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**Title: The INTENT Project: Integrating Telecollaborative Networks
into Foreign Language Higher Education**

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Abstract:

This presentation will outline a new Erasmus Multilateral project which focuses on the theme of integrating telecollaborative exchange into foreign language education at university level. Telecollaboration refers to 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. The INTENT project (www.intent-project.eu) aims to raise greater awareness among students, educators and decision makers of telecollaboration as a tool for virtual mobility in FL education at university level.

I will first report on one of the project's main activities: A European-wide survey of telecollaborative activity at university level. The survey deals with various issues including: To what extent is telecollaborative making an impact on FL education at European universities? What problems are students and educators encountering in their particular contexts?

The presentation will conclude by outlining the tools, telecollaborative models and activities which the Project team is developing in order to support this activity across Europe.

Introduction: Background to the INTENT project

Foreign language (FL) Telecollaboration involves virtual intercultural interaction and exchange between classes of FL learners in geographically distant locations. Since the 1990's, foreign language (FL) educators at European universities have used Internet information and communication tools to bring learners into contact with groups of target language speakers with the aim creating opportunities for authentic communication, meaningful collaboration and interpersonal relationship development. Research has shown that this activity, telecollaboration, contributes to learner autonomy, linguistic accuracy (Kinginger & Belz, 2002), intercultural awareness (Ware, 2004), intercultural skills (Belz & Mueller-Hartmann, 2003; Thorne, 2010), and electronic literacies (Hauck, 2010).

However, research has also highlighted the limited impact of telecollaboration in university contexts to date (Belz & Mueller-Hartmann, 2003). Various reasons have been identified for this. First, telecollaboration remains relatively unknown outside of specialised research communities. Second, practitioners who do organise exchanges encounter many barriers, such as difficulty in finding partners, misalignment of academic calendars, differing assessment procedures and divergent attitudes to ICT. An initial small-scale study carried out by this author (O'Dowd, 2011) found that university institutions often view telecollaboration as an 'add-on' activity which relies on 'pioneering' teachers and motivated students and as such, telecollaboration is not considered an integral part of university study programmes. Some reasons identified in this study included:

1. A lack of pedagogical training available for educators
2. Educators' fear of extra work-load due to lack of support and resources
3. Lack of long-term stability in partnerships with other universities
4. Lack of academic credit awarded to students for telecollaborative activity

Taking into account this current state of affairs in this area, the INTENT project was awarded funding by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning programme to carry out a 30 month project. The team established two key aims for their project:

- 1) To raise greater awareness among students, educators and decision makers of telecollaboration as a tool for virtual mobility in Foreign Language education at university level.
- 2) To achieve more effective integration of telecollaboration in university institutions.

These aims reflect the main issues confronting this area of virtual mobility – first, the lack of awareness among educators about this activity and how it can be organised and second, the need to provide practitioners with the tools, training and support necessary to make the activity as effective as possible. These aims can be broken down into the following objectives:

1. Establish a clear overview of the levels of use of telecollaboration, explore attitudes to the activity among key stake holders across European HEI's, and identify practical barriers to the take-up of telecollaboration.
2. Develop a set of tools, telecollaborative models and partner networks to overcome barriers and facilitate telecollaboration practice.

3. Develop a set of workable solutions to address the lack of academic recognition which telecollaboration receives.
4. Publish an online training manual and hold training workshops to train and inform the FL learning and teaching community and related stakeholders and decision makers.
5. Engage decision makers at institutional, regional and national levels in a collaborative dialogue as to how telecollaboration can be effectively employed as a tool for the achievement of the Bologna process.

By achieving these objectives, the project team hopes to increase the number of students, educators and decision makers who are aware of the benefits of telecollaboration and who will consider integrating it into their educational activities. The remainder of this paper focuses on the initial findings of objective 1- a European survey and collection of case studies aimed at establishing a clear overview of the levels of use of telecollaboration across European universities, and at identifying practical barriers to the take-up of telecollaboration. The data collected in this study continues to be under analysis at this stage, but we believe there are some initial findings which are already worthy of consideration.

Designing a Survey of Telecollaboration in European Universities

In order to carry out a representative survey of telecollaborative practice around European universities, the project team undertook various steps. In October 2011, the project team drew up a list of telecollaborative practitioners around Europe based on their own extensive networks of contacts. This list was collected in a database in the project wiki where each group member listed the name and contact email of their contacts. Following that, further potential informants were identified through academic publications, conference presentations and relevant mailing lists. Third, a call for participants was also published on the project website and in various academic mailing lists and relevant social networks asking for those European university colleagues who had organised telecollaboration in the past or who were interested in this type of activity to carry out the surveys. Colleagues were also asked to share the call widely with other professionals. Individuals who answered these announcements and expressed their willingness to participate in the survey were added to the database of informants in the project's wiki. This database was also to serve as a useful source of dissemination of future activities and publications by the project team.

This approach to data generation is called *convenience sampling*: This involves that the researcher contacts individuals representing the target population of interesting persons and continues until sufficient data has been collected for the purpose of the investigation. There is also an element of *purposive sampling*, in which the survey respondents are selected by the researcher on the basis of their typicality (Cohen & Manion, 1985; Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

The survey itself was developed through a process of pre-piloting and piloting similar to that described by Nunan and Bailey (2009: 145). Initial drafts of three different surveys were drawn up by the project members in León and Padua. The three surveys

were aimed at: 1) university educators in European institutions who had carried out telecollaboration, 2) university educators in European institutions who had not yet carried out telecollaboration but were aware of and interested in the activity and, 3) university students in European institutions who had carried out telecollaboration during their studies.

The questions involved a combination of closed questions, likert style questions as well as open questions. This draft was then discussed and reviewed by the other project members in the project wiki and mailing list. Based on their suggestions and comments, a second draft of the three surveys was drawn up and programmed using the surveymonkey online survey software. This second questionnaire was then pre-piloted by the members of the project team and suggestions were again shared and discussed using the project's internal communication channels. These suggestions referred to linguistic clarifications as well as suggestions to simplify the questionnaire by converting some of the open questions into closed questions. When these changes had been carried out, a third version of the survey was then piloted by a group of fifteen colleagues outside of the project team. Their feedback also served to identify and correct questions which could lead to misinterpretation as well as problems with the 'question logic' of the survey software.

Following these corrections, the survey was then deemed to be ready for dissemination. Project members in France, Germany and Italy then carried out the translation of the survey into these three languages. These team members also provided in the project wiki a translation of a model 'introduction e-mail' which team members could use when contacting possible respondents. This email explained briefly the background to the project and the survey and explained clearly that respondents who wished to receive an acknowledgement of their participation in the survey could do so by informing the team by email.

The survey was sent initially to approximately 800 educators and a further 200 students. However, the survey was also published on various academic mailing lists and websites, therefore it is impossible to establish how many educators finally received the request to participate in the survey. In total, 543 informants answered the survey. Of these, 341 were university educators and 202 were students. A total of 128 of the 341 educators reported have already organised a telecollaborative exchange in the past. These educators came from 20 different countries of the European Union. The survey findings in the following section are based on some of the data collected from these telecollaborative educators.

Preliminary survey findings

The survey reveals an interesting overview of the type of online intercultural exchanges which are being carried out across European universities. While it is not possible to go into great detail here, it can be said that European telecollaborators tend to organise exchanges which are bilingual, combining English with another European language and which involve partner classes which are predominantly from the USA, Germany, the UK, France and Italy. Exchanges tend to be relatively short in duration (one-three months) and involve students interacting with just one partner class. Interestingly, a significant majority of telecollaborators report having found their partners mainly through their own networks of personal contacts and colleagues and not through online mailing lists or websites. As regards the aims of their exchanges, telecollaborators tend to give more emphasis to the development of their students' intercultural competence than to their foreign language skills. To develop these competences, the exchanges predominantly involve task-types which engage learners in the 'discussion of different tasks and texts with their partners', 'the comparison of cultural products and customs' and 'personal presentations'.

As one of the main aims of this project is to identify the barriers which exist for integrating telecollaboration in university contexts, the research team was particularly interested in identifying the problems which informants experienced during their exchanges and also in learning why the informants believed that telecollaboration was not more widely practised at university level.

The organizational problems most commonly reported included the differences in institutional timetables (mentioned by 70 informants), different levels of language proficiency between partner classes (40 mentions), as well as lack of student motivation, differences in partner-teachers approaches and aims and lack of time to dedicate to the project (approximately 30 mentions in each case). In their extended comments, other problems which educators referred to included technical issues ("...in particular when using webcams"), the lack of synergy between educators organizing the exchanges ("the greatest challenge is finding reliable and flexible partners/coordinators at the other end"), different numbers of students in the partner classes as well as the different levels of 'importance' attributed to the exchanges in different institutions.

As regards the reasons for the lack of take-up of telecollaboration at university level, the reasons suggested by the informants confirmed to a great extent the reasons outlined in previous, small-scale studies (O'Dowd, 2011). The main barriers identified included the significant time investment necessary to set up and run exchanges, the lack of training of teachers and the fear of additional workload for educators and students which such an exchange can involve. However, apart from these already-established barriers, the survey also highlighted the significant lack of institutional support which telecollaborators perceive in their local work environments. One informant explained that "...teachers are entirely being left alone with it, there is no institutional support", while another complained "... a major obstacle is that their

institution will not allow time for them to dedicate to such a project or include the project in their teaching workload”.

Overcoming barriers to telecollaboration

Based on the ongoing analysis of the organisational problems and barriers to the take-up of telecollaboration at European universities, the project team is currently in the process of collecting case studies of universities which have successfully achieved a certain level of integration of telecollaboration into their institutions. Various successful approaches have been identified and will be published in more detail in the full report of this survey. However, some of these strategies can be mentioned here briefly :

1. In the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in Spain, an educator signs ‘convenios’ or agreements with her partner universities which guarantee that the online exchanges between the two institutions will last a minimum of 3 years. This gives the educator the security necessary to integrate the exchanges into her syllabi and also means that she will have official ‘proof’ of this form of academic mobility for her official evaluation procedures.
2. In an Italian university, students who cannot engage in work practice for personal reasons are able to get official study credits for the online exchanges which they take part in outside of class.
3. In Trinity College in Dublin an online exchange was put forward for an innovation award at national level. When the exchange won the prize, the project became much better known in the home institution and this raised interest among colleagues about undertaking similar exchanges.
4. At Glasgow university in Scotland, educators have made online interaction with various partner classes a central part of the course and they have also included work based on the online interaction as possible assessment assignments for the course. However, in order to avoid depending exclusively on the reliability of their partner-classes in order to receive a mark, students are offered various alternative assignments for evaluation.

We hope that at the Bologna workshop we will be able to discuss more strategies and approaches for overcoming the barriers to telecollaboration at university level.

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