Digital networks

ITILT mini-guide

Interactive Teaching in Languages with Technology

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Technology in language teaching

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Introduction
digital networks in language education

What do we mean by digital networks?

Language teachers are typically involved in many professional networks, both **formal** and **informal**. Networks include colleagues in the same school or school district, those we meet in training or perhaps at conferences, and members of the same professional associations. Digital networks, of course, refer to similar relations established online, sometimes referred to as

- personal learning environments (PLE) or networks (PLN),

- online communities of pratice (CoP), or

- open educational practices (OEP).

In discussing the digital resources, tools, and applications in the ITILT mini-guides **Digital Resources** and **Digital Tools**, we mentioned elements of our own professional digital networks.

Many of us are comfortable using digital technologies in the classroom, but reserve social media for personal use, in order to keep personal and professional spheres separate. Yet some of our young adult learners and younger colleagues are quite adept at moving between formal educational uses of technology and their own private social lives, and there is much we can learn from them.
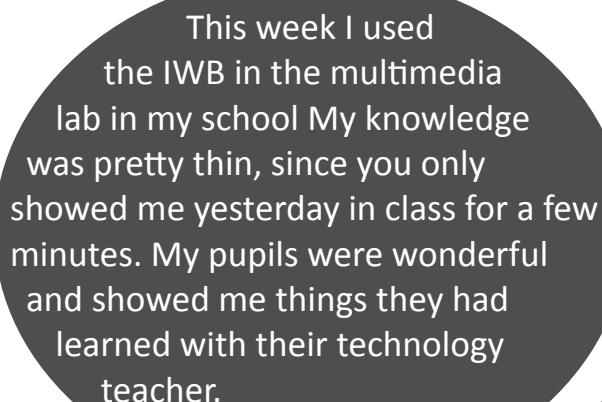
> We can build professional networks to find resources, get help, and share our own experience and expertise, using the **same platforms** we are familiar with socially, while still protecting our private lives.

The ITILT partners use digital platforms, professional associations, language teaching publications and journals, and the work of other digital educators for **professional development**.
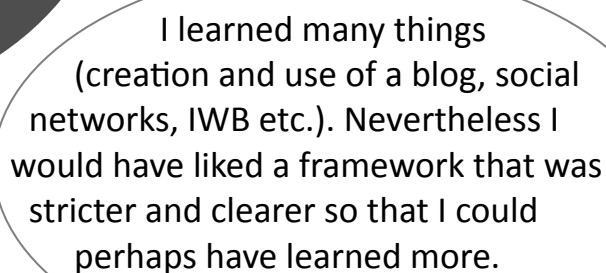
Digital networks and individual preferences in professional development

In pre-service teacher training we often find different attitudes to learning to teach languages with technologies.

Some novice teachers are keen to jump in at the deep end, while others prefer a structured approach. The following two contrasting teacher comments are illustrative:

This week I used the IWB in the multimedia lab in my school My knowledge was pretty thin, since you only showed me yesterday in class for a few minutes. My pupils were wonderful and showed me things they had learned with their technology teacher.

I learned many things (creation and use of a blog, social networks, IWB etc.). Nevertheless I would have liked a framework that was stricter and clearer so that I could perhaps have learned more.

Whyte, 2016

In this guide we hope to accommodate teachers with different views of professional development in our presentation of digital networks.

Why are networks important in language education?

Language teachers turn to digital technologies for a variety of reasons

• a way of increasing learner motivation and engagement in learning;

• improving opportunities for target language input, interaction, and feedback in their classrooms; and sometimes

• in response to institutional pressures to exploit available resources and adopt innovative practices.

Networks are important for language teachers to meet challenges such as those shown in Table 1.

Table 1: challenges of integrating technologies

CHALLENGES	TEACHER COMMENTARY	IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL NETWORKS
PRACTICE EXAMPLES	In the future I would like to learn more about creating websites and take an advanced course on word-processing. But more importantly, I would like to have **concrete examples of technology integration in class**. In my view this is what is lacking the most at university, but it's the most important element if we really want to 'bring digital technology' into teaching. *Secondary German teacher* (Whyte, 2016)	Teachers need repositories of materials and practices that they can easily access and view.
PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES	I noticed during lessons that all the pupils were not equally good with Powerpoint. I was also nervous that some would come to class without a USB key or deliberately waste time opening files. So I asked them to send me a text file with titles, keywords and photos for their presentations. I explained that I would make the slides myself and would just insert their information. I 'failed' in my aim of making them more autonomous by **doing a large part of their work myself**. *Secondary German teacher* (Whyte, 2016)	

CHALLENGES	TEACHER COMMENTARY	IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL NETWORKS
LEARNING CURVE	I am **having a very very difficult time** trying to positively integrate the technology, first with my fab IWB that won't work when I need it to (again today) and now with Google Plus. *Secondary EFL teacher* (Whyte & Alexander, 2014)	Teachers new to particular technologies need help to overcome initial difficulties and discouragements.
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	I generally get in touch with the **technology coordinator** in each school, but quite honestly there isn't always one, and when there are, these are not always the colleagues who are most committed or up to date. On the other hand, I have often exchanged with colleagues who were not official coordinators but just technophiles like myself. We form a little community within schools ready to expand through meeting face-to-face or online. *Secondary Spanish teacher* (Whyte, 2016)	Local networks are not always sufficient.

These challenges can be met through two approaches: curation, and communities of practice.

Networks in focus
examples of teacher networks

The ITILT project's approach to integrating technologies in language education is through task-based language teaching (TBLT), where teaching and learning is planned via meaningful activities, and language development occurs as learners actually use the target language. Digital networks for language teacher education can be viewed in a similar way: teachers become involved in order to further their own pedagogical objectives, and accordingly develop digital skills through their participation these in networks.

In this chapter we consider two approaches to digital networks, one based on resources, one on communities. In Chapter 3 we go on to look more closely at practices.

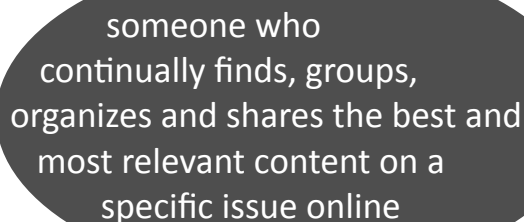## Curation for digital language education

One way into digital networks is via the **curation** of teaching and learning resources.
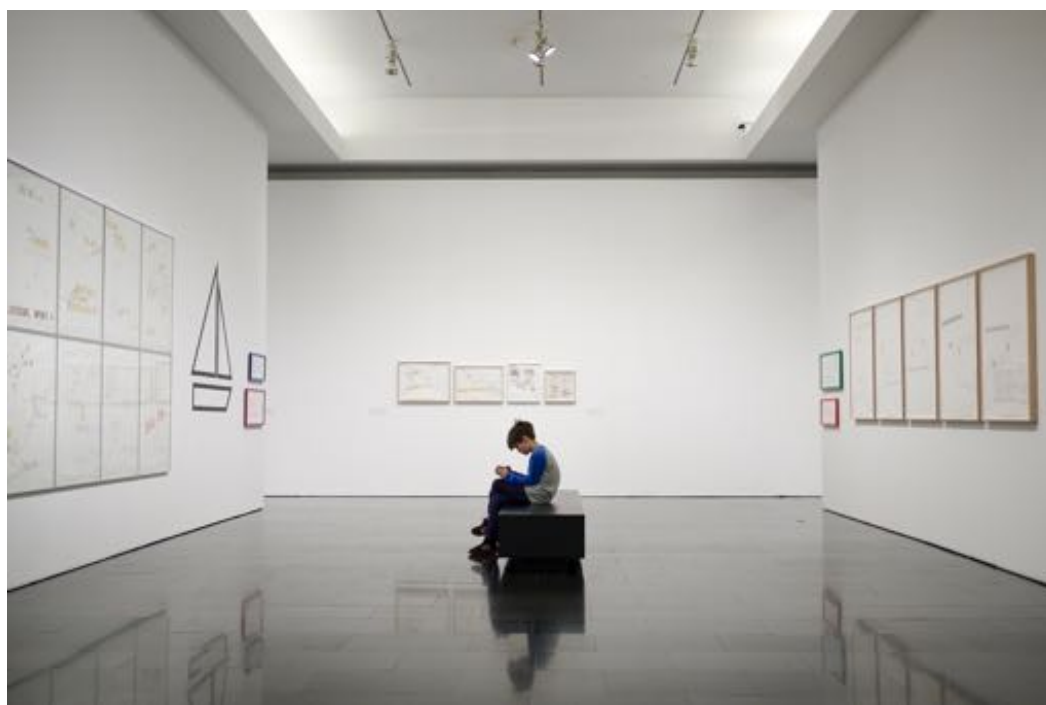
"Online curation offers an elegant solution to the problem of

information overload in the cloud by allowing users to filter and share content on a particular topic. [...] Curation platforms such as Scoop.it or Storify allow users to set up pre-formatted online magazines, add content via links and commentary, and finally share their posts automatically on social networks or blogs such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and WordPress. As with more traditional blogs, curated collections may attract casual readers but also build up a more committed following who subscribe to feeds or e-mail updates. As with PLEs, in curation the objective is to select and present information in a structured way which benefits both curator and reader/follower."

Whyte, 2014

What is a content curator?
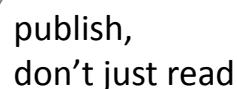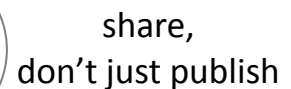
someone who continually finds, groups, organizes and shares the best and most relevant content on a specific issue online

Bhargava, 2009

How do you start curating?

publish, don't just read

share, don't just publish

Cann, 2011

How does content curation apply to language teaching? Many teachers are interested in resources to help learners to listen and read more in the target language.

In a recent chapter on technologies for teaching L2 listening, Hubbard (2017) explains the advantages of curation in these terms:

Another trend in the development of content for listening involves the **collection of enriched media for the learner** in terms of topic, language level, and other features, a process known as **content curation**.

Curation offers both teachers and learners access to **freely available online material**, providing them with **additional information** relevant to making informed choices.

Ideal content characteristics for a curated set of materials include
- being freely and legally available,
- likely to be interesting to the targeted audience,
- good technical quality,
- stable,
- accompanied by captions and/or transcripts, and
- linked to complementary

Analogous to a **curator in a museum**, a curator for listening material

- locates and **collects** them
- **organises** them into logical groups and sequences
- **provides** language level **information** of various sorts
  - vocabulary level
  - speech rate
  - speaker accent
- **adds pedagogical support**
  - pre-listening information
  - key vocabulary, etc.

Lying somewhere between **unordered collections** and **fully articulated listening lessons**, curated collections for listening ideally involve the input from a language learning expert.

Different curated collections related to teaching a variety of different languages are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: curated resources for language teachers

RESOURCE	SOURCE	DESCRIPTION
Inventory of ICT tools and open educational resources	European Centre for Modern Languages	This website presents a web inventory of online, interactive materials with a search engine filtering tools according to language skills, type of interaction, principal functions, etc. In addition, a MOODLE workspace for learning more about using online tools in the classroom is available.
Language Resource Centres	National Foreign Language Resource Centers	A national network of resources to promote the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Led by nationally and internationally recognized language professionals, LRCs create language learning and teaching materials, offer professional development opportunities for teachers and instructors, and conduct research on foreign language learning in the US.
CLIL Store	Teaching units for Content and Language Integrated Learning	Learning units with text, video, and dictionary links, searchable by language, difficulty, and topic.
TED talks	TED	A media organisation which posts talks online for free distribution under the slogan "ideas worth spreading."

Teachers interested in curating their own resources can try the platforms suggested in Table 3. Start by following another curator to find useful items quickly, and to see how curation works.

Table 3: curation platforms for language teachers

PLATFORM	EXAMPLES	DESCRIPTION
Flipboard	Françoise Wilson	English-language magazine on teaching and learning languages
Pearltrees	MFL resources	Resources for various languages
Pinterest	Gosia Kurek	OER, tools, and image repositories
Scoop.it	Jürgen Wagner	EFL, French, Spanish

PLATFORM	EXAMPLES	DESCRIPTION
	Alix Creuzé	French
	Yuly Ascension	Spanish, technology
	David Deubelbeiss	EFL

Communities of practice

Another approach to digital networks involves what Lave and Wenger (1991) have called **communities of practice**, or informal groups focusing on a specific activity, in our case language teaching. For many teachers, learning to teach with technologies, or changing practice through technology integration, involves a series of transitions: technical competence, pedagogical skills, and digital practices must all be questioned.

"Language teacher education involves **bridging** a number of **different gaps** between trainees' understanding and experience of language teaching and learning with technology on the one hand, and the competences they need to develop for their future professional careers on the other.

1. **knowledge of particular tools**
   many students in traditional university modern foreign language programmes have little experience of digital audio editors or learning platforms commonly used in secondary school classrooms.

2. **previous learning experiences** and **needs as new teachers**
   many language programmes are designed around fixed principles of cultural transmission which do not prepare students to take an active role in their own professional development.

3. **social media**
   although teachers may be confident using technology and social media for their own purposes, few are aware of the potential of social networks in their future professional practice."

Whyte, 2014

Communities of practice are one way of easing these transitions.

What do we mean by a community of practice (CoP)?

a naturally occurring and evolving collection of people who together engage in particular kinds of activity, and who come to develop and share ways of doing things – ways of talking, beliefs, values, and practices – as a result of their joint involvement in that activity

Galagan, 1993

How do people learn in a CoP?

developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgably skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter, which it subsumes.

Lave, 1991

Learning in communities of practice is different from formal training in a number of respects. Lave and Wenger talk about "**situated learning**," which is similar to active learning or learning by doing, rather than attending formal lectures, for example.

They also highlight what they call "**legitimate peripheral participation**." In simple terms, this means only being as involved as you wish, and only when you wish.

In summary, some characteristics of communities of practice include:

- an informal group with a shared purpose and shared task;

- peer-to-peer rather than hierarchical exchanges occurring outside official organisations;

- the sharing of knowledge and skills via stories of experience, and perhaps without overt pedagogical intent;

- the possibility of differing levels of engagement, from peripheral to core involvement in the community, perhaps varying over time;

- learning and exchanging in the context where knowledge and skills are used, yet also in an informal setting where members can socialise.

Whyte, 2015

Some examples of such informal networks can be found in Table 4. Depending on your goals and personality, you may wish to sign up and jump right in, or you may prefer to test the waters more cautiously and "lurk" on the periphery first.

Table 4: language teaching communities

PLATFORM	GROUPS	DESCRIPTION
Twitter	#mfltwitterati	UK-based group of secondary school language teachers
	#langchat	US language teachers
	#eltchat	international group of ESL/EFL teachers
Facebook	TESOL Academic	research/practice link in ELT
	Deutsch als Fremdsprache	German as a foreign language
	FLE français langue étrangère	French as a foreign language

In this section we have considered two approaches to digital networks for language teachers, the first starting with teaching and learning resources and showing how content

curation allows teachers to harness the potential of digital networks. More on finding and exploiting digital resources for task-based language teaching, as well as an introduction to open practice can be found in our first ITILT mini-guide, **Digital Resources**.

Our second avenue into digital networks focused on communities. We suggested that interactive approaches to teaching language with technologies often create gaps between teachers' previous experiences as both language learners and teacher, and that informal communities of practice can offer an effective means to make transitions and develop new technical and pedagogical skills via what Hoven (2007) calls "**experiential learning**." For more on specific tools and applications for language learning should consult **Digital Tools**, the second ITILT mini-guide.

Both these approaches rely on informal networks of language teachers. In Chapter 3 of this guide, we offer two examples of networks in practice in more structured contexts.

ITILT Community of Practice
project teachers and learners

In this chapter we offer examples of a more formal approach to language teaching and learning in networks. The first involves collaboration among ITILT project teachers and partners in a Google+ community, while the second concerns collaboration among language learners.

Google+ community

One of the goals of the ITILT project was to promote interactive teaching through technology-mediated task-based approaches. As noted in the previous chapter, this kind of teaching can involve at least two changes in teaching practice:

a) developing new technical competences for using new tools and devices, and

b) designing and implementing new teaching and learning activities to match the new technological environment.

To support project teachers with these transitions we set up a pilot community of practice or virtual teachers' lounge where ITILT partners and teachers could exchange.

We choose Google+ as our platform (https://plus.google.com/communities). Its advantages are

- easy-to-use free tool without advertising

- possibility of posting text, links, audio/video

- comment and tag functions

- public or private options

- separate from other social media (Facebook).

Getting started

Setting up a Google community is very simple:

1. Go to Google communities and create a community. Use settings to make the group public or private.

2. Invite participants using their Google accounts (those without gmail can create a Google account by registering an existing e-mail).
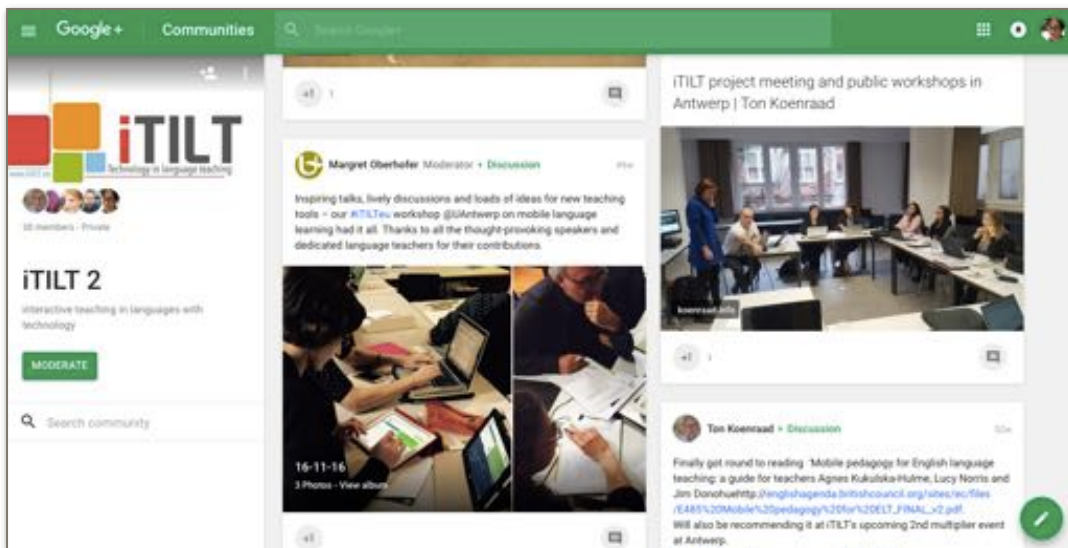
Fine-tuning

3. Appoint moderators to share community management. In our community, ITILT partners moderated the access of project teachers in their countries.

4. Members can modify settings to adjust the volume of posts appearing in the stream, and switch e-mail notifications on or off.
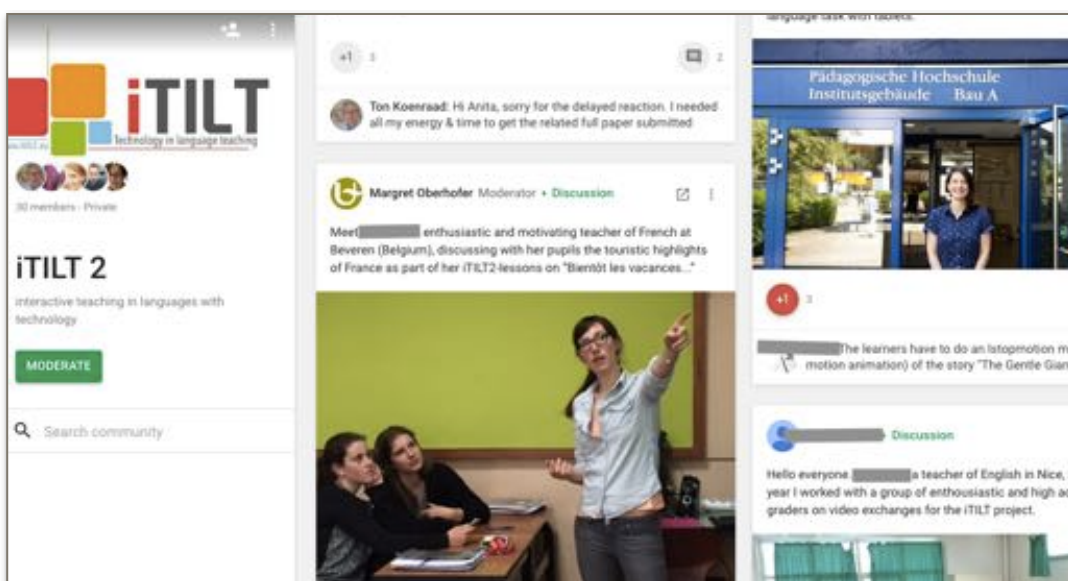
5. Project resources can be shared using <u>Google drive</u>, and the community can be used to

a) share updates

b) advertise events

c) point users to shared folders of resources, or to forms or spreadsheets.

6. Sub-groups of participants can interact separately using

a) gmail or chat

b) video communication on Google Hangouts.

Telecollaboration

Another way into digital networks is through class exchanges, which can be called

• telecollaboration

• virtual exchange

• e-tandem

• online intercultural exchange (OIE).

In this section we discuss some examples of telecollaboration in the ITILT project, then mention other projects before giving links to places where teachers can find partner classes and resources for their own telecollaborative projects.

During the ITILT project, a number of the tasks we designed involved telecollaboration. The majority were exchanges between schools in France and Germany; the Belgian task sequence concerned an exchange with the US.

Table 5: Some online intercultural exchanges

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	
Primary	Who's who?	France
	ID card task	Germany
	Video selfies	Germany
	Skype exchange	Germany
Secondary	Cultural icons	France
	Intercultural survey	France
	Phubbing debate	Germany
	Intercultural perspectives	Belgium

The Who's who? primary EFL project offers an interesting justification of task-based language teaching by highlighting the sheer complexity of the language required even for a seemingly simple task.
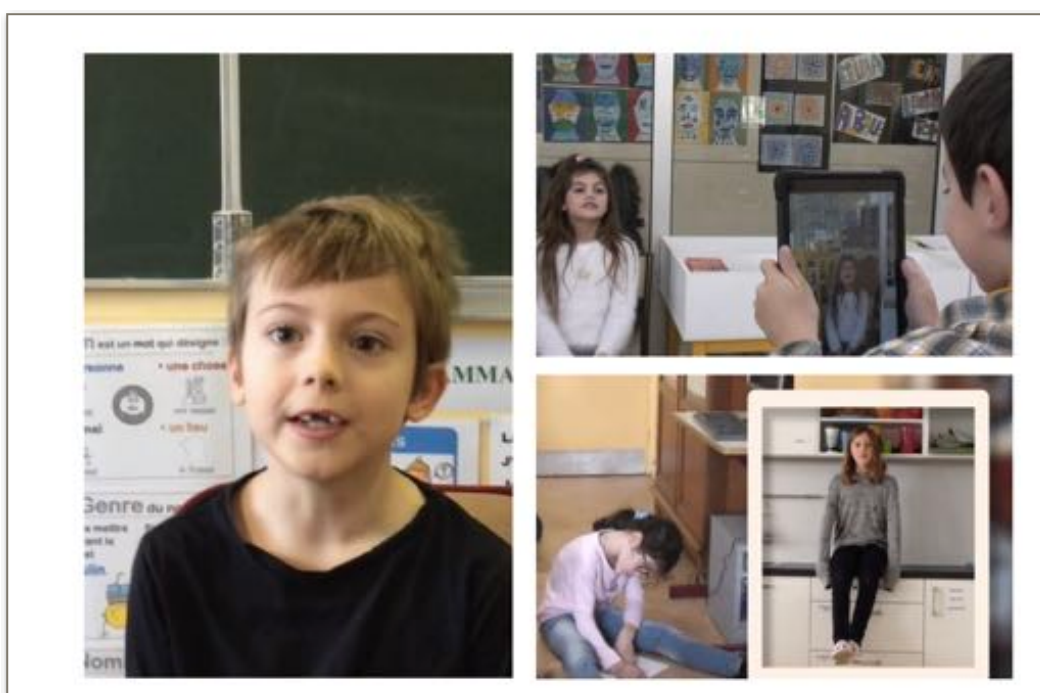
Who's who? In this task sequence, a French primary class makes a set of video selfies to send to a partner class in Germany, using English as a lingua franca. The German class does the same, and each class watches their partner's videos to identify the pupils in a group photo.

To prepare to record the videos, the learners practiced all the expressions they had learned to talk about themselves in their first term of English. They gave their names and age, where they lived, and their likes, and sometimes their birthday months or favourite colours. They recorded one another using iPads, and reviewed the results together.

Once the videos were shared with the partner class, they viewed the German videos on the IWB, each child noting information on one particular pupil in the remote class.

In a final session, the teacher recorded her pupils naming each pupil in the remote class photograph, together with any other information they had been able to understand and remember.

The task thus offers ample opportunities to practice routine expressions, to obtain individual feedback from the teacher, and to reflect on their own performance in the short videos. It also offers a real-world puzzle to solve - who's who? - and the chance to propose a solution and receive feedback on that.

What is a task?

· a task is a **workplan**

· the plan engages learners in **authentic language use**

· the task includes **materials** to help learners **achieve an outcome**

· the outcome is specified in **communicative, not linguistic terms**

Teachers who watch the <u>final clip</u> in the sequence may be able to list the following language features and problems in the learners' productions:

- *he* and *she*
- *his* and *her*
- the copula *is*
- lexis: *play the cello, wrestling, horse-riding*
- *I don't know/I don't understand*
- simple present 3rd person singular "s" *he lives*
- the preposition *in*
- *is* versus *it's*
- *live/love*
- /h/ *his, he, her*; (h)*old*; *his/is*

It seems clear that the learners have practiced language that is beyond their current linguistic competence, but which they are able to retrieve with the help of the teacher to accomplish the communicative purpose. We suggest that this experience, and others like it, will drive language acquisition, helping learners gain confidence and proficiency in the target language.

Second language acquisition research suggests

- language learning is best achieved **not** by treating language as an **'object' to be dissected into bits** and learned [..], but as a 'tool' for accomplishing a communicative purpose.

- **'learning'** does **not** need to **precede 'use'**, but rather occurs through the efforts that learners make to understand and be understood in achieving a communicative goal.

- the **interactions** resulting from the performance of tasks in a classroom resemble - in many respects - those found in **child language acquisition** in the **home**

This is one reason why telecollaboration is so useful for language learning, and why it is so useful for teachers to develop digital networks which can allow this type of exchange.

Other telecollaborative projects

Language teachers have long sought to exploit the potential of collaborative exchange with others, and technologies increase our opportunities to engage in such interactions. A sample of OIE projects, which are described in a recent book on the topic by O'Dowd and Lewis (2016), is provided in Table 6.

Table 6: Some online intercultural exchanges

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION
Clavier	Moodle course for students from France and the UK.
Cult-net	Practitioner group inspired by Michael Byram.
Cultura	Massachussetts Institute of Technology intercultural programme.
Soliya	Non-profit organisation promoting cross-cultural understanding
SUNY COIL	State University of New York telecollaborative programmes.
Teletandem	Matching Brazilian students with learners of Portuguese.

Getting involved

For teachers interested in setting up telecollaborative projects with their classes, Table 7 lists current projects which offer a useful starting point.

Table 6: telecollaboration platforms

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION
TELL-OP	TELL-OP is a Strategic Partnership that seeks to promote the take-up of innovative practices in European language learning (Data Driven Learning, DDL) by supporting personalised learning approaches that rely on the use of ICT & OER to promote the personalised e-learning of languages in the contexts of higher & adult education, in particular, through mobile devices.

| PROJECT	DESCRIPTION
TeCoLa	The Erasmus+ project TeCoLa harnesses gamified telecollaboration technologies to enhance foreign language teaching and learning. Virtual world interaction, video communication and online games are deployed to support online pedagogical exchanges between secondary school students throughout Europe.
TILA	Improving the quality of foreign language teaching and learning processes by means of meaningful telecollaboration among peers: that is the aim of the European project Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition (TILA).
UNICollaboration	a cross-disciplinary professional organisation for telecollaboration and virtual exchange in Higher Education

Don't forget: digital footprint

Teachers working online should pay attention to their **digital footprint**, meaning

- considering their online identity (profile and accounts on different platforms),

- taking care to respect licensing rules and observing etiquette online, and

- helping colleagues and learners do this.

While some teachers like to "fly under the radar" by using pseudonyms and keeping online activity to a minimum, another approach is to establish a strong online presence which allows you to exercise some control over what appears when others search for you online. Joining popular platforms such as LinkedIn or using Twitter in a professional capacity can mean those profiles appear first in search results. Search for yourself on duckduckgo to find references you might have overlooked.
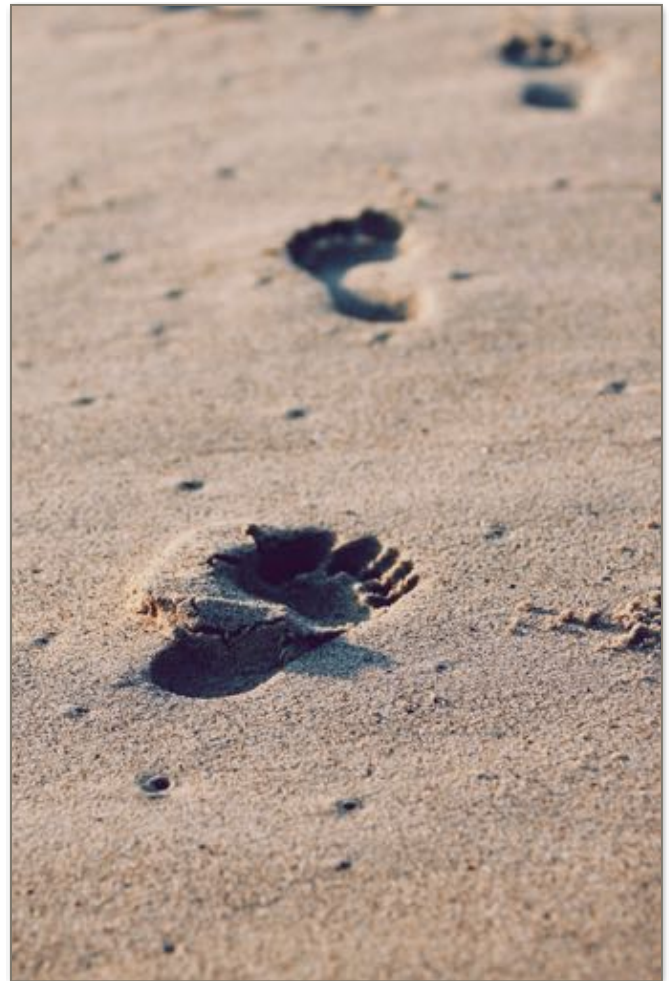
It is also important to **play fair** and **play safe**. Check the ITILT **Digital Resources** mini-guide for help with licensing, and the **Digital Tools** mini-guide for more on protecting your learners in online environments.

Going further
references and credits

The final section of this Digital Networks mini-guide has references to the research cited, for those ready to go further in this area.

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Abbreviations

ABBREVIATION	MEANING
CoP	community of practice
OEP	open educational practices
OIE	online intercultural exchange
PLE	personal learning environment
PLN	personal learning network
TBLT	task-based language teaching

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