of the Catalan groups, children could also experiment the technique deployed by the local artist and created a reproduction of one of his paintings.

1 The authors have received written consent from all the participants for their images to be reproduced and published in this chapter.

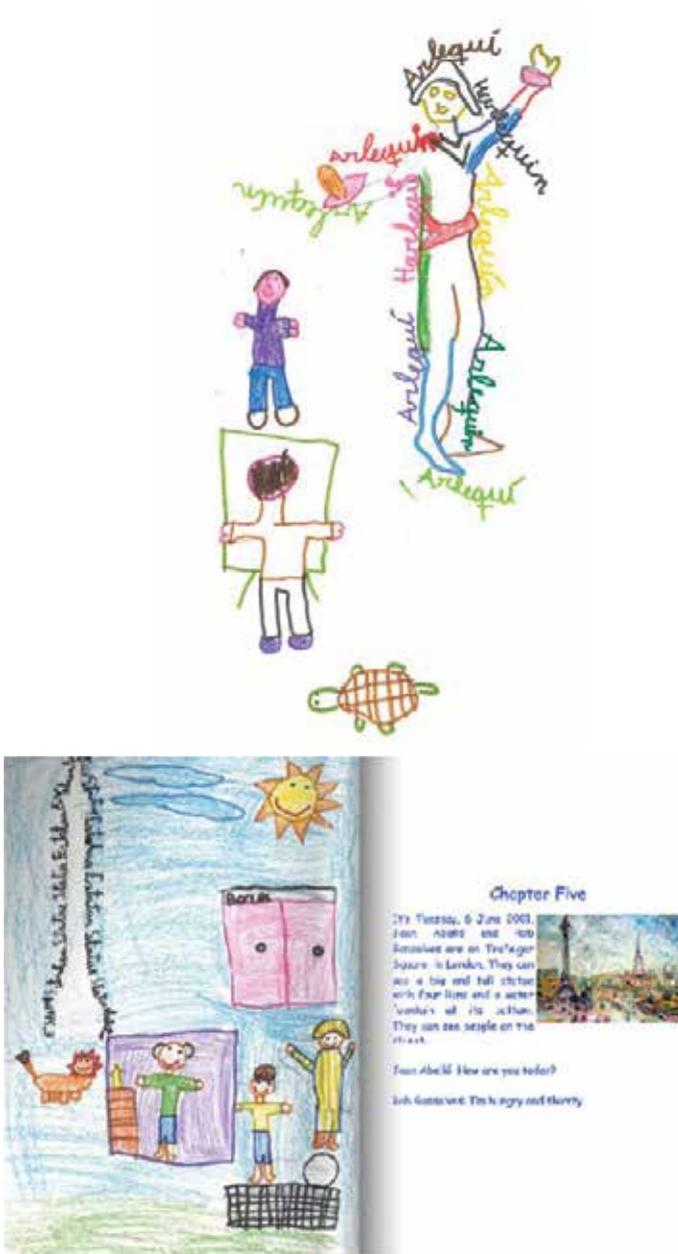


Fig. 2. Student output and page from final e-book

The final product of this international project was an eBook based upon the fictional friendship between the two target local artists. It is important to notice that communication among students was carried out asynchronously, through the exchange of emails and videos.

Bearing in mind that our students' ages and school levels were very different our learning outcomes and objectives were also different. For Catalan teachers, the main goal was for the students to learn through English about Arts. The Canadian partners were interested in helping their children learn how to write and read while communicating with other children across the world. Because both curricula requirements had to be met, the resulting product was a written text.

The children from Mollet del Vallès did not have the same linguistic level, students were provided with a significant amount of language support (e.g. the beginning of the sentences of each chapter were given to them and they added their own ideas, based on the vocabulary they had studied). The texts then had to be completed and edited by the Canadian children. Because they were taking part in the project through their 'Language Arts' class, they had to be creative and expand on the simple texts they got from their partners. Additionally, the students from Mollet del Vallès, who studied the local artist Joan Abello's painting technique, reproduced one of his works of art, which now decorates the school's main hall.

Inevitably, the resulting book is the sum of all the students' contributions, but not a collaborative text. However, thanks to their participation in this project, students improved their literacy and digital skills, while they expanded their knowledge of their immediate local environment and developed their intercultural competence.

## Healthy Habits. Year 2

*Healthy Habits* was a ten-week project designed upon the premise that language practice and knowledge acquisition are part and parcel of the same process. Learning can be understood as the transformation of information into knowledge through social actions which take place about and through language (Dooly, Mont, & Masats, 2014).



Fig. 3. Examples of the multiple activities from the project, year 2

Healthy Habits combined in-class teaching strategies (role-playing, dialogic use of common resources such as flashcards, posters, worksheets, online games) with technological resources. Through the use of ‘machinima’ (short video-clips made in Virtual Worlds), students were asked to ‘help’ two scientists (in the form of avatars) observe the unhealthy behaviour of three ‘subject avatars’ (Gameboy Gary, Hungry Helga and Smelly Susan) to explore the cause and effect of their actions with the objective to create a scientific video report, addressed to the two avatar scientists, with suggestions on how to modify and improve the habits of the three subjects<sup>2</sup>.

Authentic purposeful communication and collaboration were enhanced through video-conferences (synchronous exchanges) between the two classes in order to exchange information about the three case studies and produce the video report.

2 For more detailed information about this project please visit: <http://pagines.uab.cat/pads/en/content/healthy-habits>



Fig. 4. Students taking part in video-conference

The addressees of the report, the two avatar scientists, followed the suggestions given by the Austrian and Catalan children and some days after the receiving the video, they gave children feedback on the positive impact their suggestions had had on the lifestyles of the studied subjects.

The success of these two real examples demonstrates that it is possible to carry out telecollaborative projects using a foreign language with young learners as young as six year of age. Was it worthwhile? The answer is absolutely. But, was it easy? Of course, it was not. The following section is specially dedicated to those teachers who want to embark on a similar rewarding and challenging experience. We will address them directly when giving them tips and suggestions so as to be persuasive and inspiring. In the next section, basing our formatting on ideas and tips from other authors previously cited (cf. BIE, 2003; Dooly, 2008; Dooly & Masats, 2011; Patton, 2012), we have pulled together key features of implementing telecollaborative projects and illustrated them with samples from our project.

## Designing telecollaborative projects step by step: Tips for teachers

The recommendations below, which stem from the experiences gained through the planning, implementation and evaluation of the two projects we just described, are organized as chronological phases you should follow when planning a telecollaborative project. Whether you are a primary school teacher like us or you are working at a higher educational stage, we trust these tips will be useful. Bear in mind that careful planning is the key to success but flexibility to face challenges is equally important. Thus, do not worry, as we have already faced some difficulties in our projects, we can anticipate them and give you some suggestions to overcome them.

### Getting started

If you are interested in embarking on this adventure, first you need to be aware of your own motivations. Detect your main interests and reflect upon which teaching methods you like best. Here is where the initial project spark comes from.

It is very positive if you know with which students you would like to start a telecollaborative project. That will help you out in the later stages. Nevertheless, we must say that in our projects, this “choice” was not such, since the first graders were the oldest students we had at that moment and this is why we chose them (our other students were just in kindergarten). The important thing was that we were really interested in changing our own teaching methodology and we were open to experiment using new methods and tasks in class.

Maybe when you take the decision to embark on a telecollaborative project, you do not have a clear idea in mind regarding the contents or the main objectives you want to attain, but that is not a problem. What really matters is that you are excited about the idea of setting up a project. Obviously, you will need way more than just motivation to carry out a telecollaborative project, but in this stage, if you feel excitement and are

eager to learn, this is more than enough. We can assure you that at the very end of the project, all your efforts are going to be compensated.

### Finding a partner. Choose a solid team.

Now that you feel prepared to start, bear in mind that in order to have collaboration it is obvious that you need to start thinking about who your partner/s will be. Choosing a solid team with teachers whom you can share teaching goals will almost guarantee success from the very beginning. This is one of the most important challenges we encountered at the first stage in both projects.

This phase can be long or short depending on how lucky you are and on how many contacts, or possibilities of making contacts, you have. Be open to asking other teachers if they have friends abroad who are also teachers. That could be a nice beginning. If you do not have any contact in mind, there are platforms where you can easily find other teachers like you searching for international partners. As an example, you can visit [www.etwinning.net](http://www.etwinning.net).

Our suggestion is that you try to keep it simple at the beginning. Just one partner school is more than enough. Of course, you can also do telecollaborative projects with several schools, but this latter option, as there would be more people involved, this may result in more difficulties in the processes of planning, agreeing, setting up the calendar, etc.

From the very beginning we suggest you to share your enthusiasm, pedagogical views and prior expectations. Once you find someone to work with, share your goals, main ideas, your school context and see if you have the perfect match. If not, try again until you feel comfortable working with that teacher. This process should not be done in a rush, as it is extremely important you choose the right partner to set up and run a telecollaborative project together.

Choosing a partner can be very risky. We are all very enthusiastic at the beginning of a project. But sometimes uncertainty undermines determination and some teachers may abandon projects or not fulfill their responsibilities. Then, telecollaboration is impossible. If you feel you need to formalize the duties and responsibilities of both partners, you can negotiate a kind of contract that makes it clear what you expect from each other.

## Making sure the students are a good match

If you are an English teacher like us, you would probably love to set up a virtual exchange with a school from an English speaking country. However we must say that this is not always a positive aspect. Sometimes children who have English as a mother tongue get bored when making the effort to understand kids whose English is not that good and your kids might get frustrated trying to understand and make themselves understood. For example, when our students were listening to the video produced by the Canadian children they had a hard time trying to understand the video because the Canadian students spoke too fast for them. And of course, they were not used to the Canadian accent. However, the Catalan and Austrian kids had a similar command of English, since the target language was foreign for all of them. That is why, in the second project, our students felt more comfortable and more communicative. Of course, this is just an anecdote, but what you need to understand is that non native students can also help others learn English.

It is true that a native “source” is always great to learn the language from but virtual exchanges with non natives using English is a very good practice for the outside world. Today English is mostly used as a *lingua franca* by non native speakers to communicate to other non native speakers all around the world. So be open to establishing a partnership with a group of non native speakers with whom you share the same target language. Make sure they are not from your own country. Some schools set up telecollaboration projects with other local schools. This can be a good idea if the students do not realize that the language of communication is NOT a foreign language. Otherwise they may may not feel the need to use the foreign language is authentic. If you are teaching English as a foreign language, we suggest you find a colleague in the same situation and create a telecollaborative project where the need to use the target language is purposeful.

## Brainstorming the first project ideas: think small!

Once you have decided who your partner will be, you should share your ideas. Start by thinking small, as we did on our first project, *Travelling through Art*. It was just a four-week project based on asynchronous

communication (using emails and videos without any direct real time interaction) whose final product (an eBook) was created by students but digitized by teachers themselves. It may seem too simple but believe us, getting started is not going to be that easy. We suggest that you plan clear and simple activities together with your partner for your first project: the chances for success are higher.

What will probably happen is that once you have started, you will find that the project requires extra tasks and perhaps even a time extension. You and your partner may be so motivated and inspired that you will want to plan extra tasks after analyzing the reaction of your students and their interesting debates in class. That is possible if you were not too ambitious from the start. Remember that you also need time to adapt to a new methodology and that also requires time and slow work. We didn't have much practice in implementing student-centered activities before embarking on these projects. And although we were able to adapt, we would recommend gaining some prior experience in using activities to promote learners' autonomy and teamwork before setting up a telecollaborative project. This expertise is not a requirement, but could be very valuable later on.

## Communicating with your partner

Once you and your partner have agreed on the main topic of the project, it is time to establish an easy and direct way of communicating. We had very little communication with the Canadian teachers in our first project, as a consequence of the time difference between our countries. This often made feel like we were working alone. Not knowing promptly whether the others are following the agreements or not can cause a lot of stress. That is why during *Healthy Habits*, our second project, we chose to change partners and work with a teacher located in Europe, who was willing to have weekly contact with us not only to design the project but also to keep track of how things were going while implementing the project at both schools.

This communication is vital in a telecollaborative project. So, we recommend investing the time you need to choose the correct partner, do not rush and make sure both of you are willing to keep in touch often, not just in the creative phase but also during the implementation and evaluation of the project.

## Using social media

Suggesting you should use social media to conduct a telecollaborative project may seem evident as social media is the basis of collaboration. However, social media also provides a fantastic and ‘funtastic’ way of keeping in touch with your partners. At the time we planned our projects we did not use many types of social media; mostly just fora, emails and exchanging videos. Only years later, the Austrian teacher and one of us kept in touch through Facebook and WhatsApp. This helped us to see each other several times, continue sharing educational ideas and materials and we even visited our schools.



Fig. 5. The two telecollaborative partners meeting face-to-face

In our opinion a telecollaborative exchange cannot work properly without coordination and regular communication between partners (first teachers and then students). Keep this in mind when planning your own project.

## Planning the project goals and milestones

Now that you have established a direct channel of communication with your partner, you are ready to start planning together what you would like to do

with your students and for how long. Be aware that most of the times you will not have much freedom in choosing the topic of your project. Probably, there will be external factors that will influence your decisions (the time period when your telecollaboration is going to happen, the common points in the two curricula, students' characteristics, etc.), but that is ok. The only thing you need is to be inspired, know your students well and see what could work the best for them and could fit your country's curricula.

## Establishing SMART goals

Together with your partner double check that your main project objectives are all SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-related). If you only focus on designing motivating activities but do not have a clear overall purpose in mind, you will easily and unwillingly lose sense of what you are doing and why. Knowing exactly what you want to achieve with your students is the first and most important step of all.

## Getting inspired

At the time we created the projects, we did not have a great range of examples to get inspiration from. Today, telecollaborative projects are well known in educational contexts and surfing through the web can inspire you (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Do not miss this opportunity. As soon as you know what you want to teach together (main content, tasks and SMART objectives) you need to explore the Internet. Probably there will be lots of amazing ideas there for you to pick up, copy or adapt to your own needs. Take your time to read some teachers' fora, they will show you many interesting reflections coming from real experiences. Most likely this will help you oversee problems that due to your lack of expertise you would not be able to anticipate at this stage.

As teachers, we tend to be a kind of "superheroes and superheroines", doing everything by ourselves over and over again, but we believe this

is a mistake. Sharing with other teachers is a great way of learning and improving our daily teaching. You can even try to join a teaching groups in your area to keep updated and have easy access to good ready-to-use materials. In our projects we did not use this because we had a group of university teachers monitoring and providing help. But if you do not have access to this type of help, approach others you think might be resourceful (IT experts, members of the local community, other teachers).

## Deciding the main project outcomes

Using the SMART goals, we have defined before, create a list of tasks that need to be done to ensure the project goals will be met. Specify when and how you will carry out each task. This will be your first draft, the “skeleton” of your project, or in other words, the project’s pathway. Always keep in mind the project’s end and the final product children will create. For example, when in our first project we decided the final outcome would be an eBook with stories of the two artists around the world, it was clear to us that our students needed to know which countries their artists visited and where they were located on the globe and how you could travel there, which landmarks they represented in their paintings, how to describe the paintings, etc. So some of the activities we planned were designed to meet these needs.

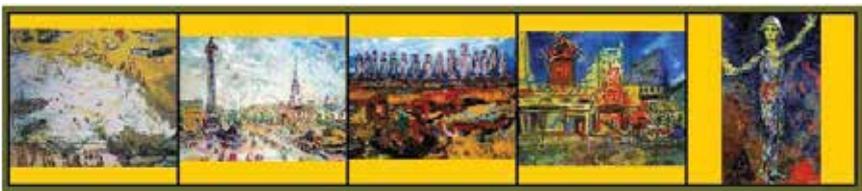


Fig. 6. The paintings from the virtual art gallery

In our second project, since our students were helping scientists to improve some people’s lifestyles (the avatars), they had to learn lots of vocabulary about daily habits, adverbs of frequency and to even state hypothesis in English. Due to this fact, several linguistic activities were created before-

hand in order to support the language students would need later on in the interaction with their Austrian friends.

## Samples of the Worksheets

Observation: Dr. Stella observes Hungry Helga

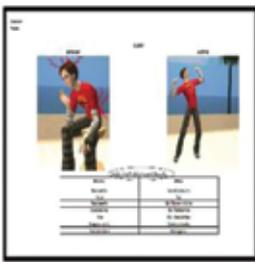
Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**CIRCLE the HEALTHY HABIT.**

Drinking lots of water
Practicing sports
Having a shower everyday
Eating fruits
Reading
Eating vegetables
Sleeping 8 hours a day
Washing hands
Brushing teeth

**CIRCLE the BAD HABIT.**

Never takes a shower
Eats lots of sweets
Never washes hands
Never brushes teeth
Plays video games many hours
Sleeps 4 hours a day



**Match the picture with the words!**

For the picture's location:  
 1. In the morning  
 2. In the middle  
 3. In the afternoon  
 4. In the evening



Fig. 7. Samples of scaffolding materials

The main outcomes are always closely related to the objectives. Make sure you have several moments to check them during the implementation phase, too. Probably, the need to add extra activities or eliminate others will arise during the project. Be ready to be flexible! Even if you have a very well planned and carefully timed project, be open minded to adapting classroom tasks at any stage, if that is necessary. This will ensure success and guarantee learning.

Do not try to do everything on your own. First of all you have a partner onboard, and both can search for additional support to help you out (families, city hall, other teachers from school, IT experts...). Create a good team and all your efforts together will result in amazing rewards both for your students and for yourselves too. As it is said: “practice what you preach!”.

## Keeping the final product in mind from the very beginning

Perhaps the first thing you need to decide together with your partner is what your students will create at the very end thanks to their telecollaborative work. Once you have decided the project's final outcome or product, you can start planning backwards. Visualize what your students will be doing on the last very session and reflect upon what they should have done previously to get there. This is a very well-known technique that helps teachers create tasks that are specifically connected to their main project's objective.

Agreeing on which the final product will be and on the context in which that product is necessary is the first step to guarantee your project will be purposeful. A project is meaningful if it fulfills two criteria. First, students must perceive it as an important task for them to be involved in. Second, a meaningful project always fulfills an educational, social and personal purpose. Make sure your project meets them all. Bear in mind that the final product of your project (which could be a performance, an artwork, a debate, a theatre play, a news programme,...) should always give your students the feeling that what they do matters.

## Posing a driving question for your project

If teachers start telecollaborative projects presenting an important inquiry, students will easily understand that they have to do some research in order to learn how to answer it. Besides, if teachers plan carefully this driving question, students will find interesting discoveries together with their partners from abroad. As Larmer and Mergendoller (2010, p. 35) state

A good driving question captures the heart of the project in clear, compelling language. The question should be provocative, open-ended, complex, and linked to the core of what you want students to learn. It could be abstract (When is war justified?); concrete (Is our water safe to drink?); or focused on solving a problem.

The driving question in *Travelling through Art* (What would have happened if Joan Abelló and Rob Gonsalves had travelled the world together?) was not made explicit from the very beginning but it was revealed to the

students just before starting the process of writing the eBook. The teachers, however, always had it in mind and this is why when students started to plan their stories, they had enough information to decide where the two painters would travel to (the cities or landscapes depicted in their works), how they would travel there (students had learnt about means of transports) and what they would visit in each place (students were familiar with the paintings and the landmarks represented in them). In *Healthy Habits*, the driving question was: How can we help Smelly Susan, Gameboy Gary and Hungry Helga have a healthier lifestyle? This is what students had to investigate in order to be able to change the avatar's unhealthy behaviour.

As you can see, in these examples good driving questions cannot be answered with just the help of a book or the Internet. A good question will probably raise many other questions that students will have to answer in order to be ready to fulfill the project's objective and create, at the same time, the final outcome (an ebook in the case of the first project and a scientific video-report in the case of the second). The driving questions gave students both a purpose and a challenge and connected them to the real world.

## Arranging tasks in different stages

Once you have the final product in mind it is time to list the activities or the tasks that will lead your students there and to arrange them in different stages. Each stage should have a clear objective (for instance, presentation of the project, getting to know our friends from abroad, planning together, creating the final product, delivering the final product, etc). We would recommend you to create a timeline since it is a clean and concise visual representation of the main project's events. This tool will help you to assign tasks to different time spans and see the overall plan easily. Besides, take into consideration that collaborative tasks usually increase in difficulty.

In both of our projects we started planning months before the implementation time. This is our advice. Plan ahead. Time is limited and telecollaborative projects cannot be improvised. Invest the amount of time you need to achieve a careful planning of each stage before starting the project. Good planning is a part of good doing.

Bear in mind that a telecollaborative project does not mean that only one language is used. There are many examples of telecollaborative projects where the students may be using only one language (e.g. a lingua franca such as English) or two languages (each partner may act as a language mentor for the other); or multilingual exchanges where many languages are used to access information. Talk about that once your project skeleton is ready and, if you opt for a multilingual project, assign a language to each of the tasks planned.

## Determining your role as a teacher in a telecollaborative project

In traditional classrooms the teacher is the information giver and students are the recipients of the information the teacher shares. Be ready to change this if you want to take part in a telecollaborative project as telecollaboration promotes the construction of shared knowledge among all the participants involved. Students take the responsibility of searching and transforming information and teachers guide them through this process or scaffold their learning. This is why it is very important to plan with your partner which will be your roles in each task.

As learners take an active role during the whole project, they need to communicate very often with their partners. During all stages, teachers have a very important role in order to prepare learners for their virtual interaction. Communication among students can be asynchronous or synchronous. In either case the teacher's role is essential. In both of our projects our role was very active since young learners needed a lot of linguistic and cognitive support but also guidance on how to work with others.

Teachers usually embark on telecollaborative projects with students who have a relatively good command of English with the thought that communication with students from abroad will be relatively easier. We strongly believe that age or aptitude should never be the only factors that determine your group choice. We would like to say that we were impressed with our young students, who barely knew how to read or write in their L1 when they were presented with the demand of writing an eBook in an L2 and succeeded! When faced with the challenge of communicating with other students in English, as this was the only shared language, our young

learners were very creative and made hypothesis about the target language. Catalan and Spanish was not needed at all. Most of the times they ended up with invented words or structures, but other times their guesses were right. In either case, they proved to possess good communication skills even for their early age and on putting it into play, they went beyond what the curriculum stated they should learn during grade one and two.

## Promoting 21st Century skills

In a good project students build skills valuable for today's world, such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, leadership, initiative, flexibility, etc. Pay special attention to these aspects and create a way of assessing them along the project.

Cooperating and collaborating with students from a different country implies the use of digital tools for communication and for producing the products. Therefore, this type of projects also favour the development of digital and audiovisual competences. When planning the project, it is very important to reach a consensus regarding which tools are going to be used to for each task. For instance, to communicate synchronously with Austria we chose Skype and observed that these chats were one of our students' favourite tasks (in spite of being one of the most linguistically and cognitively demanding activities).

## Giving students' voice & choice

If you allow your students to be responsible and take decisions, they will be more motivated to participate in your project. Students should be allowed to make some choices about the products to be created, how they want to work, and how they would use their time. Since our students were very young, teachers had to decide most of the tasks in advance. However, learners still had voice and choice. For instance they decided they wanted to visit the museum of the artist from their town, Joan Abelló, they also

chose how they were going to present themselves to the partners (through a video with still images they selected themselves, using Moodle to write about their likes and hobbies) and decided which suggestions they would like to give to the unhealthy avatars.

## Plan a final event

Purposeful projects have a target addressee other than just students' classmates or their teacher. When learners have a real audience, they become more engaged and work harder. They also care more about the quality of their final product because they are presenting it to somebody. It is highly advisable to include a final event in the project's plan, that is, a session devoted to presenting the final product and the conclusions to the addressee.

When implementing our projects, we did not take this step into account and we missed a great opportunity for closing the telecollaborative projects properly. In *Traveling through Art* we could have sent the ebook to a literary website. In the case of *Healthy Habits*, students could have uploaded their scientific video-report on youtube (always with permission from parents) in order to help people with similar unhealthy behaviours as the three avatars.

## Select digital tools

Using new technology in the classroom is a must nowadays, not only to communicate but also to present, search for information or to produce a product. In order to guarantee success, you first need to become familiar with the tools you and your partner have decided to use during the project and check for yourself their affordances and drawbacks. For instance, it took us several weeks to decide which eBook software we were going to use. In the end, we decided that we, teachers, would edit the book because the software available at that point was not user friendly for kids. Today there is a wide variety of digital tools for creating stories targeted to very

young learners such as Storybird, Smilebox, StoryJumper or similar ones. If we were to do the project again, we would make use of one of these tools so as to give children the opportunity to edit their own books.

## Be prepared to face technical problems

Telecollaborative projects rely on the use of technology. Learners need to be in contact online to work together, but communication breakdowns due to technical failures are not as rare as one would wish. When using technology, be ready to face technical problems and have a plan B in your pocket. Either you and your partner have an alternative communicative tool to the one planned (for example, you may decide to use Skype but have messenger installed on the computers just in case Skype is not working properly the day the two classes were expected to meet online) or agree beforehand that if problems occur, common tasks will be postponed.

In our case, we opted for this second option and we had fillers (optional or alternative activities) ready in case the planned activities that required internet connection or digital tools could not be done on the day they were scheduled. Remember, though, that a good telecollaborative project should link what happens in the virtual exchange with what happens in the face to face classroom. Fillers may well suit the project's goals if they are carefully chosen by the two partners.

## Plan the language your students will need to use

Do not fill up your project with lots of tasks, digital tools or group activities if you do not have plenty of time to invest on planning the type of language and linguistic support learners will need from you. As teachers we need to be very well aware of the kind of language our students will need to be able to carry out tasks in collaboration with their partners.

Linguistic preparation does not necessarily be tackled through teacher-centered activities. You can design tasks in which students need to discover

how language works. To test their progress or to give them opportunities to play with language at their own pace, you can make use of software designed for such purpose (for instance, JClic, Quizzizz, Quizlet, Kahoot, Plickers, Socrative, etc.). Take as much time as you need or have in order to give all the linguistic support your students may need. This is a very important step. In our Healthy Habits project we spent 3 one-hour-sessions to prepare students to take part in a 20-minute video call with our Austrian partners.

## Make the most of the cultural exchange

As we have already said, our projects were designed to promote quality contact among students so that they could develop their foreign language skills and intercultural communicative competence. There are three main types of tasks to promote cultural awareness: information exchange tasks, comparative tasks and collaborative tasks.

The first group of tasks are those in which students need to provide their friends from abroad with personal information such as their own biography, a description of their school, local town or city, main cultural traditions, etc. They are very suitable at the beginning of your project, since it is very important for your students to know who they will be working together with later on.

The second group of tasks required learners not only to exchange information but also to go one step further, make comparisons and pay attention to the similarities and differences between the two cultures (differences in school subjects, timetables, hobbies...).

## Group Students Intentionally

Your project plan requires you to state which tasks must be done in groups and which one individually or in pairs. Together with your partner think carefully about the activities you will do and which type of interaction they will be required. Use this information to establish how you will group

your students. When creating teams for a project never do random grouping. Students groupings may have an impact on the project's success or failure. Do not improvise groups, especially if it is your first project.

We would just suggest that you do not segregate your students according to supposed abilities, achievements or aptitudes. Segregation seriously weakens telecollaboration.

## Decide what to assess and by whom

Assessment is always challenging and in telecollaborative projects this is not an exception. One of the agreements you and your partner need to reach refers to what will be assessed and by whom. Ideally, the addressee of the student's final output should give them feedback on the work done. In our first project, the addressee was not clear. If the eBook had been aimed at a particular group of readers, they could have provided them with comments based on their reading experience. We changed this in our second project.

In *Healthy Habits*, the students were preparing the video-report for two scientists who adopted the form of avatars. The teachers were obviously controlling those avatars but the students were taking part in a simulation, the addressee was clear and the feedback too. The two avatars followed the students suggestions on how to modify the behaviour of the three subjects under study and told the children what had happened. As the subjects were avatars, the kids could also observe the impact of their suggestions on the evolution of the subjects' lifestyle and health.

Assessing the achievement of the project's goals by receiving feedback on the quality of the final product may occasionally not be enough. Assessment is institutionalized and assessment requirements may change from one educational context to another. Therefore, it is important to negotiate what will be assessed together and what will be assessed by each teacher. In either case, assessment criteria and procedures should be clear from the start and students should know them before they start the process.

## Choose the assessment tool you want to use and involve students in its design

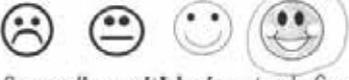
Students need guidance to elaborate the project's outcomes and also need to be informed on how they will be assessed. Rubrics can accomplish this double folded objective as they have proved to be powerful tools for revision and evaluation. As teachers, we should invest time creating or searching for good rubrics as they can provide guidance for students along the whole process. Alternatively, students can be engaged in the process of creating a rubric if the objective is to make them reflect upon the characteristics of the product they need to produce. In either case, students take the responsibility of checking and assessing what they produce and how they do it. Good guidance leads to high/quality products.

### Self-assessment

tema: *Mesos i els seus amics* Data: *29/5/11*

**AUTOEVALUACIÓ**  
**JOAN ABELLÓ**

1. Com m'he sentit fent aquest treball?



2. Com m'he sentit fent amic de Canadà?



3. Quina / es omni les activitats que MÉS m'han agradat?

(A) Jugar a la galeria Virtual amb l'Snoopy i els quadres.  
 (B) Parlar dels mitjans de transport i fer un mòbil.  
 (C) Jugar amb els Jocs del nostre bloc.  
 (D) Dissenyar la postal per enviar al Museu Abelló.  
 (E) Visitar la casa d'en Joan Abelló.  
 (F) Taller de retrat dels amics de Canadà.  
 (G) Pintar el quadre de Galles per l'escala.  
 (H) Fer el vídeo de presentació sobre nosaltres, la nostra escola i Catalunya.  
 (I) Pintar amb l'ordinador la ciutat del Arlequí.

Fig. 8. Self-assessment rubric

In our first project, our self/evaluation rubrics were written in Catalan. That was a mistake we corrected in the second year. We should not ask students to switch language to assess their learning. As teachers we need to find simple and visual assessment tools. Rubrics do not need to be complex evaluation tools.

## Concluding remarks

In this article we have argued in favour of introducing telecollaborative projects in the language classrooms as a means to contextualise learning and provide students with meaningful opportunities to co-construct linguistic and content-based knowledge while developing cognitive, communicative, digital, social, interpersonal and intercultural skills. To illustrate our viewpoint, we have briefly described two projects that, using Dooly & Sadler's (2016, p. 55) words, "embraced the premise that telecollaboration—even with beginning learners—can provide fundamental opportunities for communicative exchanges which are key to long-term language learning". As learning is a social practice, telecollaborative projects must ensure language is used purposefully and that students learn by doing and by communicating with peers to gain and transform information into knowledge and to agree on the steps to follow to attain a shared objective.

This chapter addresses teachers interested in adopting this methodology in their classrooms with the objective of giving them hints on how to set up a telecollaborative project. Underlying the list of steps to follow lies the belief that telecollaboration is not possible if one is not eager to spend time on searching for a partner, on scheduling virtual online meetings with him/her to plan together, on setting SMART goals, on deciding on the project's outcomes, on posing interesting driving questions, on arranging a variety of structured tasks, on choosing appropriate digital tools, on preparing students for collaboration and on celebrating success. Planning and assessing are two complex tasks on which the project's success or failure relies on. By making reference to the two described projects, we have tried to guide teachers along the challenging process of planning a telecollaborative project.

Telecollaborative projects are demanding for teachers as they need to change their traditional role of knowledge transmitter to become a facilitator who gives the floor to their students. Yet, in order to guarantee students can be responsible for their own learning, teachers need to plan sensitive projects, anticipate the challenges students will probably face and foresee possible solutions or activate scaffolding mechanisms. Based on the experience of having planned and implemented several projects, two of which were presented here, we will also make teachers aware of all these challenges and will try to prove that embarking on such an experience is nothing but rewarding for both teachers and students alike.

The article concludes that true collaboration, especially when participant teachers and learners come from different cultural and educational backgrounds, demands teachers to embark on a process of negotiating common contents, designing different types of modes to communicate and gain knowledge, selecting or creating a wide range of common resources and tasks, agreeing on shared assessment criteria and tools, and being willing to reach consensus between colleagues and to respect the decisions taken, even when it is necessary to alter plans to solve unexpected problems. Yet, we are positive about the results and rewards and encourage teachers to set up similar virtual exchanges, even with very young learners.

And this is all. Have fun when planning your first telecollaborative project!

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