

Collaborative tasks for online language teaching

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The Challenge

Meaningful learner interaction is critical to developing second language skills. However, this can be challenging in a digital environment. What are some tasks that facilitate interaction and build learner community when teaching and learning online?

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Abstract

Online language teaching has become a reality for many foreign language programs that have been forced to teach remotely. When developing an online language teaching curriculum (beyond a simple emergency teaching patch), it is important to uphold the same rigor and base our curriculum in methodological and pedagogic choices based on second language acquisition and educational research, and keep in mind that interaction is critical to developing second language skills. This article advocates that, through collaborative technology-mediated tasks, we can promote productive language output (spoken and written) and the type of interaction that facilitates language learning and motivates students to continue improving their language skills.

KEYWORDS

collaboration, community development, online interaction, productive skills, technology-mediated tasks

1 | INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching programs all over the world are now faced with the very real possibility that the next semester or longer will continue to have foreign/second language online classes. For future classes, it will not be sufficient to have an “emergency lesson plan” that can at least save part of our semester and that, in most cases, relies heavily on activities that develop learners’ listening, reading, and writing skills, but fail to address speaking skills.

In early 2020, teachers received an overwhelming wave of recommendations from associations, institutions, and private business about how to teach online, techniques, platforms, products, online materials, and so forth, but most of them fail to address the necessity that we have to incorporate tools and activities that allow students to use the second language in productive ways.

We cannot disregard four decades of Second Language Acquisition research because it is difficult to incorporate speaking in our online foreign or second language (L2) curriculum. The provision of input is essential for language learning and that is something that online learning can address most comfortably. We have access to a large variety of multimedia input resources (e.g., YouTube videos, Netflix movies, newscasts, and podcasts) as well as access to an unprecedented amount of reading materials (e.g., journalistic texts, essays, opinions, fiction, and blogs). However, output, interaction, and feedback are also crucial to develop an L2 (Gass, 1997; Long, 1981; Swain, 1995; Swain & Watanabe, 2013). Therefore, we need to find ways that students can produce language, engage in communication, and receive useful timely feedback.

In addition, collaborative work is essential for learning, any learning, not just language learning. Collaborative learning encourages understanding, fosters relationships, builds self-esteem, reduces anxiety, and stimulates critical thinking (Panitz, 1999).

This article advocates that through collaborative technology-mediated tasks, we can promote productive language output (spoken and written) and the type of interaction that facilitates language learning and motivates students to continue improving their language skills. We can promote what Swain (2000) termed “collaborative dialogue” with speakers engaged in problem-solving and knowledge-building. In addition, technology-mediated collaborative tasks can provide a sound design framework to implement structured learning activities that facilitate group interaction, a crucial component of successful online learning (Graham & Misanchuk, 2004), as well as help build a sense of community; essential for online learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Rovai, 2002).

2 | COLLABORATIVE TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED TASKS

The definition of technology-mediated tasks adopted in this article follows that of González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) where technology-mediated tasks are understood as:

1. primary focused on meaning. Even if the task has a preplanned language-learning goal, part of the learning has to be incidental and the language focus is not clear to students;
2. goal-oriented, with a communicative purpose and an outcome resulting from the task completion. This outcome can be communicative (e.g., an email message) or non-communicative (e.g., an online take out order);
3. tasks need to address learners’ needs and wants and they need to engage their linguistic, nonlinguistic, and digital resources, that is, tasks need to be learner-centered;

4. a task should be as authentic as possible and as related to the learner's real-world as possible; and finally,
5. tasks should have a reflective component as part of the experimental learning framework that drives TBLT.

In this chapter, one additional characteristic needs to be added: (6) tasks should promote true collaboration and learner interaction. Moreover, both tasks and technology have to be fully integrated into the curriculum to be most beneficial, although integrating a few tasks within a communicative language curriculum can be a strategic way to introduce technology-mediated tasks into a language program (González-Lloret, 2020).

Given the multitude of tools, platforms, and activities that exist, the goal of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive list of possible tasks, but rather to offer a few examples of technology-mediated tasks that illustrate the principles of TBLT and the characteristics presented above.

3 | TECHNOLOGIES THAT FACILITATE COLLABORATION

Among existing technologies, some facilitate collaboration and interaction more efficiently than others. Sophisticated virtual environments for social engagement and multiplayer online games can facilitate experiential learning and collaboration (Canto, de Graff, & Jauregui, 2014; Cornillie, Thorne, & Desmet, 2012; Reinhardt, 2019; Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012; Thomas, 2012). However, these tools require a larger commitment from the teachers to know the spaces and have the technological capacity as well as the literacy to be able to play and move in these environments, and, therefore, will not be included in this chapter. For a recent look at how these technologies fit TBLT and research findings on how they promote language learning see González-Lloret (2017).

In this article, I am going to focus instead on readily available technologies that are either free or already being used in many learning institutions, and that can be implemented easily and without too much effort. The tasks proposed here combine a variety of skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) dictated by the task itself and the technologies necessary to accomplish it. Given our current situation for social distancing, some of these tasks would naturally be performed face-to-face, so the article proposes ways to modify them for a technology-mediated environment and still be able to engage language learners in collaboration and language interaction.

4 | EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATIVE ONLINE ACTIVITIES

When they think of collaborative activities in technology-mediated environments, most language teachers think of small group work because this is what we do in traditional language classrooms. Furthermore, collaborative activities in the class have a dual purpose. On one side, they promote language interaction among learners and maximum engagement with the task, and on the other, they have the important function of building a community of learning.

5 | TASKS IN SMALL GROUPS

Well-designed small group tasks can be beneficial if they allow for an equitable participation of all group members, more time for interaction, and the provision and acceptance of feedback. Among the tools that can facilitate small group/pair interaction, we have those for synchronous work such as videoconferencing tools (Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp video calls, Line, etc.) and those for asynchronous engagement (Google docs, forums, VoiceThread, Extempore, etc.) where students can still collaborate without having to be connected at the same time.

The following collaborative small group/pair tasks are inspired by everyday use of the Internet in our L1. The Internet allows the learners to engage in authentic tasks, with a variety of multimodal input sources, including shopping (for books, clothing, gadgets, food, etc.); banking; selecting a restaurant for take-out; making or canceling reservations at a hotel, for an excursion, or for a flight; finding a tutor, a yoga class; or checking the weather anywhere in the world. These Internet-based tasks have the potential to be more representative and, potentially, more relevant for learners than the tasks found in more traditional language textbooks. Additionally, they can easily be done online.

Task 1: Shopping

Level: Novice/Intermediate (ACTFL proficiency scale)

Skills: Reading, speaking-listening, and minimal writing

Technology: Zoom and Amazon website in the L2

In pairs or small groups, students need to find four books to buy on Amazon for people according to teacher's specifications (e.g., one for a teenager that enjoys science fiction, one for an older adult that enjoys gardening, the third one for their teacher, and the fourth one for themselves). Using the breakout rooms feature in Zoom. Students can navigate Amazon while talking to each other in the target language to decide on the books, they can read reviews, find some familiar words or cognates, and look at the review score. Then they use the chat function to write a short message to the teacher with their decisions and simple justification for choosing each book (if the students have a high-enough language level).

In order to provide feedback, the teacher can visit the breakout rooms and/or ask each group to record their group work and share it with the teacher for feedback. Feedback can also be provided on the written part of the task.

Another version of the previous task could be to buy clothing and accessories at Amazon (or a similar site) within a given budget or to travel to a city of the target culture at a given time. Students would first have to find out what the weather is like on that city on that time (the Weather Channel website can be used in 40 different languages) and then negotiate what they are going to buy to travel to that city depending on their needs. They would then "shop" at the online store for what they need making sure they are within budget. A follow-up can be done using Google documents to write collaboratively what they are going to buy and make sure they are within the budget.

*Task 2: Preparing a party**Level: Intermediate/Advanced**Skills: Reading, speaking-listening, and writing**Technology: Zoom and Electronics website in the L2*

Learners in small groups read and discuss reviews in the L2 of several technologies to help the teacher purchase something s/he needs (a laptop, tablet, noise-canceling earphones, TV...) given a budget and some characteristics. They then write their recommendations collaboratively in a Google document they share with the teacher. This activity requires more reading, discussion to come to a consensus. Furthermore, the writing may require more advanced linguistic forms to give recommendations.

*Task 3: A Netflix mini-series**Level: Advanced**Skills: Writing and speaking-listening**Technology: Google documents, Google slides, Google Meet, and Google forms*

In groups, learners prepare a pitch to Netflix for a new movie or mini-series. The topic can be predecided by the teacher according to topics in the curriculum or left open. Learners collaboratively discuss (using the chat or video function in Google) and write their idea in a Google document (i.e., format, synopsis, characters, episode breakouts, etc.); develop a presentation using Google slides (or any other tool) to present the idea to the class; and video record themselves performing a dialogue in the show. After all the proposals are complete, the feedback has been incorporated, and their ideas and language perfected, the presentations are shared (in a Google shared folder) with classmates and students vote on the best idea using Google forms.

These are only a few examples that can be modified and adapted to the class level by adjusting the complexity of the task (i.e., the language involved, the number of elements of the task, the skills required, having an open-ended versus coming to one agreed decision, the abstractness of the task, etc.). Regardless of the task, the platform needs to allow for the engagement and collaboration of students, and, ideally, give the teacher the option of recording learners' group interaction so that feedback can be provided.

6 | TASKS TO BUILD CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Building a sense of community in a traditional classroom is essential for learning to take place (Sergiovanni, 1994), but this is even more important for online classes (see Lomika, 2020, this issue), where students are geographically at a distance and interaction is a key component to building an online community (Du, Liu, & Brown, 2010). In online classes, learners need to feel connected, to feel they are part of a group. A lack of community may lead to loneliness, isolation, low self-esteem, and low motivation to learn, which, in turn, can lead to low achievement or even dropping out (Rovai, 2000).

According to Hare and Davis (1994), interaction is either task-driven or socioemotional. Task-driven interaction, directed towards the completion of the task, usually happens as a response to instructor-generated discussion topics or activities, as well as peer assessment when the way students engage in criticizing, giving supportive feedback, and commenting on peers work may have an impact on affiliating and creating community. On the contrary, socioemotional interaction is

largely self-generated and can be created by exchanging empathetic messages and the disclosure of personal information. Increased personal disclosure (likes, dislikes, live moments, shared fears, etc.) strengthens the classroom community, and the more individuals know about each other, the more likely they are to establish trust and seek support (Rovai, 2002).

Some of the tasks that build community can be quite similar to what we do when we chat or videoconference with friends and loved ones. Short ice-breaking activities (warm-up tasks) are excellent to build a sense of community. For these tasks, students can show and talk to their classmates about what they have in their refrigerators (corresponding to a chapter about food); in their closet (in connection with vocabulary on clothing or shopping); a room in their house (chapter connected to furniture and parts of the house); introduce a member of their family or a pet (physical and personality descriptions and likes and dislikes); an artifact and explain where they got, with whom, why (to use past tense); or report on what is happening in their community, neighborhood, city, and so forth.

As for the technology, Web 2.0 technologies are ideal to exploit the collaborative and participatory nature of the web, highlighting their potential to be used as a context for interaction (Reinhardt, 2020; Wang and Vásquez, 2012). These tools can also foster a sense of community, as well as provide learners with the agency to take charge of their own learning, which, in turn, facilitates language learning (Duff, 2012).

7 | CONNECTING TO CULTURE

Technology-mediated tasks have the potential to connect students (either in small groups or as class) with the target culture in ways that are almost impossible in a physical traditional class. Most museums in the world can now be visited virtually, providing an opportunity to engage with the target culture that most language learners may never have. Cultural organizations have made massive amounts of resources available to teachers. For example, see the Center for Applied Linguistics *Red Bilingue Mex-US* providing films, books, access to television, and so forth (<https://calcommunities.org/index.php/calmex-demo/>).

Cultural tasks can also be adapted to the students' level by manipulating their complexity (cognitive complexity, linguistic complexity, and technological complexity).

Task 4: Art and Artists

Skills: Reading and speaking-listening

Technology: Email and Zoom

At a *novice level*, each learner is assigned via email a famous painting from the C2 which they need to describe (what are they doing, colors, like, dislike...). At an *intermediate level*, the teacher assigns a painting, sculpture... and the name of the author and the learners need to find and read information about the author and the piece of art (origin, what represents, where it was painted, where we can see it now...). Afterward, each student presents their painting to the class and the other students have a chance to ask questions. As a follow-up, students write a short essay describing what three paintings they would like to have hanging in their house and why. At an *advanced level*, each student could virtually visit a museum and select their favorite piece of art, research about the author and the piece, and then present it to their classmates, emphasizing why that piece is special for them. See for example, the virtual tours of the Louvre (<https://www.louvre.fr/en/visites-en-ligne#tabs>), the Renwick Gallery at Smithsonian American Art Museum (<http://americanart.si.edu/multimedia/wonder360/>), or the Museum of Frida Kahlo (<https://www.museofridakahlo.org.mx/en/the-blue-house/multimedia/>).

Another tool which can provide a virtual experience, in this case of cities, is Google Earth (or Google Maps in its street view) with several useful tools to engage learners in collaboration. From asking and giving each other directions to tagging monuments, landmarks, restaurants, bookstores in their own city (but in the L2 to contribute knowledge to other speakers of the L2 visiting their city), Google Earth and Google Maps are an immense source of input and possible tasks. For example:

Task 5: Planning a tour of City X

Skills: Speaking, reading, and writing

Technology: Google Earth, Google Drive, and Google Forms

This task engages learners with Google Earth (or Google maps in the street view). Working in small groups at a *novice level*, students look for one monument or landmark each of a city of the L2 (same city for the group) and describes it to the rest who need to guess what monument that is. At the *intermediate level*, each group of students collaboratively decide on four or five important landmarks of a city of the L2 (different cities each group) and presents them to the class. And at the *advanced level*, each group of learners collaboratively prepares a half-day tour of a city (monuments, landmarks, their historical and cultural importance, places to eat, etc.) which they record as a three-dimensional virtual visit using the Tour tool in Google Earth. All the tours are shared in a Google Drive folder for the learners to experience and vote on the best one (using a Google Forms).

For more activities and a guide to develop technology-mediated tasks, see González-Lloret (2016).

8 | COLLABORATING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Finally, the Web 2.0 tools mentioned above can also be used to connect learners with other speakers beyond the language classroom, via desktop or mobile apps, asynchronously (e.g., YouTube, blogs, groups, fandoms, email, and Twitter), synchronously (text-based, audio-based and video computer-mediated communication tools (e.g., Skype, Hangouts, Facetime, and Line), or using a combination of both (e.g., social networks and WhatsApp).

Learners can connect on their own to engage in interaction with other speakers with similar interests in social networks, through blogs, fandoms, or online communities (YouTube, Reddit, Yahoo groups...) to develop their reading and writing skills. Although these spaces are designed for individual interaction, they can also be brought to the language classroom to spark conversation and focus on form, and they can be used for team writing.

One excellent way of engaging in collaboration beyond the classroom is what we know as tandem, teletandem, or telecollaboration. During telecollaboration, learners from two institutions (learning each others' language and culture) meet through different technologies to discuss, negotiate, and/or create some type of artifact (poster presentations for a conference, policies for a new building, a travel itinerary, a website...) using the L2. The tasks in telecollaborative projects usually occupy a large part of the syllabus and have a strong intercultural component. Telecollaborative projects engage learners in authentic interaction, provide lots of language input, and help develop cross-cultural awareness and sociocultural competence. See Chun (2015), Dooly and O'Dowd (2018), Helm (2015), and O'Dowd (2016) for recent reviews of the field, and Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet (2001) for an example of a full

telecollaborative curriculum. For practitioners interested in finding patterns to start telecollaboration, there are several for-pay enterprises that facilitate such virtual exchanges as well as websites where teachers can browse for proposed projects or can look for partners for a project they may have in mind for free, among these: UNI-Collaboration (<https://www.unicollaboration.org/>), E-Pals (<https://www.epals.com/#/connections>), Teletandem Brasil (<https://www.teletandembrasil.org/>), and eTwinning (<https://www.etwinning.net>).

9 | FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude this chapter, I would like to mention a few dangers to avoid while planning and conducting collaborative technology-mediated tasks. The first comes with not considering the technological contexts of the students and the teachers. Some of these activities require a stable and strong Internet connection (e.g., videoconferencing, sharing screen, jumping between breakout rooms, Google Earth maps) and we need to know whether our students (and ourselves) have good access before we start planning an entire semester using these tools. This can be solved by conducting a needs analysis to find out the participants' technical capabilities, digital literacies, and institutional support (González-Lloret, 2014). According to our findings, we may need to give some students (and/or teachers) extra support and training so that technology is not the reason they fall behind. As educators, we should do everything in our power to narrow the digital divide and make online learning accessible and equitable.

A needs analysis can also help us determine the right amount of content and the right amount of technology. It is important to have realistic expectations about the working load that online courses produce for teachers, the possibility that remote participants have for synchronous connection, the amount of feedback that students will receive, as well as the type and amount of evaluation that can be done through technology. As Jiang (2020) in a BBC article reports, tools such as Zoom, although they facilitate our work (and study), require more focus and energy than a face-to-face conversation because we cannot read the body language as easily as in face-to-face, the different rhythm of pauses and conversation feel unnatural, and we are aware we are being watched on a camera. Therefore, a combination of synchronous and asynchronous work may be the key to find balance and keep learners cognitively engaged in the task.

Finally, it is important not to fall into technological determinism. Online language teaching can certainly facilitate access, and at times like the ones we live now, it may be our only possibility for teaching. The technology is here to support and facilitate the teaching, but a well-developed and methodologically sound curriculum, based on language acquisition research findings, has to be the foundation of any language course.

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How to cite this article: González-Lloret M. Collaborative tasks for online language teaching. *Foreign Language Annals*. 2020;1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12466>