Email Tandem Exchanges as a Tool for Authentic Cultural Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the description of an email Tandem exchange project conducted between 94 intermediate-level students (47 pairs) from Columbia University/Barnard College in New York and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in Spain during the Fall Semester of 2010. There were several goals to this project: to help improve students’ writing skills; to encourage them to learn about culture through authentic (understood as ‘direct contact with a native speaker’) and real exposure to the target language; to foster progress in their use of the target languages through peer-to-peer corrections; and to take an active part in their own learning through self-assessment. Based on students’ opinions, this project had a very positive impact in the way they viewed the foreign/target culture on both sides of the Atlantic. It also helped them enhance their written proficiency and acquire a new lexical mastery that would have been impossible through the limited and less-real scope of the classroom.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning, Collaborative Learning, Email, Foreign Language Learning, Tandem Exchange, Teaching Culture, Telecollaboration Exchange

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AN E-TANDEM EXCHANGE?

The word ‘tandem’ is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a group of two or more arranged one behind the other or used or acting in conjunction” (“Tandem,” n.d., emphasis added). A tandem is a partnership, and when it is applied to language learning it can be a very good example of collaborative learning. Learning in tandem thus means working together to achieve a common goal, which in the present article is identified as authentic cultural education in a foreign language. The word “authentic” is operationalized here from Krashen’s perspective (1982, as cited in Vandenheuvel, 1996, p. 3), referring to the importance of providing the students with experiences that bring the real world to the classroom so that they may, little by little, comprehend ‘authentic’ language that really enables them to upgrade their acquisition of the target language.

E-Tandem exchanges are email exchange projects stemming from the International Tandem Network (http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/) that was created in 1994 by the Commission of the European Union (http://ec.europa.eu/index_en.htm). Their foremost
basic principle is “autonomous learning,” which places all responsibility, interest, and effort upon the student him/herself, and this means that it always entails out-of-class learning and dedication. It is:

“A form of open learning, whereby two people with different native languages work together in pairs in order to learn more about one another’s character and culture; to help one another improve their language skills; [and] to exchange additional knowledge – for example, about their professional life (http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/).”

Since these ‘two people’ are not language instructors, but students, and their communication does not happen in the language classroom but via email in the students’ own time, all that takes place between them may be referred to as “authentic.” According to Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni (2000, p. 3), “e-mail, a form of asynchronous computer-mediated communication, has been called ‘the mother of all Internet applications’ (as cited in Gonglewski, Meloni, & Brant, 2001, p. 1).” Tandem partners exchange information, correct each other, and help one another with their language skills. The topics in their exchange can also be aimed at fostering intercultural exchange, expanding learner’s knowledge about the target language with firsthand information from a native speaker (and not, for instance, the textbook used in class).

There are two other principles associated with e-Tandem exchanges. The first one, named the ‘principle of reciprocity,’ is based on the joint effort of both partners, who are responsible for the other’s learning and is directed at the mutual benefit that begins with their contributions. Since both students are language learners, they may easily relate to each other and are “more likely than other speakers to deal with their partner’s problems with a greater sensitivity, patience and understanding” (http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/learning/idxeng11.html). Möllering (2002, p. 2) summarizes the key ideas from this principle: “mutual support, equal contribution, same extent of benefit, equal roles: learner-learner.”

The second principle has to do with ‘learning autonomy.’ In Tandem exchanges, the student himself directly determines the rules to follow: based on some loose guidelines, he decides how much, how long and how often to write to his partner. This way, he can control his own flow of information and thus, his learning and development. This principle also relates to what is communicated to the partner. Although there may be pre-set topics to cover during the exchange, every student decides what to say about them, and is also in charge of explaining cultural aspects and issues to their partner based on their own experience and knowledge.

Vinagre (2006, p. 13) points out: “There is a growing body of research that investigates the integration of e-mail into language learning environments and its effectiveness as a tool to promote foreign language learning” (see this work and Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011, for a comprehensive list of studies and references. Additionally, Warschauer, 1997, provides the reader with a complete conceptual framework for the use of computer-mediated communication). It is also worth mentioning that “other perceived benefits refer to extending language learning beyond what can be achieved in the classroom […], providing authentic contexts for real communication […] and encouraging equal opportunity participation.” The study conducted by Vandenheuvel as early as 1996, confirms that students were motivated “to improve their mastery of the L2 in order to communicate more effectively with native speakers [via their e-Tandem exchange]” (p. 143, original in Spanish). Research involving telecollaborative exchanges has greatly increased in the last 10 years, and studies nowadays focus on very different aspects of e-Tandem exchanges. For instance, Vinagre and Muñoz (2011) deal with corrective feedback, or Belz (2004) presents an interesting study that focuses on the ‘adult language play’ that may happen with students who develop a bond of trust while in the exchange when they use it in a playful manner that helps learn new forms in the target language.
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