

## Interculturally Wired, Locally Connected: Online Collaboration and Intercultural learning in a Bi-national Blended Learning Project

**Joannis Kaliamos**

Leuphana University Lüneburg (Germany)

[Joannis.Kaliamos@leuphana.de](mailto:Joannis.Kaliamos@leuphana.de)

*"Going Green – Education for Sustainability" is a Moodle-based blended learning project for the English-as-a-foreign-language and content-and-language-integrated-learning classroom that was jointly developed by the U.S. Mission to Germany, Leuphana University Lüneburg, and the e-learning specialists LIFE e.V. In this project, German and U.S. students in secondary schools explore current sustainability challenges and environmental policies in their countries, and collaboratively develop and implement local action plans for sustainable development in their communities. The project's conceptual foundation is threefold and can be located at the interface between the theoretical strands of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT).*

*This paper aims to address the question as to which task types and corresponding ICT tools can be used effectively to promote intercultural exchange and foreign language learning. In this context, three exemplary task settings from the Going Green curriculum are introduced: (a) learning about U.S. culture by use of interactive and authentic online materials; (b) indirect intercultural exchange through sharing research results produced by learners themselves; (c) direct intercultural exchange through online collaboration beyond classroom borders. These task types vary with regard to their degree of online collaboration. They are introduced in their overall context of the bi-national blended learning project. Their potential for intercultural learning is presented by use of classroom materials from the ongoing project.*

### **1. Introduction: Going Green project context**

Going Green is a Moodle-based blended learning project for secondary English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) and content-and-language-integrated-learning (CLIL) classrooms in the U.S. and Germany. It intends to engage and connect German and U.S. learners in exploring environmental challenges and policies in their countries, and collaboratively develop and implement local action plans for sustainable development that will enter a concluding student competition. Conceptually, the project operates at the interface of three pedagogical principles:

Firstly, the project incorporates the approach of task-based language teaching (TBLT) by offering a curriculum that is organized in product-oriented and meaning-focused task-cycles reflecting a link to real-world communicative situations (cf. Ellis 2003). It further integrates content and language instruction in a modular project structure, i.e. exercises for discrete language practice complement content-based task-cycles. According to Stoller, projects in foreign language education can be defined by their common features. Amongst others, such common features include a focus on content learning rather than specific language targets; projects involve student-centeredness with close teacher scaffolding; they are rather cooperative than competitive through the necessity to share ideas, expertise, and goals; they allow for an authentic integration of language skills; they culminate in a tangible or intangible product; and they provide learners with motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging tasks and activities (Stoller 2002: 110).

Secondly, Going Green sets out to promote the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), following the understanding that foreign language education should not merely lead to development in linguistic competences. In keeping with Byram (1997), ICC is seen here as an interplay of interconnected savors, or skills, i.e. the cognitive level of knowledge about one's own and other cultures, the skills of interpreting and relating cultures to one another, of discovering and interacting in different cultures, and the learner's attitudinal dispositions to relativize their own and value other cultures (ibid.: 34).

Thirdly, the project promotes the inclusion of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) into regular secondary school classroom settings. In anticipation of the various constraints to such an approach in daily classroom practice, several means of support are deliberately included, such as detailed teaching guides, face-to-face teacher trainings, and ongoing support through Moodle, in order to



increase experiential learning opportunities for teachers and learners involving effective digital media use.

With regard to the project's content-orientation, the topics of environmentalism, sustainable development, and civic engagement serve as the overarching thematic framework. Thus, Going Green not only reflects the premises of high-profile political institutions (see, e.g., the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014), but also the curricular goals of all 16 German state curricula for the upper-secondary EFL classroom. Hauschild *et al.* (2012) underline the potential of green topics for content-based foreign language instruction as they affect people globally, transcend local and national cultures, and influence much of what we see, hear, and read in daily news media. This topic orientation can constitute so-called "rich points" of intercultural communication – moments of incomprehension and unmet expectations between speakers of two languages, between insiders and outsiders of cultures at play, according to linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar (1996).

## 2. Methodological framework

### 2.1 Blended learning

The concept of blended learning, on the most basic level, implies a combination of face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction (cf. Graham 2005: 5). It seeks to optimize learning processes and outcomes by complementing traditional classroom settings with self-directed or virtual learning phases, e.g. mediated by an online learning management system. However, this general definition leaves relatively much room for a variety of realizations in practice, e.g. with regard to the sequencing of, and emphasis given to, online and offline activities as well as in-class and out-of-class phases, dependence on computer mediation, distribution of media, and instructional methods, to name but a few (cf. Staker & Horn 2012).

It is noteworthy here that in Going Green, too, different concretizations of the blended learning paradigm are practiced within the same project context. The project's Moodle platform and the learning arrangements therein can be implemented by teachers at their discretion, allowing for a flexible adaptation in accordance with local media infrastructures (availability of computers and web-access at schools), established teaching methodology and practices, and assigned time budgets. While a number of teachers mainly use the Moodle platform as a resource of teaching materials and as depository for digital files, others fully incorporate the blended learning paradigm into their daily teaching practice, utilizing it for online communication and web-based task settings. In so doing, they follow what Staker and Horn (2012: 8) define as a rotation model for blended learning. Blended learning designs of this type follow a structure in which, "within a given course or subject (...), students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher's discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning." In addition, other modalities typically connected to this type include, amongst others, activities like "small-group or full-class instruction, group projects, individual tutoring, and pencil-and-paper assignments" (*ibid.*).

### 2.2 Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education

The research area of computer and web-based language learning today is one of the fastest growing in the discipline. This is also reflected in the sheer multitude of concepts and activity types found in relevant research literature involving intercultural communication and exchange via electronic devices and access to the web, e.g. telecollaboration, tandem learning, computer-mediated communication, and others. In this paper I follow Thorne (2006), who introduced the "non-sectarian umbrella term" internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (ICFLE), as the aforementioned terms fail to express adequately the inherent dualism of intercultural learning *and* language education in these learning environments (cf. *ibid.*: 3, also Belz 2007: 128). ICFLE can thus mean different learning activities in which L2 learners engage in intercultural dialog while developing the linguistic resources necessary for this kind of dialog. In this process, language learners can overcome the simulative character of traditional classroom-based L2 communication and engage in authentic interaction with expert speakers of the target language or other learners in different parts of the world. Finally, Dooly and O'Dowd (2012) broadly distinguish three categories of online interaction and ICFLE, all of which can be identified to varying degrees in Going Green: in-class interaction, e.g. collaboration in a wiki or forum discussion between learners who also learn together in a face-to-face classroom setting; class-to-class interaction, e.g. telecollaboration projects between courses in different physical locations; and class-to-world interaction, which is similar to telecollaborative learning in many ways, but includes communication with partners in non-educational settings, e.g. in specialized fan forums, online communities, and other Web 2.0 platforms.



### 3. Intercultural collaboration task types in Going Green

The Going Green Moodle platform includes a three-step curriculum for participant classes. The introductory module "What is sustainability?" focuses on the students' underlying assumptions and stereotypes concerning sustainable development in the U.S. and Germany and introduces basic concepts like the ecological footprint and political initiatives for sustainability on the local, state, and federal government level. The second content module "Exploring the challenges" allows learners to explore up to four different sustainability challenges, i.e. recycling, green cities, sustainable food production, and fashion. For each of these challenges, students find an introductory activity, a research activity, a case study, different categories of language exercises and tasks, and a so-called eco-challenge asking learners to research and demonstrate how aspects related to the selected topic impact on their local community. In the last module, students are to participate in a competition by designing and planning their own action plan for sustainable development and presenting it creatively using the target language. These three modules are located in the participating courses' private e-classrooms (i.e. password protected Moodle courses). In addition, a meta-course open to all project participants, the Virtual Town Hall, is a place for exchange and communication beyond classroom borders.

The following outline of three exemplary task types from Going Green indicates how different forms, or degrees, of intercultural communication and online collaboration can be integrated into the same project context. They all have in common that they are facilitated through Moodle, they promote learning about U.S. culture (the target culture in the participating courses) through authentic and web-based materials, and they include a reflexive focus on the students' own native culture. The tasks are also available online at <http://moodle.goinggreen2014.org/>.

#### 3.1 Learning about culture(s)

By definition, most of the task-cycles in Going Green fall into this category as they target the thematic framework of sustainability in Germany and the U.S. explicitly. In particular, the research and case study tasks offer a differentiated and often unexpected insight into the target culture, implementing Agar's notion of intercultural rich points. Fig. 1 is a screenshot of the *TASK: The plastic bag ban in Los Angeles*, a case study in the module about plastic waste and recycling. Learners not only learn factual knowledge about the target culture, but in order to solve the task they need to participate in a forum discussion, aiming at the skills of discovery, interpreting, and relating, thereby also influencing the other categories of Byram's ICC model. Computer-mediated communication here is mainly done in-class.

### TASK: The plastic bag ban in Los Angeles

A number of communities in California, as elsewhere in the U.S., have adopted laws to regulate the use of, or entirely ban single-use plastic bags from their businesses. As of this year, Los Angeles has put a law into effect that bans all single-use plastic bags from stores. It is the largest city in the U.S. to do so and is now attracting politicians and activists from other cities to follow their lead.

- Research the situation in L.A. using the following resources. Search for more resources online as needed.
- Take notes on paper or in your personal blog ("draft").
- Then, discuss your findings in the [FORUM: Case study discussion Plastic//Recycle](#).

---

 **Materials and resources:**



Video Text

**CBS L.A.: L.A. plastic bag ban goes into effect new year's day (Dec. 30, 2013)**

Fig. 1: Screenshot of *TASK: The plastic bag ban in Los Angeles*

#### 3.2 Indirect intercultural collaboration tasks

Several task-cycles in Going Green ask learners to share and exchange learner texts beyond classroom borders. Fig. 2 is a screenshot of the *DATABASE: Plastic//Recycle*. In a preceding step, learners create texts, collages, videos, or other products demonstrating how a selected sustainability issue impacts on their local environment. In order to solve this task, they are supposed to upload their outcome into the database and research other groups' contributions. In a concluding presentation, the students are supposed to compare at least one other contribution to their own work, thereby including an authentic learner text from the target culture in this task. Thus, this is not necessarily a form of institutionalized class-to-class cooperation but moreover a limited and informal way of cooperating in an intercultural setting.

## DATABASE: Plastic//Recycle



Upload your result from the Plastic//Recycle Eco Challenge assignment here. If you have created your product somewhere else on the web, publish the link to the location in the field 'Link'. Upload a picture, if possible, so that others can get a first glimpse of your project. If you have produced a standard document, e.g. a presentation or text, upload it as a 'File' (max. 5 MB).

**Beware: Only after you have uploaded your own work, you will be able to see other entries!**

View list View single Search Add entry Export Templates Fields Presets


Title	Link	File	Picture	Date
Avoid Plastic	Blog Entry on "One World, One Ocean"	bathing-slice-pixabay.com.png		Sunday, 3 August 2014, 6:57 PM

Fig. 2: Screenshot of DATABASE: Plastic//Recycle

### 3.3 Direct intercultural collaboration

The project provides several ways for a more direct type of ICFLE, the most obvious being that two tandem courses (U.S. and Germany) register on a shared e-classroom and collaborate online along the parallel texts and tasks of the Going Green curriculum. The exemplary activity presented in fig. 3 is a database introducing a list of U.S. experts on sustainability – politicians, academic scholars, and NGO representatives, who have agreed to answer student questions arising from the project. Such an activity type can be of particular interest for those participants who do not have the opportunity to collaborate with a tandem partner. Through the provided infrastructure they can add another dimension of ICFLE to their classroom.

## DATABASE: U.S. sustainability experts



Take a look at our list of renowned experts in sustainability and environmentalism. Post any questions you would like to ask them in the comment section below their profile (Click on **View single** → **Comments**). At the end of the expert week, all questions will be forwarded to our expert(s) of the week. They will post their answers in this section as a text or video message.

View list View single Search Add entry Export Templates Fields Presets

Name	Occupation	Special Expertise	Expert week(s)
	Former State Senator of Kansas, Lecturer in American Government and Politics, Kansas City (USA)	environmental policy, the role of state and local government	15-21 September 27 October-2 November
	Lecturer and PhD student in English	Political cartoons on	22-28 September 20-26 October

Fig. 3: Screenshot of DATABASE: U.S. sustainability experts

### 4. Conclusion

The individual forms of intercultural collaboration and communication mentioned here are not new. In fact, the different realizations of ICFLE have been implemented in school contexts for two decades now. However, I have tried to show that these forms of ICFLE are brought together in Going Green in the context of one single, content-based foreign language project. The group of participants ranges from ICFLE-experienced tandem partners to first-time ICFLE users building occasional and goal-oriented partnerships as they proceed in the project's curriculum. This is of particular importance as the reality of many foreign language classrooms (at least in Germany) all too often does not reflect the technological advances described in academic studies. In an earlier contribution I have demonstrated that one major consequence of a rudimentary ICFLE implementation in classrooms is a deficit in experiential and procedural knowledge involving effective digital media use for communication and



other tasks (Kaliampos & Schmidt 2014). Finally, Going Green is work in progress. The project has been designed and implemented for the first time in the 2014-15 school term. The first project cohort will conclude in December 2014. The analysis of classroom data and emerging learner texts against the backdrop of the here outlined conceptual goals will be of great interest.

## Acknowledgements:

I wish to thank the Graduate School at Leuphana University, Lüneburg (Germany) for generously supporting my participation in the 7<sup>th</sup> ICT for Language Learning conference. Many thanks also to the Going Green team at Leuphana University, Lüneburg, LIFE e.V., Berlin, and especially to the U.S. Mission to Germany for initiating the institutional partnership behind Going Green – Education for Sustainability.

## References

- [1] Going Green – Education for Sustainability
- [2] Website: <http://goinggreen2014.org/>
- [3] Moodle platform: <http://moodle.goinggreen2014.org/>
- [4] Agar, Michael (1994): *Language Shock. Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company.
- [5] Belz, Julie A. (2007): *The Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Telecollaborative Partnerships*. In: O'Dowd, Robert (Ed.): *Online Intercultural Exchange. An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers*. Clevedon, Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 107-166.
- [6] Byram, Michael (1997): *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [7] Dooly, Melinda & O'Dowd, Robert (2012): *Researching Online Interaction and Exchange in Foreign Language Education: Introduction to the Volume*. In: Dooly, Melinda & O'Dowd, Robert (Eds.): *Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange. Theories, Methods and Challenges*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 11-41.
- [8] Ellis, Rod (2003): *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Graham, Charles R. (2006): *Blended Learning Systems: Definition, Current Trends, and Future Directions*. In: Bonk, Curtis J. & Graham, Charles R. (2006): *The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass/Pfeiffer, 3-21.
- [10] Hauschild, Staci; Poltavtchenko, Elena & Stoller, Fredricka L. (2012): *Going Green: Merging Environmental Education and Language Instruction*. In: *English Teaching Forum* 50: 2, 2-13.
- [11] Kaliampos, Joannis & Schmidt, Torben (2014): *Web 2.0 Tasks in Action: EFL Learning in the U.S. Embassy School Election Project 2012*. In: *American Studies Journal* 32: 1.
- [12] Staker, Heather & Horn, Michael B. (2012): *Classifying K-12 Blended Learning*. San Mateo, CA: Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation.
- [13] Thorne, Steven L. (2006): *Pedagogical and Praxiological Lessons from Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education*. In: Belz, Julie A. & Thorne, Steven L. (Eds.): *Internet-Mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education*. Boston, Mass.: Thomson, Heinle, 2-30.