Combining Classroom-Based Learning and Online Intercultural Exchange in Blended Learning Courses

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Abstract

This chapter poses courses integrating Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) as a specific type of blended learning (BL) courses. It aims at gaining insight into how experienced OIE course designers combine both learning modes – f2f sessions and the online exchange – into coherent BL courses, and which common denominators this blending shares.

1. Introduction: From telecollaboration to blended learning

The literature on online intercultural exchange (OIE), also called telecollaboration or virtual exchange, has grown constantly over the last decade. Most of these publications have focused on the actual online exchanges, analyzing how they work, the kinds of tasks used, what students learn, and what has failed (e.g. O'Dowd & Ritter 2006, Müller-Hartmann 2007, O'Dowd & Ware 2009, Guth & Helm 2010), etc. However, most OIE projects are devised as components of blended learning (BL) courses, where BL is defined as a combination of face-to-face (f2f), "classroom education" (Bersin 2004: 85) or "brick-and-mortar setting" (Staker & Horn 2012: 3) sessions and online learning (e.g. Charlier *et al*. 2006, Neumeier 2005). As a result, OIE can also be examined from another perspective, that is, in terms of complete courses, rather than in terms of the OIE project and the roles of the different partners. From this perspective, OIE is viewed as a component of a BL course and as a specific online learning mode that differs from other forms of online learning, such as individual online work and online interactions between students and their local teacher and/or their local peers, in that it involves online exchanges with geographically distant partners.

As has been frequently pointed out (e.g., Deschryver & Charlier 2012, Garrison & Vaughan 2008, MacDonald 2008, Means *et al.* 2010), BL offers manifold possibilities for enhancing pedagogy in higher education because it allows learners to benefit from both f2f and online learning modes. Consequently, it has been widely embraced by teachers and learners. However, the broad variety of possibilities to mix both learning modes makes it at the same time difficult to design effective BL courses. Despite (or perhaps because of) this fact, most books describing guidelines and best practice in BL course design simply show the kinds of activities that can be used in each learning mode without suggesting how the learning modes can be linked coherently (e.g., Bersin 2004). But, the effectiveness of BL courses cannot be taken for granted as such (Chew *et al.* 2008, Means *et al*. 2010): they need to have a sound pedagogical design. The crux of BL design is the way the f2f and distant modes are combined. Furstenberg and Levet also highlighted this point, when they stated that what made their BL course including OIE coherent was the "interplay between online and classroom work" (2010: 305).

2. How are f2f and OIE sessions combined in existing courses? Research question and data collection

2.1. Research question

This chapter addresses the question of how the interplay between the f2f and distant modes within such courses works. To date, Furstenberg and Levet (2010) are the only researchers to have examined this issue specifically with respect to OIE. A small number of publications that have examined other forms of BL in higher education have looked at ways of best combining f2f and online sessions (e.g., Garrison & Vaughan 2008: 105-141, Murphy & Southgate 2011). These publications implicitly consider the f2f sessions the lead (or dominant) learning mode and the online sessions a complementary mode. In fact, in the literature on BL, when one learning mode is considered to be central and dominant this mode is often the f2f mode (e.g., Haeuw 2004, Deschryver & Charlier 2012). Nevertheless, two recent models (Flipped Classroom and Flex model; see Starker & Horne 2012: 10-13) put the online component as the backbone of a BL course. Another taxonomy (Bersin 2004) – elaborated in professional training contexts – does not focus in the first instance on which mode is the backbone of BL design, but rather on how tight the modes are integrated and interwoven. This chapter examines whether these models apply to BL courses combining f2f and OIE sessions (see 4.1).

The hypothesis underlying the present study is that in BL courses including OIE, the OIE component often becomes the central and lead mode because, first, designing and preparing a course with distant partners is both complex and time-consuming (Guth *et al*. 2012). Teachers who are prepared to invest a lot of time and energy in organizing and coordinating such exchanges do so because they believe it is important for the students' learning and motivation. And, second, since they consider OIE as an effective means to reach the learning aims, it would seem likely that they would give OIE a central role in the courses they design.

Moreover, the aim of the present study was to determine whether there are common denominators in the ways teachers with OIE experience design BL courses that combine f2f sessions and virtual exchange. The literature on BL identifies several aspects that have to be considered in order to effectively combine f2f and online learning modes (see Singh 2003, Bersin 2004, Neumeier 2005, Degache & Nissen 2008, Garrison & Vaughan 2008, Deschryver & Charlier 2012). These aspects, that will structure part 4 of this chapter, include choosing a lead mode that will form the backbone of the course design, and determining the pedagogical function of each mode, the choices students can make within each mode, and the teacher's role in each mode. The teacher's roles can include assessment, but it is essential to identify the mode(s) that give rise to the skills and contents assessed. Another aspect is the sequencing of the learning modes and the amount of time dedicated to each mode (see Nissen, 2014).

2.2. Data collection

As stated above, the aim of this exploratory study was to identify any common approaches to designing BL courses involving an OIE component. To do this, I analyzed and compared the designs of six BL courses that combine an OIE component with f2f sessions in what their designers consider a coherent way, i.e. both modes being integrated and interdependent. In order to ensure the courses analyzed would have comparable characteristics, I focused on higher-education language-training courses. All six course designers had experience in OIE (minimum experience: 3 years, mean experience: 9.5 years) and were involved in the course as teachers, as well as designers. Consequently, they all had in-depth knowledge of the course they presented. In addition, they all teach and/or do research into OIE, so they had the awareness and expertise needed to reflect on the courses they had designed.

Data on five of the six courses were gathered through semi-guided interviews (average length: 49 minutes), whereas data for the sixth course (21F.303) were obtained from a book chapter (Furstenberg & Levet 2010) and via answers to questions sent to G. Furstenberg by email (Table 1). The interview questions focused on the parameters that have to be taken into account in order to ensure the f2f and OIE components of a course are combined in a purposeful way (see 2.1.). The interviews were analyzed using content analysis. All the teachers also filled in a questionnaire giving factual data about their course, such as the course title, the name of the institution, the degree the course was delivered in, the number of course hours, and the

number of ECTS credits. In addition, course materials were obtained for four of the courses (see table 1), so their designs could be examined in more detail.

Course title	Person interviewed	Data
New Trends in Education (NTE)	Malgorzata Kurek	Interview 59 min., questionnaire
Spoken English (SE)	Ciara Wigham	Interview 46 min., questionnaire, example and assessment grid of study guide
21F.303 (BL course linked to Cultura)	Gilberte Furstenberg	Book chapter Furstenberg and Levet (2010) & questions / answers via e-mail, questionnaire, open access to past sessions of Cultura
English Language 1 (EL1)	Robert O'Dowd	Interview 34 min., questionnaire, task description and assessment grid
English Language 3 (EL3)	Sarah Guth	Interview 53 min., questionnaire, access to wiki
Intercomprehension between Romance Languages (IRL)	Yasmin Pishva	Interview 55 min., questionnaire

Table 1. Data collection

3. Brief presentation of the courses

An overview of the six courses (table 2) shows that they displayed a number of differences and similarities. Differences included the fact that they were delivered in different countries, within different degree programs, and for different study years; similarities included the fact that all these courses including an OIE component have the same duration of one semester - even though the IRL course incorporates a first semester of preparatory activities -, they were assigned relatively few ECTS credits, and involved classes with relatively small numbers of students (from 7 to 20), except for EL1, which involved two classes of 40 students.

Course title	Institution (country)	Degree / study year	Duration / official no. hours	ECTS	No. students	OIE component	Language(s)	Partner countries
New Trends in Education (NTE)	WSL (Poland)	Teacher training, MA 4th year	1 term (30h)	3	7-8	Formulaic language use in virtual academic discussions	English lingua franca	Taiwan
Spoken English (SE)	Univ. Blaise Pascal (France)	Applied foreign languages, 1st & 2nd year	1 term (20h)	2.5	12	Open Learning Project (Tandem)	English, French	UK
21F.303 (BL course based on Cultura)	MIT (USA)	L2 course, 3rd semester	1 term	(12 units)	15	Cultura	French, English (L1)	France
English Language 1 (EL1)	Univ. of León (Spain)	English studies & Spanish studies, 1st year	1 term	(part of) 6	40 x 2	(no name)	English (& Spanish in the forums)	1) USA 2) Israel, USA
English Language 3 (EL3)	Univ. of Padua (Italy)	Modern languages, 3rd year	10 weeks	3 (pass-fail course)	20	Padova-Dickinson	English, Italian	USA
Intercomprehension between Romance Languages (IRL)	Univ. Grenoble Alpes (France)	L2 course, any level & any degree	2 terms (48h)	6 (3 per term)	10	Galanet	French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese (L1)	Brazil, France, Mauritius, Italy, etc.

Table 2. Overview of the six courses

3.1. New Trends in Education (NTE)

The NTE course consists of nine units, all of which have the same structure. Each unit (see figure 1) starts with a video clip the students watch online before individually answering comprehension questions and filling in a learning log. This is followed by a classroom, teacher-led pre-discussion about the clip to prepare the students for their online discussions about the clip, carried out in small groups, with distant peers. The students finish the unit offline with a reflective questionnaire and a reflective panel discussion. Every three

units, the students use a new and more difficult tool for the OIE, starting with a written asynchronous tool (forum), followed by a written quasi-synchronous tool (chat), and then an oral-synchronous tool combined with a chat tool (Skype).

3.2.   Spoken English (SE)

The SE course is run in parallel to 13 other courses with the same title at the same university and with the same assessment criteria, but integrates an OIE component and is offered to students with a higher level of English (higher intermediate level, B2, to bilingual). During the first six weeks, the students work exclusively f2f and do preparation work in small groups. They start by choosing a topic, together with a number of related video clips in English and in French. Then, they prepare an English and French study guide, focusing on language, and prepare discussion questions. During the final six weeks, they have online discussions with distant partners (in groups of four) based on these questions and the study guides. In parallel, they use a Voice Forum to record reflective messages focusing on language and intercultural issues.

3.3.   21F.303

21F.303 is a course based on the *Cultura* project (Furstenberg & Levet 2010) in which f2f sessions add a language component to the project's intercultural focus. In the initial phase of the course, the students use an online forum to complete three anonymous questionnaires on concepts (through word association), relationships (through sentence completion), and attitudes and values (through reactions to hypothetical situations). In the second phase, they compare the answers given by course members and distant partners to the same questionnaires. As homework, and with help from a detailed worksheet, every student chooses an item on one of the questionnaires and compares the answers given by French and American students. In the classroom, students who chose to analyze the same item work together, using a whiteboard, to identify what is said in the forums and how it is said. Then, they compare their results with those of the other local groups before discussing their findings online with the distant partners. The partners' answers are analyzed as another homework assignment and the results are shared in the classroom. In the next project phase, the students carry out a search for specific data, and then summarize, discuss, and compare their findings on a forum, before comparing and discussing them f2f. At the end of the course, the students give a reflective oral presentation (see figure 1).

3.4.   English language 1 (EL1)

The EL1 course follows the OIE project phases described by Müller-Hartmann (2007) and O'Dowd and Ware (2009). After an introductory and presentation phase, the students create a blog in order to exchange information with their distant partners. Then, with help from questions they had prepared beforehand, they interview their partners on cultural topics, mostly through a written asynchronous tool, but they can also choose to use other tools (e.g., Skype). Because of the limited overlap with the partners' university calendars, the OIE then stops. Until this time, the f2f and OIE sessions alternate throughout the course. The semester ends with an f2f oral presentation based on critical reflection on the online exchange.

3.5.   English language 3 (EL3)

The OIE component of the EL3 course follows similar phases to EL1, but it is divided into two parts. In the first part, the students work f2f and use a wiki as a virtual learning environment (VLE) in order to read articles, analyze two films that address intercultural issues, and then prepare questions for an online discussion with the distant partners. This online discussion is carried out one-to-one using an oral-synchronous tool (Skype). The f2f work and the wiki then form the basis for a Skype debriefing.

The second part of the course (weeks 7 to 9) is a final collaborative project to write an essay. Students and their distant partners work in small groups, dividing up the roles and work required to complete the essay. Then, each student looks for resources, writes his/her part of the essay, corrects his/her peers, and edits the text on the wiki. The course ends with an f2f reflective discussion about their online experiences.

3.6.   Intercomprehension between Romance languages (IRL)

The aim of the IRL course is to enhance intercomprehension, that is to say, improve understanding of other languages within a language family. During the first semester, the students assess their skills in different Romance languages, and work on similarities and differences between these languages in order to increase their ability to understand all of them. F2f sessions are combined with individual online learning activities in a VLE.

The OIE project, called *Galanet*, consists of writing a press file and starts in the third week of the second semester. It enables the students to practice intercomprehension by interacting with distant peers in many different countries. It is divided into four phases: 1) icebreaking and choosing a topic for the press file, 2) discussing the topic, 3) choosing the columns to include and looking for resources and information, and 4) writing and publishing a press file in four Romance languages (Degache 2006). F2f sessions during the second semester are devoted to tasks connected to each of the OIE phases. These tasks have the same objectives as the OIE phases.
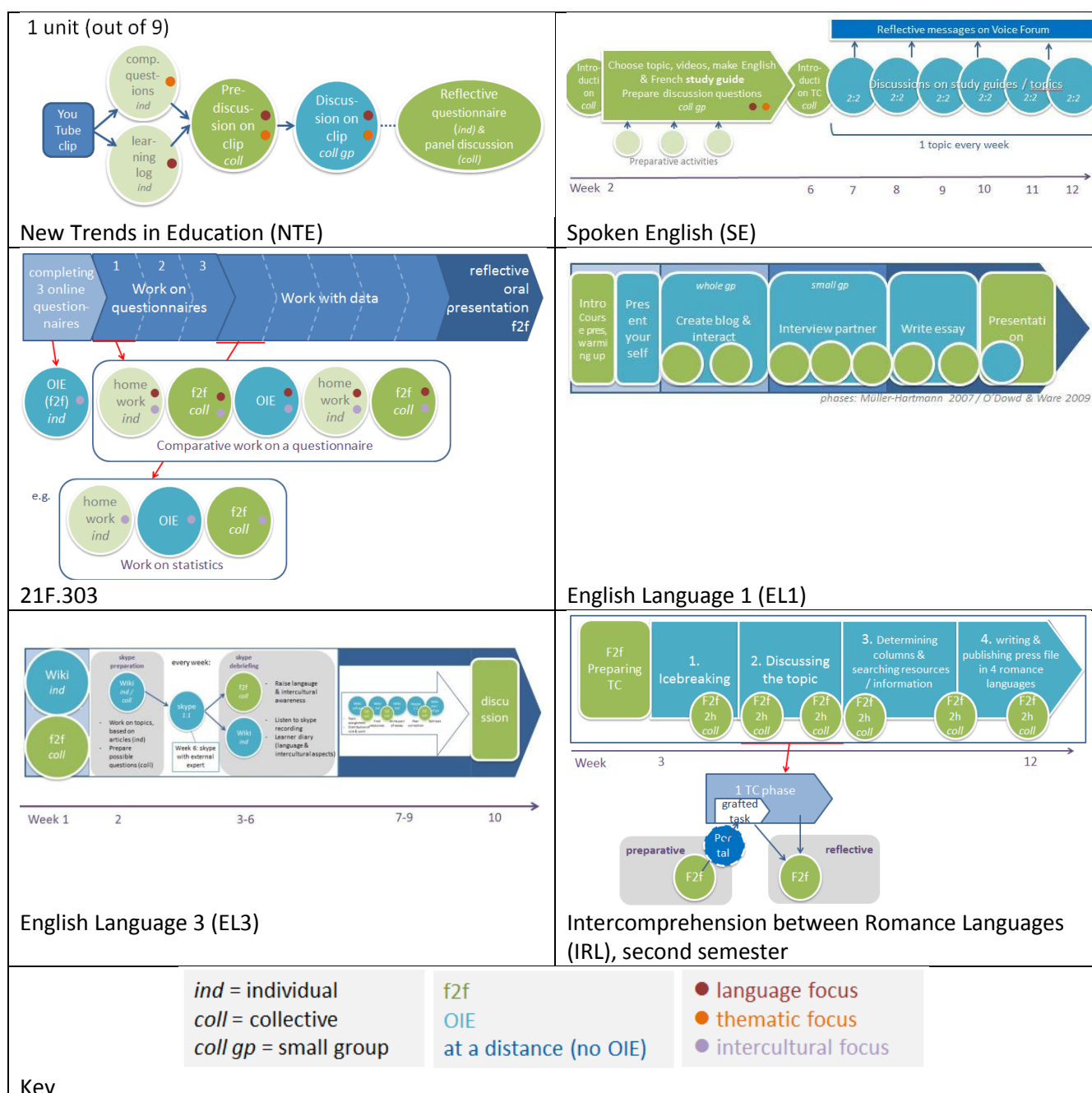

Figure 1. Design of the 6 courses.

4. Results and discussion

These short descriptions of the six courses and figure 1 bring to the fore the variations in how they are structured, how the two learning modes are sequenced, the kind of learning activities they include, and the tools they use. The descriptions also highlight differences in the "main threads" that form the backbones of the courses in terms of the combination and sequencing of f2f and OIE sessions. A main thread is determined by the learning objectives but can also relate to pedagogical approaches such as TBL or collaborative learning that influence largely the course's architecture. Some of the courses have more than one main thread, which makes both their design and their analysis more complex. The main threads of the six courses analyzed here can be summarized as follows: specific language skills (aimed at communication and involving task- or project-based learning, or intercomprehension), intercultural skills (relationship building, intercultural awareness, intercultural learning), digital literacy skills (multiliteracies), and transversal academic skills. These main threads are summarized in table 3.

Course title	Main thread
New Trends in Education (NTE)	From oral comprehension and focus on form to oral fluency & multiliteracy
Spoken English (SE)	Conversation on specific themes, prepared during f2f tasks
21F.303 (BL course based on Cultura)	Intercultural learning: "the students journey together through both cultural 'lands'" (Furstenberg & Levet 2010). Language skills
English Language 1 (EL1)	Blending through projects/tasks. Intercultural awareness (finding the link between language & culture). Academic skills
English Language 3 (EL3)	From discussion to collaboration. Intercultural awareness
Intercomprehension between Romance Languages (IRL)	Intercomprehension skills

Table 3. Main threads of the six courses.

Despite these apparent differences, analysis of the inner course design showed that the courses have a number of points in common in the way they are designed and in the way they combine the two learning modes. For example, all the courses follow Biggs' "aligned teaching" principle in that their teaching methods, activities, and assessment methods are coherent with the courses' learning objectives (Biggs 2003: 27), as far as this is possible in the given context (see 4.3.).

4.1. Lead mode

Analyzing the courses in terms of BL models also reveals similarities. For example, all six courses correspond to Bersin's (2004) "program flow model", with quite rigid course scheduling compared to several courses run in business contexts, as all the learners on a course start and finish at the same time, and most activities are obligatory. Bersin contrasts this model with a "core-and-spoke model" in which optional activities and media are added to a single main mode whenever the learner needs them. In the six courses examined in the present study, neither the f2f sessions nor the OIE components are optional; they are both integrated parts of the course. This is in line with Furstenberg and Levet's affirmation that in their course OIE "is not, as is often the case, merely an add-on" (2010: 308). In addition, since the courses have a predominately common schedule for all students of one local class, they do not correspond to the Flex model in which "students [would] move on an individually customized, fluid schedule among learning mod[es]" (Staker & Horn 2013: 12).

Even if both learning modes are integral parts of a BL course, one mode may still be dominant and more central to the course design. As stated in the introduction, in non-OIE BL courses, f2f is often considered the lead mode. In contrast, the designers of all six OIE-BL courses analyzed here stated that OIE is the lead mode. For example, the first semester of the IRL course, which does not include any virtual exchanges, is considered preparation for the OIE sessions in the second semester; in the SE course, "the f2f part is just the lead-up to the OIE"; and in the 21F.303 course, "the whole language course is built around the [OIE] project" (Furstenberg & Levet 2010: 308). If the OIE has synchronous and asynchronous parts, it is the synchronous part that everything is centered on: "The focus, particularly for the students, were the synchronous sessions" (EL3).

Nevertheless, although the distant OIE mode is the dominant one, these courses match neither with the Flex model (see above) nor with the flipped classroom model. In a flipped classroom, "the primary delivery of content and instruction is online" (Staker & Horn 2013: 10), whereas f2f, students put into practice what they have learned at a distance. In the six OIE-BL courses, it is to a large extent the OIE-online part that is dedicated to "putting into practice certain things that you want the students so learn about" (EL1; see 4.2).

Course title	No. hours			Estimated workload	
	f2f	OIE (minimum)	Other mode	f2f	OIE
New Trends in Education (NTE)	21h	9 weeks / 9h *(chat & Skype during f2f sessions, but not forum)*	Work on YouTube clips	20%	80%
Spoken English (SE)	10h	6h	Learning log & Voice forum (4h)	40-50%	50-60%
21F.303 (BL course based on Cultura)	4h/week	5h/week Online: Cultura forums Offline: "homework": preparatory or reflective (individual) work on the Cultura website		40%	60% (20% forums, 40% "homework")
English Language 1 (EL1)	~15h (1h/week)	2.5 months ~20h (2h/week)	-	30%	70%
English Language 3 (EL3)	15h	8 weeks / 12h Skype (oral synchronous OIE) & 24h wiki (written asynchronous OIE)	-	40%	60% (30% oral synchronous, 30% written asynchronous)
Intercomprehension between Romance Languages (IRL)	16h/ semester	10 weeks, 8h (2nd semester)	Instructions for activities in between f2f sessions in a VLE	2nd semester: 50%	2nd semester: 50%

Table 4. Hours allocated to the f2f and OIE modes, and the estimated workloads for the two modes.

It is interesting to note that, in terms of the time allocated to each mode, OIE would appear to be the subsidiary mode in three of the courses (NTE, SE, and IRL), where fewer hours are allocated to online exchanges than to f2f (see table 4). However, the estimated workloads for the OIE components of all the courses are at least as high as the estimated workloads for the f2f components. Although all of the teachers accepted to give such an estimation (see table 4), some of them found it difficult to give percentages for the workload, because 1) it depends on how well the students do the online component and, more importantly, because 2) it is often difficult to differentiate between f2f sessions, homework, and participation in virtual exchanges. A possible explanation for this is that synchronous OIE usually occurs during f2f sessions (NTE, EL3, IRL) in order to ensure a common time slot and to be able to provide the students with technical help if needed. The only course where this is not the case is EL1, which has a large number of students. In this case, small groups of distant students agree on which communication tool and which mode (synchronous or asynchronous) to use. 3) And, most importantly, as the teachers have stated, OIE is not just an integral part of course design, it is the hub. This is another possible reason why the teachers' had difficulty distinguishing between f2f and OIE modes, and homework. Several reasons were given for the dominance of the online component:

- The aims of all the courses are to improve communication skills or fluency, and/or intercultural skills. The best mode for practicing these skills is the online mode. "The telecollaboration is a way of putting into practice certain things that you want the students to learn about" (EL1).
- An OIE project is complex and needs explaining, for example, intercultural differences, trouble-shooting, and task instructions. This is time consuming and does not leave time for many other things (NTE).
- OIE clearly fosters student motivation: "The telecollaboration is the driving bit. It's the motivational bit" (EL1).
- Most of the f2f work and homework is oriented toward preparing the virtual exchanges (see 4.2.2.).

4.2. Function of each mode

The above specifications show that OIE, in terms of estimated workload and of targeting the learning aims, is at the center of the design of all six courses; "even th[e] f2f sessions were telecollaboration-oriented", as the

NTE-teacher puts it. However, the OIE and f2f facets of the courses are tightly interwoven. The following section shows that the role of the f2f sessions in all six courses is to prepare for and/or reflect on the OIE sessions (see figure 2). It is interesting to note that this applies regardless of their timely sequencing, either in rather regular intervals (NTE, 21F.303, EL1, IRL), in separate blocks (SE), or in a combination of both (EL3). The particular types of activities included in each mode nevertheless depend on the main focus of the course, for example, language or intercultural awareness.

Figure 2. Relationship between the f2f and OIE modes in the six BL courses

4.2.1. OIE online discussions: chosen language and aims

In four of the six courses (NTE, SE, EL1, EL3), at least part of the time, the students use a second language when interacting with their distant peers. All four courses aim at fostering oral fluency, developing communicative competence, and/or enabling the students to carry on discussions in their L2. As a result, it is the OIE online discussions and interactions that the teachers feel are most important. In the other two courses (IRL and 21F.303), the students express themselves in the Romance language they know best (IRL) or in their 'mother' tongue (21F.303). In the IRL course, the aim of the OIE component is to allow students to practice plurilingual written interactions, that is, to read and understand other Romance languages and to interact effectively. In 21F.303, the focus of the online exchanges is both expression – the content and form of which is used afterwards as input from local peers for a reflective activity – and discussion, with the aim of fostering intercultural awareness[1]. Other courses also use OIE to improve intercultural skills (EL1, EL3). Additionally, if exchanges include one-to-one synchronous oral sessions, they are considered opportunities to "develop some kind of very personal relationship" (EL3).

4.2.2. Preparatory and reflective f2f activities

The f2f mode is complementary to the OIE component, but necessary and irremovable. The two main functions of the f2f sessions are to prepare for the central mode of the course, that is, the OIE sessions, and to analyze the virtual exchanges in terms of what was said, how it was said, and what happened. In both cases (i.e. in preparative and reflective sessions), the main focus of the course – whether it is language skills (e.g., listening skills, intercomprehension skills and strategies, vocabulary, form, academic discourse, etc.), intercultural awareness, academic skills, technical issues, or several of these –, determines the types of learning activities and the aspects of the OIE that the f2f sessions deal with. For example, a course with a focus on intercultural awareness, such as EL3, concentrates f2f on behavior during the OIE, on misunderstandings and hasty judgements, whereas a course with a focus on intercomprehension (IRL) includes f2f work on how to express ideas, related to the topics the students wish to choose for the collaborative OIE project, in different romance languages.

F2f sessions are often based on various, interactive, learning activities: they include guided discussions (NTE, EL1, EL3), either as preparation for distant discussions or to review things students noticed during their virtual exchanges, and small group activities (SE, 21F.303, EL1, IRL), such as brainstorming, comparing ideas, negotiating, and collaborating. Several teachers emphasize that f2f sessions within these courses are very interactive, as the following two quotes illustrate.

> "In class, [students] spend most of the time negotiating what they are going to use [within their collective task]" (SE).
> "The classroom is a highly interactive place where students, taking center stage and interacting with their classmates, develop insights and co-construct and expand their own knowledge and understanding of the subject matter" (Furstenberg & Levet 2010: 333).

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[1] In this course, the language objectives are addressed in the f2f sessions and as homework, not online.

In a less interactive part of the f2f sessions, teachers give instructions, for example, on how to accomplish a given task, or on how to deal with technical problems (see 4.2.4.).

4.2.3. A supplementary distant mode

Some courses combine the f2f and OIE modes with another distant mode (IRL first semester, NTE, SE), such as a VLE, a wiki, or videos or activities on other websites. This second distant mode is not directly integrated in the OIE, although it also is an integrated part of the course. It provides links to online videos, listening comprehension activities and hosts learning logs (NTE), makes available instructions and links to online language exercises (IRL), or allows the student to record and post an oral reflective production expressing a personal, metacognitive and cultural point of view, in order to get a mark for his course (SE). According to the course designers, these distant learning activities using the supplementary mode could or do exist independently of the OIE sessions; nevertheless they provide input for the virtual exchanges or allow students to work on the skills needed for these exchanges. These courses hence contain a double distant mode (one primarily dedicated to the virtual exchange with distant peers, the other one not), and a f2f mode.

4.2.4. The teacher's role

Unsurprisingly, the teacher's role in the OIE mode is almost exclusively proactive (organizing and coordinating online exchanges with distant partners). During the actual exchanges, their main role is to provide technical assistance. They also listen to or read students' online discussions in order to identify points they think are interesting and important to discuss afterwards in class.

Teachers' interventions during virtual exchanges are mostly f2f. Their declarations show that these interventions may fulfill a number of roles, depending on whether the function of the f2f mode is to prepare the OIE session (give instructions, e.g., on how to use a tool, encourage students to interact), react to the OIE session (reassure students, identify critical points of the OIE), encourage students to reflect on the OIE session (discuss what happened during the OIE or problems during the OIE, act as a cultural moderator), or evaluation. F2f sessions are largely dedicated to interactive activities such as discussions and group work (see 4.2.2.). Nevertheless, the amount of guidance and input a teacher gives during discussions and group work depends on the teacher's style.

4.3. Assessment

Another question that has to be addressed when analyzing the combination of two learning modes into a BL course is how assessment takes into account the contributions of the two different learning modes. In many cases, teachers' freedom to choose assessment methods is restricted, at least partly, by institutional constraints (e.g., SE, where the tasks assessed have to be the same as those assessed in parallel courses). Other factors constraining choices of assessment methods include general teaching practice, with students being unused to, for example, formative assessment (NTE), the number of students to be assessed (EL1), the different roles students may play in the online project, which makes it difficult to evaluate their contribution to the final collaborative task (IRL), and the difficulty of assessing skills such as intercultural awareness (EL3). In addition, the skills and tasks assessed depend on the courses' main objectives.

Despite this long list of inherent differences, the items on which assessment is based generally bring together both modes of a BL course. For example, a portfolio may integrate reflection on what happened in both learning modes (21F.303). Improvements in language skills (assessed in IRL) or analytical skills (21F.303) will also be due to both modes. Other aspects that may be assessed include participation, task completion, and reflection, as illustrated in table 5.

Course title	Participation	Reflective task / analytical skills	Task completion / academic literacies	Portfolio	Language skills
New Trends in Education (NTE)	OIE & f2f				
Spoken English (SE)	f2f	OIE/ SDM	f2f		Within task completion
21F.303	OIE & f2f	OIE & f2f		OIE & f2f	
English Language 1 (EL1)		OIE & f2f	f2f		Within task completion

English Language 3 (EL3)	OIE & f2f				
Intercomprehension between Romance Languages (IRL)	SDM & OIE				OIE & f2f

Table 5. Assessed items and the modes they relate to (SDM = supplementary distant mode; see 4.2.3).

4.4. Student choices

The courses analyzed here follow Bersin's "program flow model" and would therefore be expected to be quite rigid. This raises the question of whether or not students have the opportunity to make choices, for example, about which learning activities to use or time management. Giving students choices is a way of keeping transactional distance low (Moore 1993) and helping them make the course their own.

Of course, scheduling an OIE session with one or more distant partners requires tight planning, of the OIE component but also of the related f2f sessions. Analysis of the teachers' statements on flexibility for learners showed that flexibility tends to be related mostly to the presence of larger tasks or projects that last longer than a week and that include several steps, where the students are able to make choices. This is the case for both the OIE and f2f components of the courses. In three of the courses, these tasks form the hub of the virtual exchange (EL1, EL3, IRL), with students being able to choose distant partners, online discussion questions, when to hand in work within a given deadline, topics, resources, tools, and their role in the online project. In one course (SE), rather than the OIE component, it is the f2f component that is task-based, with students able to choose their local partners, deadlines, topics, and resources. Thus, whether a task is accomplished f2f or via OIE, it is within the task that students have the most choices.

Two of the courses (NTE and 21F.303) do not include long tasks that can be divided into several steps and completed using a project-based approach. In these two courses, students are given fewer choices: they choose either deadlines or the topic to be addressed. Both courses are based round small tasks or activities that are repeated from week to week, with the aim of progressively developing certain skills either in the field of multiliteracy and oral fluency (NTE) or in order to take the students on an "intercultural journey" (21F.303).

5. Conclusion

This chapter addresses the questions of how experienced OIE course designers combine OIE and f2f sessions into coherent BL courses, and of the common denominators this blending shares. An analysis of six higher education language-learning courses in different European countries revealed several major differences between these courses, including study year, degree program, course objectives - that result, together with constraints due to university calendars of the different project partners, different teaching styles, and different methodological approaches, in various course structures, and in various sequencing of the two learning modes. However, the courses also had numerous similarities including the facts that most of them lasted only one term and involved (with one exception) relatively small numbers of students (between 7 and 20). Like most HE courses, all six courses followed a linear structure with learners starting and finishing the course simultaneously. As such, they fit Bersin's (2004) "program flow model", in which learners tend to have little freedom to choose their learning activities. In the courses analyzed, students were free to make choices, particularly when the course was based on a longer task and a project-based approach. However, this freedom to choose is not necessarily contradictory to Bersin's "program flow model", as it extended only to aspects such as local or distant partners, online discussion questions, when to hand in work within a given deadline, the topics studied, and the resources or tools the students used. Working on a joint topic or project, together with one or several other classes at a distance, which have their own constraints in terms of assessment, scheduling, etc., makes it difficult to give larger choices to the students. In only one case (IRL) were students free to make choices about learning activities. Nevertheless, student's choice is only one means to reduce transactional distance (Moore 1993). Interaction is another one, which is central in these courses.

Another result concerns the coherence of BL courses. Concordantly to Guth et al.'s (2012) finding that virtual exchanges tend to be integrated rather than add-on activities to other courses, both learning modes were

inherent to the designs of all six courses analyzed. This is maybe due to the fact that the teachers were asked to present a course that combines both modes in a way they considered coherent, which probably excludes simple add-ons. In addition, a common feature of all six courses is that the OIE mode is the central part of the design, with the f2f sessions being mostly devoted to preparatory and analytical activities relating to the virtual exchange. These courses' design differs from existing BL models that consider the online mode to be central (flipped classroom and flex model). But, these courses integrating OIE fully meet a key design principle for BL courses that several authors claim with reference to Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Theory (Chew et al. 2008, Garrison & Vaughan 2008, Nissen 2014): facilitation through online interaction with peers and a tutor.

The aim of this study was to examine the designs of different BL courses involving virtual exchanges in order to determine the factors that produce a coherent course design. This is an issue that, to date, has been little studied. The identification of parallels between these courses, regarding aspects such as using the OIE part as a lead mode, orienting the f2f part towards the OIE part, assessing most often jointly both modes, and student choices, should help course designers and teachers develop effective BL courses that include OIE.

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