

# Toward Successful Telecollaboration Using SNSs in EFL Instruction: What Elements Should Be Incorporated and Considered?

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## **Abstract**

Telecollaboration using social networking sites (SNSs) allows students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) to communicate and collaborate online with native English speakers (NESs) easily in the present global communities. Furthermore, researchers realize that telecollaboration contributes to cultivating learners' intercultural understanding, developing foreign language skills, and activating learner autonomy. There is a risk of practitioners facing several unforeseen obstacles during the process of designing telecollaborative projects; however, these difficulties can be solved with careful consideration and planning. This paper therefore presents important elements that contribute to successful telecollaboration in EFL teaching and learning, highlighting asynchronous text-based telecollaboration using SNSs that are user-friendly and allow the promotion of close relationships between peers. The paper further describes critical components in the three program phases—preparation, implementation, and assessment.

**Keywords:** computer assisted language learning, EFL, Web 2.0 technology, social networking, telecollaboration

## **Introduction**

In an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting, it is critical for learners to immerse themselves in situations that entail authentic English language use in order to enhance their English skills (Ellis, 2008). However, the creation of such opportunities in EFL classrooms is often difficult or limited, especially in Asia, due to a shortage of native-speaking English teachers (NSETs). One significant reason is that there is an increasing interest in employing NSETs in Asian countries, and they are in high demand (Jeon & Lee, 2006; Copland et al., 2020). Nevertheless, Web 2.0 technology including blogs and social networking sites (SNSs) has significantly lessened such barriers. Specifically, telecollaboration using SNSs allows EFL learners to communicate and collaborate online with native English speakers (NESs) easily in the present global communities.

Belz (2003, p. 2) defines telecollaboration as “institutionalized, electronically mediated intercultural communication under the guidance of a languacultural expert (i.e., a teacher) for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence.” O’Dowd (2011, p. 342) additionally describes telecollaboration as “the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work.”

Telecollaboration models can be categorized as monolingual, where only one language is used in the exchange; bilingual, where both languages are used by the exchange partners; and multilingual, where more than two languages are used (Anikinaa et al., 2015). Furthermore, telecollaboration can be conducted either synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous telecollaboration is any real-time interaction that involves text-based online chat and audio/video meeting functionality. Asynchronous telecollaboration is any time-delayed communication, which includes email, mailing lists, discussion forums, and SNSs. Another dichotomy involves the relationship between oral and textual counterparts. Oral telecollaboration is often connected to its synchronous counterpart through video conference systems such as Zoom and Google Meet. However, when students exchange videos that include spoken English, the dialogue can be considered a type of asynchronous oral telecollaboration.

In the literature of computer assisted language learning (CALL), it is often emphasized that telecollaboration can stimulate students' intercultural competence (Kabilan et al., 2010; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2010; Lee & Markey, 2014; Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010; Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2019). Moreover, many previous studies have asserted that it can help develop English language skills (Lee, 2004; Pinkman, 2005; Chen & Brown, 2012; Gardner, 2013) and nurture autonomy in language learning (O'Dowd, 2007; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009; Coutinho, 2016). In this way, telecollaboration serves as a beneficial tool for foreign language teaching and learning.

While there is a risk of practitioners facing several unforeseen obstacles when designing telecollaborative projects, the difficulties could be solved with careful consideration and planning (Toscu, 2021). As an increasing number of language instructors are currently interested in telecollaboration (Wicking et al., 2021), it is appropriate to offer guidelines on establishing and running such projects (Ha, 2014). This paper consequently highlights several elements that contribute significantly to successful telecollaboration in EFL teaching and learning. In particular, the paper underscores asynchronous text-based telecollaboration using SNSs. The reasons for this emphasis are that asynchronous projects allow the promotion of close relationships between peers in comparison with synchronous projects (Hauck & Youngs, 2008), and that SNSs involve the feature of user-friendliness. This article further discusses what elements should be incorporated and considered in the three program phases; namely, preparation, implementation, and review.

### **How to prepare for a telecollaborative project?**

#### **Finding appropriate collaborators**

Finding suitable collaborators for telecollaboration is vital as the initial step. A partnership in telecollaboration is essential to evaluate the degree of success of a project (Ha, 2014), yet finding an appropriate partner is not an easy task (Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020). Contacting acquaintances who are instructors in English-speaking countries and proposing a telecollaborative project can be a productive first effort. Alternatively, it is possible to get to know many EFL instructors at international conferences, which may create an opportunity to move forward with a telecollaboration project with them (Wicking et al, 2021). Furthermore, instructors can be found through associated platforms such as UNICollaboration (<http://uni-collaboration.org>), which is specifically dedicated to this type of partnering in higher education. Other projects such as Cultura (<https://cultura.mit.edu>), iEarn (<https://iearn.org>), Global Nomads (<https://gng.org>), Soliya (<https://www.soliya.net>), and Sharing Perspectives (<https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com>) provide resources for teachers, including

ideas and materials (O'Dowd, 2018). Specifically for English language teachers, forums like EnglishClub (<https://www.englishclub.com>) or English Forward (<https://www.englishforums.com>) offer valuable opportunities for communicating and exchanging ideas and know-how in English language teaching and sharing learning with other teachers. Without question, it is critical to build reliable and steady partnerships between collaborating teachers when conducting a telecollaborative project (O'Dowd, 2013).

#### Making a schedule

The duration and frequency of telecollaboration are closely tied to the academic schedule of the instructors' classes. Instructors need to take into account their academic schedules because they vary by country or region. Considering the differences in schedule, they need to choose an overlapping time frame that coincides in order for the two institutions to implement a telecollaborative project. It might be prudent to suggest beginning with a less-ambitious pilot such as a one-time event or a limited series of events before moving on to more comprehensive, large-scale schemes. After deciding on a clear schedule of telecollaboration, it is necessary to inform students of the activity schedule so that they have expectations about the activity and can prepare properly to maximize the learning benefits.

#### Considering student relationships

It can be convincingly argued that the native and non-native relationship has the most significant impact on EFL learning since NESs have abundant linguistic and cultural knowledge. Telecollaboration can stimulate non-native speakers to improve their language skills by interacting with native speakers of the target language (Díez-Bedmar & Pérez-Paredes, 2012; Helm, 2015). In addition, establishing personal connections via telecollaboration is a significant contributor to the creation of a positive learning environment (Mazer et al., 2007). Conversely, Boyd and Elisson (2008) caution that personal relationships developed through SNSs are typically deeply embedded in individuals' personal lives, although SNSs allow people to connect online without difficulty. Therefore, there is concern as to what extent participants can establish a productive relationship through telecollaboration using SNSs for the purpose of EFL learning. To solve this issue, it is ideal to match groups of the same age (e.g., university students with university students) because it is relatively easy for students of the same generation to share cultural perspectives (Toscu, 2021).

For successful telecollaboration, moreover, consideration should be given to whether students will interact in pairs or in groups. Pair activities allow students to interact more closely with each other. Still, there is a danger that communication breakdown will occur if one student does not engage enthusiastically in the activity. When students interact in groups, meanwhile, such an issue is less likely to emerge. Should groups be the preferred option, it is necessary to consider how many students to include in each group. It is recommended that this be determined through discussions with the partner instructor.

#### Setting goals

Establishing clear and realistic goals for implementing telecollaboration is highly important to achieving success in this scheme (Chun, 2015). Harris (1995) suggests that an online exchange activity should be tied directly to the curriculum. In EFL learning, one of the main goals of telecollaboration is to develop English skills (Kabilan, et al. 2010; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2010; Lee & Markey, 2014; Liaw & Bunn-Le Master,

2010; Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2019). Instructors who wish to emphasize listening and speaking skills should consider adopting synchronous telecollaboration using online video conference systems such as Zoom and Google Meet. Nevertheless, time zone differences between the participating countries can present a serious challenge. Synchronous telecollaboration for students in the United States and the United Kingdom who are communicating with students in Asian countries is especially difficult. As an alternative, students can record and upload video clips that they narrate or in which they speak in English on the closed discussion board of an educational SNS. This asynchronous activity is aimed at nurturing listening and speaking skills. If the focus is on reading and writing skills, instructors can incorporate extensive use of the closed discussion board on an educational SNS where students can share their posts in the written mode.

Another critical goal of telecollaboration is enhancement of intercultural understanding. Because telecollaboration incorporates communication between participants from different places, it is a very powerful tool to nurture participants' intercultural competence (Mont & Masats, 2018). Similarly, telecollaboration can offer a rich environment for participants to cultivate interculturality by devoting themselves to meaningful authentic collaborative opportunities with native speakers, by learning and discussing cultural differences, and by developing relationships with one another (Izmaylova, 2017). Intercultural competence therefore appears to be a major focus in the telecollaboration literature (Kabilan et al., 2010; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2010; Lee & Markey, 2014; Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010; Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2019; Hirotani & Fujii, 2019). The findings and implications of such studies will serve as useful resources when instructors seek to establish telecollaborative projects highlighting the development of students' intercultural competence.

Overall, developing both language skills and intercultural understanding is indispensable for teaching EFL. For setting goals, instructors are encouraged to carefully consider which skills they wish to highlight in curriculum-based telecollaboration. In addition, they need to explain the aim of telecollaboration to the participants before a project launches (Dooley, 2008).

#### Developing content

When instructors develop the content of a telecollaborative project, it is worth considering incorporating project-based learning (PBL), which is a teaching method that can enhance purposeful communication. Krajcik et al. (2008) defined PBL as a constructivist approach that highlights inquiry-based active learning through collaborative group interaction and results in valuable outcomes that are meaningful for the learners as well as for society. PBL is a useful approach to incorporating technology into the curriculum, as it helps students apply what they learn to real-life experiences and delivers a multipurpose inspiring education (Edutopia, 2008). In telecollaboration that adopts PBL, it might be interesting to assign topics related to social or global issues that concern people everywhere. With such topics, participants will be encouraged to express their opinions and share their ideas about global issues through telecollaboration.

#### Selecting Platforms

When considering which SNS to select, instructors must evaluate which applications are most suitable for telecollaboration in the given educational settings. Facebook may come to mind first, as it is currently the most popular SNS globally: People in all parts of the world enjoy communicating with others on Facebook. As a popular and familiar SNS, Facebook has potential as an effective online site for EFL learning and related online

educational discussions (Abraham et al., 2018). However, there are concerns that personal information may be disclosed to unfamiliar people and that unscreened strangers may make friend requests on Facebook.

For the safety and security of participating students, it is recommended that instructors use education-oriented SNSs such as Edmodo (<https://new.edmodo.com>), Eliademy (<https://eliademy.weebly.com>), and Twiducate (<https://www.livelingua.com/twiducate>). Unlike Facebook, access to such educational sites is allowed only for registered students and teachers, with students joining a particular online learning community established by the teacher. Furthermore, with an educational SNS, teachers can conveniently monitor student engagement and evaluate learning performance more easily than would be the case if, for example, email were the main means of student interaction.

Educational SNSs offer various teacher-friendly functions, including posting assignments and reminders. Students, meanwhile, can engage in discussions on the message board, submit homework, and interact with their teacher. By sharing the assigned group code with teachers and students in the participating countries, it is possible to conduct telecollaboration activities that involve the global community and help cultivate students' intercultural competence (Okumura, 2020).

In addition, educational SNSs can be used with smartphones once the application software is downloaded. The use of mobile devices appeals to students who are digital natives; many of them already enjoy communicating with friends or acquaintances using a variety of messaging applications such as Instagram and WhatsApp. Thus, for members of the younger generation, telecollaboration through educational SNSs on smartphones is likely to be a preferred learning mode. Similarly, the mobility of smartphones can contribute to developing new approaches that can nurture more personalized learning (Ros i Solé et al., 2010), as well as cultivating learner autonomy in EFL learning.

### **What instructors should do in the implementation?**

In a telecollaborative project, one of the instructor's critical responsibilities is to maximize the outcome (O'Dowd, 2011). In order to do this, the instructor should support student engagement and facilitate students' interactions.

#### Supporting student engagement

During the implementation of telecollaboration, the instructors' critical role includes assisting the students (Ensor et al., 2017). The degree and amount of support may depend on the participating students' language level. For beginning level EFL students, in particular, it may be necessary to give them vocabulary and expressions that they need in order to interact or to write what they want to say during the initial stages of telecollaboration. Although EFL learners seem to look forward to interacting with NESs, they may also be concerned about whether their English will be adequately understood. This is a particular concern for novice EFL learners; hence, language support from EFL instructors is essential until students get used to interacting on a SNS in English. Once they are comfortable with interactions during the telecollaborative activity, the students will be expected to learn a variety of vocabulary and expressions from their partners' English language use (Díez-Bedmar & Pérez-Paredes, 2012).

### Facilitating students' interactions

Another important task for the instructors to carry out during the implementation phase is facilitating communication (Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2015). When using educational SNSs in particular, the instructor and partnering teacher can monitor all student work on the discussion board of the platform, which is limited to participating instructors and students. Similarly, instructors are able to ascertain the frequency of student interactions. Ideally, students are actively posting and commenting, and their counterparts are replying to the posts on a regular and timely basis on the discussion board. If some students are sending or receiving few comments, the instructor may want to encourage them to pay closer attention to the telecollaboration and facilitate their communication on the discussion board.

### **What elements are significant for assessment of students' progress?**

#### Formative assessment

Evaluation of students' engagement in a telecollaborative project is a complicated, still-fundamental issue (Helm, 2015). As mentioned above, PBL is a useful way to establish the content of a telecollaborative project, and accordingly, the instructor can use formative assessment in PBL, which is particularly suitable for evaluating telecollaborative learning. Higgins et al., (2010, p. 5) define formative assessment as "work that a student carries out during a course for which they get feedback to improve their learning, whether marked or not." Additionally, Eberly Center, Carnegie Mellon University (2021) asserts that the purpose of formative assessment is to observe student learning in order to deliver ongoing feedback that can be utilized by instructors to develop their teaching and by students to enhance their learning.

One essential technique of formative assessment is the use of portfolios (Belz, 2002; O'Dowd, 2010; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008), which can be defined as a purposeful collection of students' work (Apple & Shimo, 2004). Using portfolios, it is possible to help students reflect on their online interaction (Wicking et al., 2021) and achievement (Howrey & Tanner, 2009). A portfolio can contain any piece of work produced as part of a telecollaborative activity, including SNS postings and replies and video presentations (Wicking et al., 2021).

#### Using a test or a survey

As a different way to assess students' performance in telecollaboration, it would be useful to apply characteristics of summative assessment that is recognized as assessment of learning. For the assessment of EFL writing skill, for instance, some scholars have incorporated the pre-test/post-test design in their telecollaboration using Edmodo and found that the telecollaborative projects helped develop students' writing skills (Noviana et al., 2015; Shams-Abadi et al., 2015; Fauzi, 2017; Altunkaya & Ayrancı, 2020). Regarding the purpose of assessing intercultural competence, a number of previous studies used the pre- and post-survey method in their telecollaborative projects in order to evaluate each student's progress (Schenkers, 2012; Hirotoni & Fujii, 2019; Katsumata & Guo, 2020). Their attempts serve as good models for instructors who are trying to adopt a test or survey for assessment purposes.

In sum, several academics assessed students' performance and attainment in telecollaboration formatively and summatively. However, as O'Dowd (2010) states, it is vital to improve comprehensive assessment models for telecollaborative projects. Instructors thus need to consider what components should be assessed by which assessment tools.

## Conclusions

Although establishing a well-prepared telecollaborative project can be challenging for EFL instructors, previous research has shown that doing so can provide profitable opportunities to promote students' intercultural understanding, enhance English language skills, and activate learner autonomy. Furthermore, EFL instructions with Web 2.0 technology can deliver more innovative learning opportunities in connection with the global community when compared with traditional instructions within the classroom (Al-Kathiri, 2015). EFL instructors need to arrange and prioritize these elements in order to develop an optimally effective telecollaboration. Without question, preparing carefully, implementing a strong support framework, and assessing students' progress thoroughly are key factors for successful telecollaboration.

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