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# Developing teachers' telecollaborative competences in online experiential learning

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we aim to investigate the development of the collaborative competences that teachers require when engaging in telecollaborative projects. In order to do so, we explore the data gathered from a group of teachers who were trained online to become future telecollaborative teachers. Participants carried out a series of tasks that included reading and reviewing articles on telecollaboration and implementing a virtual exchange. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed on the data gathered from a forum, wiki and answers to an end-of-course questionnaire. Results suggest that teacher training through modeling and exploratory practice may help teachers acquire the conceptual and procedural knowledge and skills (competences) required by the telecollaborative teacher. However, in order to develop procedural competences, teachers need to engage in experiential learning following a linear process that not only facilitates an understanding of what online collaboration entails, but also provides them with hands-on-experience and encourages them to reflect on the complexity of the collaborative process.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid development of technologies has compelled many teachers to become teachers 2.0 in the 21st century. This process implies that practitioners have to become actively involved in integrating web 2.0 technologies in their classrooms. However, despite greater emphasis on technology learning in higher education, new teachers entering the educational system find exploiting technologies in the classroom difficult. In-service-teachers experience similar concerns since they have to face the same challenges with the technology without any prior training. Elaborating on this, a recent report by [Moeller and Reitzes \(2011\)](#) mentions how, despite its availability, technology is not widely integrated into the learning experience. They surveyed more than 1000 high school teachers, IT staff and students in the U.S. and discovered that only 8% of teachers fully integrated technology into the classroom with 43% of students feeling unprepared to use technology as they looked ahead to higher education or their work life. A similar report by [Grunwald Associates \(2010\)](#) elaborated on the difficulties teachers in the U.S. face when trying to use technologies pedagogically in the classroom. Thus, only 39% of teachers report moderate or frequent use of technology as an instructional tool and many of those who use technology do so primarily to present information rather than to provide hands-on learning for the students. These findings suggest that creating learning contexts that exploit technologies successfully is not always easy as authors such as [Dooly and Sadler \(2013\)](#) point out:

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teachers do not necessarily understand, nor reflect on, how these tools and the interaction through these tools can help students actively construct new knowledge [...] Moreover, teachers need to help their students see the relevancy of what they are learning and how they learn – as this is the type of competency their students will be expected to have in the future (p.8)

In Europe, reports carried out on the future of learning (Ala-Mutka et al., 2010) also mention as one of the main challenges for the future of education and training the importance of ensuring that “all learners obtain the necessary skills to confidently, efficiently and critically use technologies to achieve their objectives” (p.6). In order to facilitate this goal, “teachers need to continuously update their skills in order to support learners in safe and critical usage of the currently most relevant technologies” (p.6). Therefore, more knowledge and support is needed to develop effective pedagogical strategies to use ICT in education.

One of the most pedagogically sound proposals to use technologies effectively in the classroom is telecollaboration. Telecollaboration can be defined as a learner-centred activity that entails engaging students in virtual collaboration with partners in different locations in order to achieve certain learning or training goals. In the field of foreign language education, it means involving students in online international communication and collaboration with partners of different cultures and in distant locations with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural competence (Belz, 2003). Research in telecollaboration has shown its potential to stimulate participants' linguistic competence (Sauro, 2009; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011), intercultural competence (Liaw, 2006; Vogt, 2006), learner autonomy (Fuchs, Hauck, & Müller-Hartmann, 2012), pragmatic aspects through social relationships (Kinging, 2000, pp. 23–46) and multiple literacies (Guth & Helm, 2011; Kress, 2003). Other authors (Vinagre, 2010) have suggested that it can also help develop the students' instrumental, systemic and interpersonal competences which are considered essential for their future employability (i.e. technological literacy, ability to work in a team, ability to work in an international or multicultural context, ability to communicate in a foreign language, ability to work autonomously). Some of these competences can be difficult to develop in many educational settings and, in this respect, telecollaboration offers educators an opportunity to foster them by transcending the traditional face-to-face language classroom.

Despite these potential benefits, telecollaboration has not become established practice in foreign language education. One of the reasons that can explain this has to do with challenges that its implementation poses for many teachers. According to O'Dowd (2013), the complexity of this activity refers to “many different types of online contact involving various educational contexts, types of partners, online tools and pedagogical approaches” (p.4). Therefore additional knowledge and skills are required in order to engage in telecollaboration when compared to other activities in traditional face-to-face learning settings.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Training teachers for telecollaboration

An increasing number of studies have focused on how teachers can be trained to acquire and develop telecollaborative competences. Some studies (Stickler & Hampel, 2007; Vinagre, 2015) emphasize the importance of experiential use and integration of specific technological modes in the teachers' own learning process in order to improve their knowledge, competences and preparation so that they can integrate technologies in their classrooms. Other studies (Guichon, 2009; Hauck & Wernecke, 2013) mention the importance of ‘exploratory’ teaching practice and the need for ‘experiential modeling’ in teacher education (Fuchs et al., 2012). The principles underlying these new models of teacher education are based on socio-constructivist approaches to learning which emphasize the importance of social interaction for the construction of shared knowledge. These approaches require teachers' active participation, interaction and reflection, and technologies are considered to be mediating tools. Their main aim is to encourage participants' understanding of the pedagogical value of online collaborative experiences and motivate them to transfer this knowledge into the classroom (Dooly, 2009). In order to achieve this goal, the relation between theoretical (conceptual) and practical (procedural) knowledge is essential, since the former needs to be transformed into the latter through experiential activities. In this process, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge is a prerequisite for the development of procedural knowledge. According to Harteis (2010: 95) conceptual or theoretical knowledge (knowing that) consists of “information on objects, humans, relations and instruments”. The acquisition of conceptual knowledge requires not only the provision of information but also reflective and thoughtful learning since it demands an understanding of the meaning of terms and theories (Slavin, 2006). The construction of conceptual knowledge, however, is not the crucial criterion for learning success, but rather procedural knowledge (knowing how). This practical knowledge is the application of conceptual knowledge through “changes of perspectives, multiple approaches to a problem, social exchange of assumptions and commonly shared cognitions” (Harteis, 2010: 96).

Bearing this in mind, we organized a teacher training course which aimed at fostering the participants' development of the knowledge –conceptual and procedural– and skills (competences) required by the telecollaborative teacher by engaging them in virtual collaborative exchange. Thus, the focus of the training course was not on foreign language teaching but rather on allowing participants to acquire hands-on experience as telecollaborators so that they would gain the confidence required in order to exploit this activity in their classrooms. Since in telecollaboration the learning process is considered as important as the final learning product (Vinagre, 2010), the case study presented here investigates, on the one hand, a process-oriented

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