



# Telecollaboration

## Connecting Language Learners On-line in Intercultural Exchange

### Changing Times in European Education

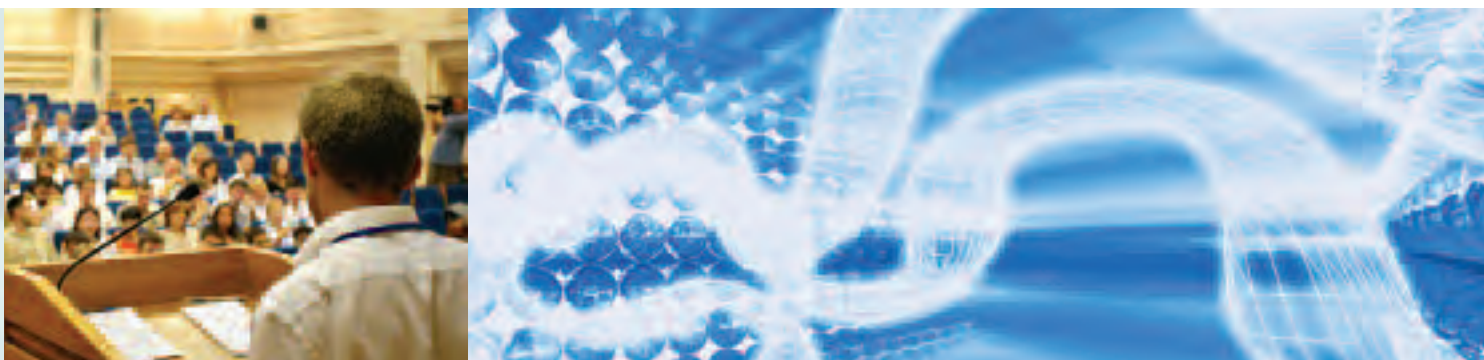
In recent years, teachers and educational institutions in Western Europe have found themselves in a changing working environment as regards the application of new technologies. This new situation includes an increase in national and European funding for research and educational projects which focus on how e-learning and multimedia systems can contribute to foreign language learning. This rise in interest at governmental and institutional level is combined with the ease of access which exists to "second generation" on-line communication tools such as blogs, wikis, and open-source virtual learning environments such as Moodle. These tools differ from their predecessors in that they are very user-friendly and require little technical knowledge in order to work with them. A further important development is undoubtedly the level of young learners' familiarity with on-line technologies. Youngsters throughout Europe are communicating and sharing infor-

mation with each other more and more via mobile telephony and synchronous communication tools. As a consequence, young people are more open to taking on on-line components in their formal learning, and often actually expect their teachers to use the internet and computers in their classes.

This new context has meant that educators and course administrators are increasingly interested in how new technologies can be successfully and seamlessly integrated into language courses. How can communication tools such as blogs and wikis be used effectively by language learners? What is the role of the teacher in on-line language learning? With these questions in mind, a workshop was held in March of this year at the University of León in northern Spain. Supported by Eurocall, the European Organization for Computer Assisted Language Learning, the workshop aimed to introduce the activity of telecollaboration to teachers of foreign languages in secondary school and university contexts.

### What is Telecollaboration?

Telecollaboration involves engaging language learners in collaborative projects with students from other cultures through the use of on-line communication tools such as e-mail and message boards with the belief that this interaction will improve their communicative and cultural skills in the foreign language. As a quick glance at any recent CALL journal or conference proceedings will confirm, this activity has become extremely popular among language educators as these exchanges have been shown to hold great potential for both language and culture learning. However, exchanges often fail to function effectively due to organizational difficulties, intercultural misunderstandings, and a lack of appropriate planning and co-ordination between both sets of teachers and learners. To remedy this, the workshop brought together a group of experienced international practitioners in this area who would help participants to set up and structure exchanges



## *Robert O'Dowd explains how and why*

in a pedagogically sound manner, and also to develop a battery of techniques which would allow them to work with the problems and misunderstandings which are common in such projects.

A group of over 40 foreign language educators and researchers came together at the University of León to take part in the workshop. The event was based around five main workshop sessions which introduced the participants to different aspects of on-line exchanges and how they could be integrated into their classes. While teachers use many different configurations to structure the types of tasks and to establish to what extent students should use their target language and their first language, several distinct models of telecollaboration have emerged in recent years which offer practitioners relatively defined structures within which to organize their on-line exchanges. Therefore, the first section of the workshop looked at three of the best-known models of on-line exchange:

Breffni O'Rourke from Trinity College in Dublin introduced the e-tandem model of learning, which is based heavily on the principles of autonomy and reciprocity and which represents probably the oldest and best-known form of on-line intercultural exchange. Breffni also gave participants the chance to take part in an on-line MOO environment, a powerful synchronous communication tool which is not well known among educators. Following that, Jim Crapotta and Jesús Suárez from Barnard College, New York presented the Cultura model which highlights the intercultural learning possibilities of such exchanges and is based on the comparison and analysis of parallel cultural texts. Finally in this section, Isabel Pérez from the University of Granada in Spain also spoke about the value and potential of relatively low-tech traditional e-mail exchanges and showed many practical examples about how such exchanges can be put into practice at primary and second-

ary school level.

The second part of the workshop focused on questions and issues which regularly emerge from the research literature and from the practical reports on on-line projects. For example, Paige Ware from the Southern Methodist University in Dallas looked at the role of grammar acquisition in on-line exchange and underlined that progress in grammatical competence is not an automatic outcome of on-line interaction and that careful structuring of tasks combined with student preparation and training and a pro-active role on behalf of the teacher are necessary to ensure the maximum benefit for learners.

Throughout the workshop, some basic guidelines and principles emerged repeatedly in practically all of the sessions. These key points are outlined below so teachers and students who are interested in taking part in on-line exchanges can consider them before making the plunge into on-line exchanges: