

LONG-DISTANCE TANDEM LEARNING BY E-MAIL: EVALUATION OF A CASE STUDY

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This paper presents the findings of an experiment in tandem language learning by e-mail carried out jointly by the Institute of Modern Languages and the Department of Applied Languages at Antonio de Nebrija University in Madrid and the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) in the United States during the first semester of the academic year 2004-05. We found that, despite certain teething problems regarding the implementation of the project and the students' initial ignorance of the pedagogical principles of reciprocity and autonomy needed to guarantee the success of the project, the students' involvement and participation reflected a considerable improvement in their communicative competence in the target language, especially with regard to their vocabulary acquisition, writing skills and foreign culture awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of an experiment in tandem language learning by e-mail, carried out jointly by the Institute of Modern Languages and the Department of Applied Languages at Antonio de Nebrija University in Madrid and the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) in the United States during the first semester of the academic year 2004-05.

While most initiatives involving e-mail exchanges as part of the foreign language learning process are set up using the International E-Mail Tandem Network¹, our project started with a direct agreement between the two universities. The immediate objective pursued by the parties involved was to establish a close relationship between the students of both countries, so that they could use their target language in authentic contexts and situations. This would lead to an increased awareness of 'what they could do with the language' in the short term, which, in

¹ The International E-Mail Tandem Network offers universities and other educational institutions in many different countries the possibility of establishing tandem learning exchanges.

turn, would facilitate motivation. In addition, we also wanted to encourage our students to get to know and understand their counterparts' culture. The overall objective was to promote autonomy in the language learning process in order to make the students aware of the importance of being responsible for their own learning and that of their partners.

Before we move on to describing and evaluating our exchange programme, it is necessary to define certain concepts in order to understand the relevance of tandem learning by e-mail within the language learning process.

TANDEM LANGUAGE LEARNING

The concept of tandem language learning has been the topic of much research over the last ten years. The term *tandem* implies collaboration and simultaneity and when applied to language learning we refer to a partnership between two learners who are learning each other's mother tongue. These learners meet regularly and work together with the purpose of achieving a two-fold objective: to improve their own communicative competence in the target language and to help their partner to achieve the same. Based on this definition, we can see that tandem learning rests on two main principles: reciprocity and autonomy (Brammerts 1996). The principle of reciprocity refers to the idea of exchange and, if this exchange is to be successful, there has to be a balanced partnership in which both participants benefit equally.

The principle of autonomy has often been misconstrued as being nothing more than self-instruction and, while it is possible for self-instruction to foster learner autonomy in some cases, it is also true that it often fails to provide successful results. Another misconception related to learner autonomy refers to the belief that, since students are responsible for their own learning process, teachers become mere observers and, therefore, redundant. Although teachers cannot plan the development of learner autonomy in a series of lessons, it is highly unlikely that students will become autonomous without active encouragement from their teachers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Learner autonomy is defined by Little (1991:4) as a "capacity-for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action". In his work on learner autonomy, Little takes into account various aspects of cognitive psychology dealing with active problem-solving, development of new capacities for abstract thinking-learning and George Kelly's (1963) psychology of personal constructs. In his theory of personal constructs, Kelly explains that: "Different men construe [the

universe] in different ways (. . .) Some of the alternative ways of construing are better adapted to man's purposes than others. Thus, man comes to understand his world through an infinite series of successive approximations." (Kelly 1963:43)

This process of construing the world is a "continuous process of hypothesis-testing and theory-revision" (Little 1991:17). Our personal constructs are built mainly upon the shared system of beliefs and values that we acquire as members of a particular society and culture. However, as a whole, they are unique to each one of us and we must constantly reshape our constructs in the light of new experience. As regards learning, personal construct psychology provides an insight into the bearing of each student's own system of constructs on the learning task. Any learning task requires that the student assimilate new knowledge and, therefore, the student needs to constantly adjust and adapt. When this adaptation only requires a few changes in the already-existing personal constructs, learning takes place easily. However, if these adjustments entail a major restructuring of the underlying personal constructs, learning becomes difficult and, therefore, frustrating. In the field of foreign language learning, one consequence of Kelly's theory would suggest that students should understand their own personal constructs if learning is to be facilitated emotionally as well as cognitively. This awareness may not be easy to achieve, in the same way that successful learning might not always follow. However, if success in language learning lies mainly in an increased awareness of the learning process (internal cognitive aspect), learners must be active participants who take full responsibility for their own learning and they must also collaborate with others in solving problems and in restructuring their personal constructs through the making and testing of hypotheses.

Another major influence on the concept of learner autonomy is provided by Vygotsky, who reflects on the importance of social relationships to the development of learning. The central concept in his theory is "the zone of proximal development", which can be defined as: "[. . .] the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky 1978:86)

This approach stresses the crucial importance of collaboration (external social aspect) in the learning process. Thus, interactive communication should be facilitated through the use of alternative learner-centred environments, where students can work together and help each other either in pairs or in larger groups.

From the points previously discussed, one realises that the internal cognitive aspect and the external social aspect of learning are inseparable; they are two sides of the same coin. They are intertwined in such a way that they cannot evolve independently. They influence each other and, for learning to take place, these two

aspects must both develop. Thus, it is necessary for these aspects to be brought together to reflect on the principle of autonomy.

FOSTERING AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The principle of autonomy is essential to the process of language learning, since, in order to achieve communicative efficiency in the target language, learners must have “independence, self-reliance and self-confidence to fulfil the variety of social, psychological and discourse roles in which they are cast” (Little 1991:27). This approach also calls for a change in the role of the teacher, who should act as a facilitator or a counsellor, helping to create a context which fosters the development of learner autonomy. One of the contexts in which this development of learner autonomy becomes possible is tandem learning by e-mail. In this type of exchange, students use the target language for the purposes of authentic communication with native speakers of their target language and they do so voluntarily. However, the relationship established between both participants, although based on power (student-teacher or non-native speaker-native speaker) does not remain static, since the above-mentioned roles are interchangeable, which leads to a more balanced collaboration. Furthermore, the native speaker’s role is not to lecture on a series of grammatical or cultural issues; on the contrary, it is up to the learner to take advantage of what the native speaker has to offer as an expert in his own language and as a facilitator of the learning process. It is quite interesting to note what Appel (1999:14) writes in this respect: “for the exchange to be successful the learner needs a minimum of autonomy which will then further develop as a result of the exchange”. Thus, tandem learning places participants in a feedback loop. In this context, the more autonomous a learner is, the more autonomous he becomes. Therefore, although autonomy cannot be taught, it is very important that the facilitator or co-ordinator of the exchange monitors it closely, in order to draw attention to the learning process in cases where autonomy is underdeveloped.

THE ROLE OF E-MAIL IN TANDEM LANGUAGE LEARNING

The effectiveness of using e-mail as a tool to promote foreign language learning has been mentioned in a wide range of studies. Previous research suggests that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can facilitate communication (Cooper and Selfe 1990), reduce anxiety (Kern 1995, Sullivan 1993), increase oral discussion (Pratt and Sullivan 1994), enhance student motivation (Warschauer 1996a), facilitate social learning (Barker and Kemp 1990) and improve writing skills (Warschauer 1996b), among others.

Another feature of electronic mail is that it has assumed functions and features usually associated with spoken language as well as formal writing (Davis and Brewer 1997), thus facilitating the development of speaking and writing skills in the foreign language. For all the above-mentioned reasons we set up an exchange programme on the basis of a previous pilot scheme implemented during the academic year 2003-04. During this stage, twenty students at each university took part in the e-mail exchange as a voluntary activity to complement their coursework. After obtaining a highly positive feedback from the students at this point, we decided to continue with a more complex form of collaboration between the two universities during the first semester of the academic year 2004-05. Thus, the role of tandem learning by e-mail became more important within the overall course of study and was included as a mandatory activity for all the students taking English Level 4 (Higher Intermediate) at Antonio de Nebrija University and those students taking Spanish courses at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

SETTING UP THE PROJECT: INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION

The approach to language learning at both universities shared certain basic features, such as emphasis on the development and use of communication skills and a focus on similar topics, which facilitated our task when it came to setting up the project. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting the fact that students at Antonio de Nebrija University used a multimedia language learning system, which combined multimedia resources with conversation-based sessions. Therefore, Spanish students were familiar with the use of technology as an integral part of their foreign language classes, whilst the course syllabus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst had a more traditional, albeit innovative, language learning approach.

The academic profile of the learners from both universities was also similar. With the exception of some mature students, most of the students were between nineteen and twenty-four years of age and had enrolled in foreign language courses to complement their further education studies. Even though none of our students majored in language or linguistics, the study of at least one foreign language was compulsory for the students at Antonio de Nebrija University, whereas Spanish language was taken as an extracurricular or optional subject in the case of the students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Before setting up the exchange, we had to make some decisions regarding how best to involve a total of ninety-two students in tandem learning by e-mail. Out of these ninety-two students, sixty were split into four groups attending Higher Intermediate English courses at Antonio de Nebrija University and thirty-two were split into two groups attending Spanish classes at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The six groups were taught separately for part of the time, and for the

other part they worked in tandem partnerships. We had agreed to pair students who had similar learning targets and roughly the same level of proficiency in their target language, which meant that we had twice as many higher intermediate students at Nebrija University as at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. In view of this imbalance we decided to ask some of the American students if they were interested in having two partners. This arrangement would mean that their work was effectively doubled, and for this reason they were offered the possibility of achieving a higher grade as an incentive. Nine of them agreed to correspond with two Spanish students each, but we still had nineteen students at Antonio de Nebrija University who did not have an American partner. We found a temporary, but not ideal, solution. In addition to one-to-one communication, we developed a 'common room' on the Internet where all the students involved in the exchange could meet. We developed different sections within the 'common room' so that the students could organise their material and also gain easy access to all the resources the instructors had previously uploaded and those they would upload throughout the semester. The 'common room' we designed had a 'discussion forum' where the learners could post messages and exchange information, a 'files section' featuring a series of folders to organise the material they were working on, a 'chat section' to facilitate the organization of the chat session they were required to undertake, a 'photos section', a 'links section' designed to give the rest of the students access to interesting or helpful websites for their learning process, a 'polls section' and a calendar to help them organise their work in time for class. This facility allowed us to implement a partial solution to the problem of the nineteen Spanish students who could not be paired with any American student. We would evaluate their active participation in the 'common room' by applying different criteria to those used to evaluate the e-mail tandem exchanges, since those students solely participating in the 'common room' exercise were taking part in an entirely different activity. This active participation would have the same weight for the purposes of determining their final grade as the participation in the one-to-one exchanges carried out by the students who did have an American counterpart.

Another difficulty we encountered was the academic year at the two universities, Amherst and Nebrija, was structured differently. Throughout the year we discovered that the differences between their academic calendars seriously disrupted the rhythm of the e-mail correspondence. We learned that the second semester was not as suitable as the first semester for the implementation of transatlantic tandem language learning projects, mainly because there was a ten-day break in each country, Spring Break in the United States and Easter in Spain, which did not coincide, causing a temporary and general breakdown in e-mail communication, since the students lost contact with each other for nearly a month. In this respect, we found that the first semester was clearly the most suitable part of the academic year time to carry out our tandem learning project.

PEDAGOGICAL ORGANIZATION

The first step in setting up the project was to develop a self-evaluation questionnaire specially designed to discover the students' knowledge of the culture and people they were going to work with throughout the semester, as well as to gain an overall insight into their personal perception of their own communicative competence in the target language. It was administered online so that the students could enjoy easy access to it and we could examine the results almost instantaneously. The questionnaire included open-ended questions as well as others where the respondents were simply required to answer "yes" or "no". At the end of the exchange period, the participants were then asked to fill in a similar questionnaire. This enabled us to evaluate whether the project had been a positive and productive experience for the learners, not only from a linguistic point of view but also from a cultural perspective.

Once the students had been assigned a partner, they were required to exchange a minimum of two e-mails a week, messages that they also had to send to their instructors, who kept a digitalized copy of all the e-mails in order to evaluate the entire process on a weekly basis. The students were given a series of topics to discuss, which they were to approach from a personal perspective, based on their own experiences. The idea was to compare and contrast two different cultures and two different ways of life. We sought to link some topics to events actually taking place in both countries, and others to developments in their own personal lives at that particular moment. The aim was to encourage a sense of familiarity and confidence, which would hopefully facilitate communication.

All the students involved in the project were invited to use the 'common room' mentioned above. Participants in both countries were asked to carry out various projects together, whose results would later be displayed on the 'common room' message board for the rest of the students to see. While paired students had a choice as to whether they wished to use the 'common room' facility, depending on the needs of the joint projects they were asked to carry out, participation was compulsory for the nineteen Spanish students, who were required to contribute to its development throughout the course by adding files, photos and surveys or by simply suggesting interesting links. Thus, these students had to visit the 'common room' at least twice a week in order to participate in the discussion forum, whose topics were generally, but not necessarily, the same as those given to the paired students. In this respect they were able to exchange opinions with the students from the United States and their own classmates. Furthermore, they were given a task to carry out in the 'common room' every week. This task changed from week to week depending on the weekly topic addressed by the paired students, so that all the participants could read and comment on their work.

Although participation in the Internet 'common room' and the paired e-mail exchanges formed the basis of the project, we also suggested that our students organize at least one chat session and print it out for us. This was a somewhat impossible task due to the time difference between the two countries. However, our intention for the future is to overcome this obstacle and evaluate the use of synchronous communication in tandem language learning.

From the point of view of pedagogical organization our main concern was to define the role of e-mail tandem learning in relation to the overall language course. Thus, we encouraged our students to see tandem language learning by e-mail as an integral part of their coursework and, in order to ensure their full and committed involvement in the project, we developed a series of activities for our regular conversation classes based on the topics or tasks they were required to prepare as part of their joint e-mail collaboration. Thus, correspondence with their partners became crucial in enabling them to follow the course effectively: on the one hand, this meant that students necessarily took part in both tandem and regular learning; on the other, 'common room' interaction among the students provided the means of gaining access to information and materials to be used in the preparation and development of the regular sessions.

However, we found that this created a problem in almost all the regular sessions we carried out, especially if we wished to base them on the information obtained from our transatlantic partners. Although we were working with small groups, which is an advantage in this kind of project, there were always some students who were slower than others and failed to keep up to date with their work. In this respect, although they may have worked regularly on the project, which is acceptable in terms of learning and evaluation, they did not always have the work completed in time for the regular sessions, which meant that some students could not participate fully in the session and felt somewhat out of place. In order to solve this problem, emphasis should be placed on the concept of learner autonomy, making the students fully aware of the fact that they must take responsibility for their own learning progress.

A crucial dimension of this learning framework was to introduce students to the pedagogical principles of tandem language learning, by explaining in detail the principles of reciprocity and learner autonomy. We emphasized the need for an equal effort to be made by both parties, as well as the need to accept responsibility for one's own learning and that of one's partner. This meant monitoring and evaluating the learning process as well as those activities that made up that process and, in this respect, we integrated error correction as a mandatory task in each of the e-mails exchanged. We explained to the students that we were not interested in them correcting every single grammar mistake they identified in their partners' e-mails. Instead, we told them that we were interested in them focusing on the use of register, paying particular attention to the adequate and appropriate use of the target

language in specific contexts. However, we did encourage them to correct grammar mistakes they considered to be important, leaving it to their own judgement to decide what mistakes these would be.

Another aspect we might mention here is that the messages sent by the students were only written in the target language. We were aware that this arrangement did not follow the principles of the International E-Mail Tandem Network, which stresses the importance of using both languages in any tandem exchange so that both members of a pair have equal opportunities to read and write in their L2. However, since we wanted to encourage students to use the target language as much as possible, and in order to minimise their use of *spanglish*, we decided that writing in their native language should be avoided with the exception of error correction, since in order to help their partners improve their target language proficiency it was important to correct their mistakes and errors in their target language (i.e. the students' mother tongue)

EVALUATION OF TANDEM LANGUAGE LEARNING BY E-MAIL

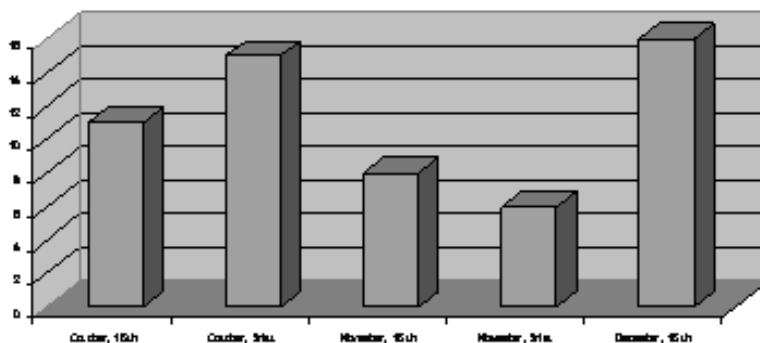
EVALUATION OF LEARNERS' PARTICIPATION

We have already mentioned that the students were required to exchange a minimum of two e-mails per week and also collaborate in joint projects in the Internet 'common room'. Since we received the e-mails as soon as they were sent or received by the students, the evaluation of their progress was carried out on a weekly basis throughout the entire duration of the course. Quantity, quality and frequency were the main points to be evaluated in the partnership correspondence. On the one hand, we did not want our students to write e-mails that were endlessly long, but we did not allow them to write three-line e-mails either. On the other hand, we tried to encourage them to use the more elaborate grammatical structures that they had previously learned when writing about the topics we suggested to them or those they may have agreed to discuss themselves.

With regard to learners' participation in the Internet 'common room', evaluation was also carried out on a weekly basis, although this involved two different sets of evaluation criteria. For those students involved in a one-to-one e-mail exchange we mainly evaluated their contributions to joint projects and guided forum discussions, since the goal was to create a more informal environment for the students to talk freely about any topics they were interested in. When the students participated and contributed actively by suggesting topics of discussion, and uploaded useful, helpful and entertaining material for the rest of their partners, they

were awarded a higher grade. Furthermore, the Spanish students whose evaluation was exclusively based on their participation and contribution to the 'common room' were evaluated on the quality of the files they uploaded for their partners. They were asked to prepare documents on the same topics the one-to-one students were covering at that time. The format of these files was determined by the students themselves and varied from Word documents in which they presented compositions or created lists of vocabulary, to PowerPoint presentations which made their material more visual and entertaining, not to mention audio files. The term 'quality' in our evaluation criteria referred to the content of the material itself, as well as their personal contribution in presenting this content in an attractive format. We also took into account any extra material they might have included, such as links to interesting websites relating to the topic under discussion. They were required to upload a minimum of one file per week and to exchange a number of messages in the forum section, which would oblige them to interact with other students. Their participation in the forum discussions and their proposal and preparation of new topics not included in the syllabus, gave them an opportunity to raise their grade by a maximum of two points. This type of evaluation might have seemed unfair to the learners involved in the one-to-one e-mail exchanges. Indeed, some of them thought that rather less work was required of the students not involved in pair work. In order to address this perception and ensure that we struck the right balance in our evaluation of the two different modes of tandem language learning, we decided that twice as much compulsory work would be required of the students participating solely in the 'common room' as that demanded from the students working in pairs.

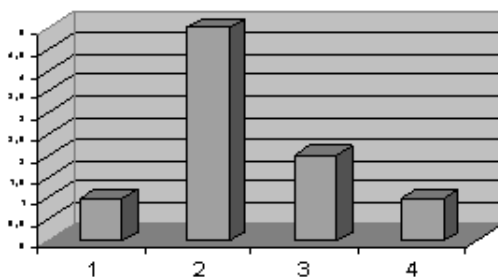
As we mentioned above, this alternative to paired collaboration only provided a partial solution to the problem of imbalance in the number of learners taking part in the project at the two universities, since participation in the 'common room' did not generate the same amount of feedback as the one-to-one e-mail exchanges. As a result, the students who only participated in the 'common room' felt somewhat abandoned and dejected because most of their work or messages posted on the message board did not elicit any responses or commentary on the part of the other students. This meant that a high percentage of these students lacked the motivation to make regular contributions, which resulted in many of them dropping the project in the middle of the semester, only to make a last-ditch and last-minute effort during the final few weeks of the semester in order to produce enough work for their teacher to evaluate. Graph 1 shows the work pattern followed by the students in the 'common room', based on information gathered every two weeks between 15th October and 15th December 2004.



Graph 1: Student's work pattern in the 'common room'

Based on the results of this analysis, we decided that, in the future, we would only work with the same number of native speakers in both languages in order to ensure the pairing of all the students in one-to-one e-mail exchanges.

On the American side, the imbalance in the number of students had other implications, one of which was the low level of achievement of those students who decided to correspond with two Spanish partners. Although the idea of having two Spanish partners was favourably received in the beginning, as time went by the students realized that they had taken on far too much work, which caused irregular communication patterns in some of the two-to-one tandem language learning partnerships. We observed three different kinds of irregular patterns as shown in columns 2, 3 and 4 in the graph below:



1. Same quality and quantity for both partners (11%).
2. Wrote more to one of the two partners (55%).
3. Stopped writing to one of the two partners (23%).
4. Sent the same e-mail to both partners (11%).

Graph 2: Irregular communication patterns

Column 2 reflects the partial breakdown in communication we recorded in which the participants began to correspond more actively with one of the two students in the partnership. Column 3 shows a complete breakdown in communication with one of the two partners. In column 4 the irregular communication pattern consisted of an attempt on the part of the students to reduce their workload by sending the same e-mail to both partners. Only a small number of

students managed to maintain the same rhythm and quality of correspondence for both partners, as shown in column 1.

We found that the general tendency was to focus either largely or entirely on only one of the two partners assigned to them. Most of the American students sent an e-mail on an occasional basis to those students they had largely decided to drop (as shown in column 2), whilst others stopped writing to one of their partners altogether (as shown in column 3). Two main motivations underpinned the students' decision to drop one of the partners: some students kept in contact with the partner they found it easier to relate to, whilst others continued their correspondence with the partner who worked more actively with them or who were more helpful in their opinion. Below we can observe the comment made by one of the American students who initially corresponded with two Spanish learners, explaining why she had decided to continue writing regularly only to one of them:

Yo tengo dos personas en el intercambio. Carmen fue muy esquiva. Solamente me dice las cosas que necesita decirme para la clase. Está personal conmigo raramente. [...] Xime fue muy divertido cuando hablo con ella. Me dice lo que necesita decirme y de su personal también. [...] Ella me enseña mucho de la cultura, como su cine, sus lenguajes coloquiales, y sus celebraciones. Fue muy agradable. [...]

Translation: I have two partners as part of my exchange. Carmen is very uncommunicative. She only tells me things she needs to tell me for the class. She rarely gets personal. [...] Xime was great fun when I wrote to her. She talked about the topics we had to discuss, but brought up personal issues as well. [...] She helped me understand a lot about Spanish culture, such as cinema, colloquial expressions and typical celebrations. It was very enjoyable. [...]

The irregular communication pattern shown in column 4 was not that obvious, and it might have escaped our attention entirely had we not analysed the students' work in detail. In some cases, to avoid wasting their time, the students sent exactly the same e-mails to both Spanish partners, which meant that there was no personal interaction but a mere exchange of academic information. This was not the aim of the project and, in this respect, these students did not benefit from the tandem exchange by e-mail as was originally planned.

As a final observation we would like to add that the two-to-one partnerships were also characterized by the low quality of the information that was included in the e-mails, a lack of corrections, irregular communication. Furthermore, the American students felt under pressure by having to respond to four weekly incoming e-mails compared to the two e-mails the rest of the students were required to answer. We detected a high level of frustration in our two-to-one partnerships which resulted in a lack of motivation. Once again, this reinforced our belief in the importance of having the same number of students in both countries for future e-mail tandem projects.

EVALUATION OF LEARNERS' IMPROVEMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE AND FOREIGN CULTURE AWARENESS

In this section we shall describe the tools we used to evaluate our students' language learning progress, as well as their understanding of their counterparts' culture.

As we mentioned previously, we administered a self-evaluation questionnaire through the Internet at the beginning of the course specially designed to discover the students' knowledge and perceptions of the foreign language and culture. They were asked to answer the questionnaire in their mother tongue, in order to provide clearer and more elaborate answers. This questionnaire was needed because an important evaluative dimension of the project depended on the students' perception of e-mail tandem as a mode of language learning. How learners felt about what they were doing was likely to have an important impact on their involvement in the learning process. For this reason we were interested in examining the interaction between the learner's expectations about e-mail tandem learning and the theoretical principles underlying this mode of learning.

On the last day of class, the students were asked to answer another questionnaire online featuring similar questions to those of the first questionnaire, so that we could compare the answers and analyse the results. Our intention was to carry out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data, and this is why we included open-ended questions where the students could freely express their opinions, in addition to "yes" or "no" questions which would allow us to undertake statistical analysis. The questionnaire was presented to the students as a tool for stimulating serious reflection and raising learner awareness. The questions in the first questionnaire included the following:²

1. Why are you studying English? What are your goals in studying English?
2. How long have you been studying English?
3. How would you describe your language proficiency / level up until now?
4. How would you rate your interest in learning the English language and discovering English-speaking culture, especially American culture?
5. Do you have any English / American friends or family? Do you practice English with them?
6. How would you describe your experience of and contact with American people and culture before starting this class?

² We have translated the questions which were originally in Spanish into English.

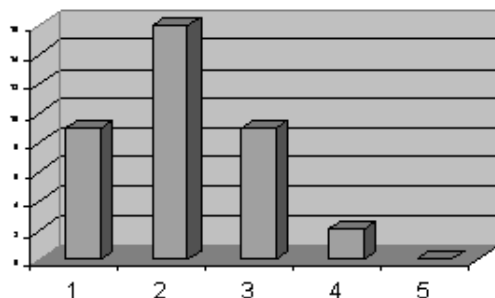
7. What do you think of American people? Describe any ideas or opinions that you have about them.
8. What do you think of American culture? Describe any ideas or opinions that you have about it.
9. What do you think of the English language? What ideas or social status do you associate with it?
10. What kind of benefits do you expect to obtain from an exchange such as this?
11. Do you like computers and the Internet?
12. Are you familiar with their use?
13. What do you think about the use of computer and Internet technology in language learning?
14. What are your expectations of this course?
15. How do you think the use of e-mail and the Internet can help to fulfil your expectations on this course?
16. What topics do you think would be interesting to discuss on a course such as this? Please suggest topics.
17. What do you think will be required of the two parties involved in this project (students over here and in the other country) in order to make an Internet exchange such as this actually work?

We can carry out a quantitative analysis of the data produced by the questionnaire in questions 3, 4, 5, 10, 11 and 12. We have chosen the answers to the most relevant questions for our study and quantification of the data appears in the descriptive statistics shown in the tables and graphs below:

Q.3. How would you describe your language proficiency / level up until now?

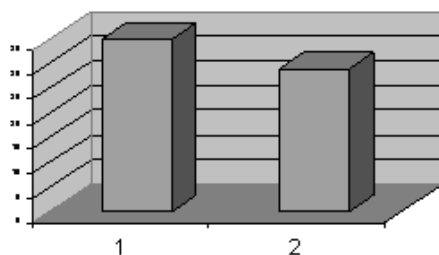
	Very unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Very satisfactory
My grammar	0%	21%	74%	6%
My vocabulary	3%	44%	50%	3%
My written fluency	3%	29%	68%	0%
My spoken fluency	3%	45%	45%	6%
My confidence in using English	6%	41%	50%	3%

Q.4. How would you rate your interest in learning the English language and discovering English-speaking culture, especially American culture?



1. Very high (26%)
2. High (46%)
3. Average (26%)
4. Low (6%)
5. Very low (0%)

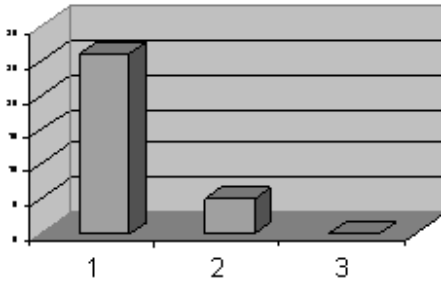
Q.10. What kind of benefits do you expect to obtain from an exchange such as this?



1. Improvement of linguistic knowledge (100%)
2. Improvement of cultural knowledge (83%)

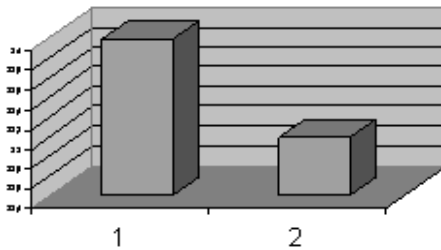
As we can see in the graphs above, 80% of the students were happy with their knowledge of the grammar before the exchange, 53% were happy with their vocabulary acquisition and 68% were happy with their writing skills in the target language. 51% of the students were satisfied with their fluency in the target language, whereas 53% felt confident when speaking the language. Their expectations regarding the exchange included the following: they believed it would help them improve their level of language proficiency in the target language (100%) and increase their awareness of the foreign culture (83%). We later compared this data to the relevant answers in the second questionnaire in order to analyse the students' self-evaluation of their achievement at the end of the project and to be able to draw some significant conclusions. Out of a total of twenty-one questions, we selected the following:

Q.1. Has this exchange enhanced in some way your desire to learn English?



1. Yes, I feel more motivated (84%).
2. It has had no effect either positive or negative (16%).
3. No, quite the contrary, I feel less motivated (0%).

Q.5. Has this exchange helped you to improve your linguistic and cultural knowledge?



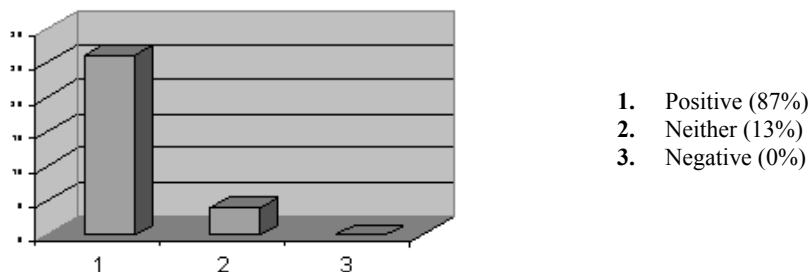
1. Improvement of linguistic knowledge (77%)
2. Improvement of cultural knowledge (74%)

Q. 6. How would you describe the progress you have made in your linguistic learning?

	Very unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Very satisfactory
I have improved my grammar	0%	6%	65%	29%	0%
I have improved my vocabulary	0%	3%	10%	71%	16%
I have improved my written fluency	0%	6%	13%	65%	16%
I have improved my spoken fluency*...	3%	13%	58%	19%	6%
I have improved my confidence when using English	3%	3%	39%	42%	13%

*... (thanks to practice, vocabulary and/or the grammar I learned)

Q.16. In general, would you describe the exchange as a positive or negative experience or neither one or the other?



As we can observe in the tables and graphs above, 87% of the students regarded the experience as positive, 77% perceived a clear improvement in their level of proficiency in the target language and 74% an improvement in their knowledge of the foreign culture. Other perceived benefits of their tandem partnership included an increase in motivation (84%), help with vocabulary (87%) and improvement of their writing skills (81%). They also perceived benefits in terms of increased confidence in their use of the language (55%) and, to a much lesser extent, improvement in their fluency (25%) and grammar (29%).

Besides answering these questionnaires, we asked our students to write a composition in their mother tongue, commenting on different aspects of the project. They were asked to write about those aspects they liked best, those they did not like at all, whether they thought it had been beneficial in terms of language learning and whether their perception of their partners' culture had changed. Below we include some of the students' commentaries regarding this last question:

[...] Yo nunca tuve un concepto sobre la cultura americana solo lo que vemos de la televisión y de las películas. Siempre pensamos que están armados que son muy chulos que solo piensan en ellos, que son los más importantes. Esto no es así ya que después de conocer a Emanuel veo que es todo lo contrario. [...]

Translation: [...] I never had any clear ideas about American culture, just the things you see on television or in the movies. We tend to think they all use guns, act cocky and look after number one, because they think they're more important than everyone else. I don't think that anymore; after meeting Emanuel I realized it is quite the opposite. [...]

[...] Antes de empezar el intercambio tenía ciertos prejuicios sobre los americanos. Quizá por todo lo que se ve en la televisión o se lee en las revistas y periódicos, que nos están haciendo crearnos una imagen de los americanos bastante negativa; pero después de esta experiencia me he dado cuenta de que los estudiantes americanos son jóvenes con nuestras mismas inquietudes, ilusiones y ganas de pasarlo bien. Por lo que he podido hablar con mi pen-pal entre los

jóvenes americanos y los españoles no existe una gran diferencia. Nos diferenciamos más en las tradiciones y costumbres. [...]

Translation: [...] Before starting the exchange I had some prejudices about Americans. These might be because of everything we see on television or read in magazines and newspapers; they tend to create quite a negative image of Americans. However, this experience has shown me that American students are just young people like us, with the same interests, the same worries, the same illusions and the same desire to have fun. From what I can see from my pen pal conversations, American and Spanish young people are not that different. The differences I see have more to do with traditions and customs.[. . .]

We also told students that they could suggest ways in which the e-mail exchange could be improved. Some students replied as follows:

The only way I can really think to improve the enjoyment of the exchanges, is to make the guidelines a little less strict. If you were to stick with demanding two per week, make only one of them about a mandatory topic.

[...] I think this might make the exchanges a bit more personal, and create a bit more motivation to complete them.

[...] I think it was very effective in cultivating conversation style, and new vocabulary. We had a lot of things to talk about and write about. [...]

[...] I think it a great benefit because it is just that much more conversational experience with the language, and it is great that it is with our peers. [...]

[...] I feel like I increased my confidence in writing and speaking as the semester went by. [. . .] It forced me to be creative to express what I feel and think of the topics we talked about. [...]

[...] It helped me to learn a lot more about Spanish people and their cultura, and it was nice to know that I was helping someone else to expand their horizons as well. [...]

The first commentary suggests that one of the attractions of e-mail tandem learning is that it makes this mode of learning especially appealing, since the term enjoyment is used to describe the experience. It also reflects the importance students generally paid to the personal dimension of the exchange. Furthermore, it illustrates the fact that the topics which provide the focus of e-mail tandem learning should relate to areas of personal experience, since students find it easier to talk about a subject matter that reflects their interests and concerns. This is another strength of tandem learning, since it is content-driven and the content is dictated precisely by the students' concerns and interests. Finally, the students' remarks in the other examples show that e-mail tandem learning is perceived as an excellent means of learning through language use (with features of spoken as well as written language), one that makes learning more interesting because it involves personal interaction with a native speaker on a reciprocal basis.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the data analysis as a whole. It is clear that the students valued their experience in e-mail tandem learning as overwhelmingly positive. In addition, what the students identify as appealing about e-mail tandem learning relates precisely to a feeling of being in charge of the learning content and process, both of which are features of autonomy in learning. The students are in charge of the learning content since communication is linked to the students' needs and interests; they are in charge of the learning process because they make decisions regarding language use in communication (which is informal and presents features of spoken language). They also perceive that learning is made attractive because it involves personal and mutual interaction with a partner, in accordance with the principle of reciprocity. Finally, tandem learning encourages students' motivation, which is, in itself, "a necessary foundation for autonomous learning" (Ushioda 1996).

LINGUISTIC DATA ANALYSIS

The final part of this evaluation consisted of a series of specific activities which we designed in order to evaluate the students' improvement in general target language competence and improvement in specific skills such as writing and vocabulary acquisition. As part of these activities the students were asked to go through the e-mails they had sent and received up until that point, or through the messages they had posted on the message board in the 'common room', and to review all the information carefully. We encouraged them to make notes of the new vocabulary they had come across and to organize it into topics so that we could structure them into semantic fields later on during the face-to-face sessions. Other activities involved finding specific information relating to different cultural topics and then giving a short presentation or taking part in a class debate based on the information brought together. When we implemented these activities we realized that the students, in addition to improving those aspects of their language competence mentioned above, had also developed other skills such as metalinguistic strategies (their capacity to reflect and use the language to provide explanations about the language itself), a decisive factor in ensuring successful learning in e-mail tandem.

The use of metalinguistic skills was especially obvious in the students' error correction. In general, language learners are not expected to have the appropriate metalinguistic skills to correctly identify, categorize and analyze their partners' errors. However, many students used metalanguage during their exchanges, as we observe below:

Correcciones:

- Para decir que has comprado tickets mejor decir que has comprado entradas. Quiere decir lo mismo que billetes pero aquí siempre decimos entradas. Por ejemplo: He comprado entradas para ir al cine; He sacado entradas para ir al teatro, a la opera... (...)

- (...) maquillaje es masculino, por eso deberás decir el maquillaje en vez de la maquillaje

-En vez de expensivo di caro. Ya se que allá se dice expensive, pero aquí a lo que cuesta mucho dinero lo llamamos caro.

The task of error correction was approached in a variety of different ways, depending on their degree of engagement with it. Some students worked very hard and usually attached a file with corrections, comments, suggestions and better alternatives according to the context. Other students included corrections at the end of their e-mails, a mere list of corrections in some cases, or reproduced their partners' e-mails below their own and corrected the mistakes by replacing the incorrect structures or vocabulary with more appropriate ones without giving any explanation. The students also tended to reproduce the e-mail and write the corrections alongside the errors in capital letters, sometimes with comments in brackets. Colours, different types of fonts and emoticons were other devices students used to either attract their partners' attention or show the corrections in a clearer way, as we can see in the following examples:

[...] Voy a hablar de la música de los Estados Unidos que muestra que Los Estados Unidos es una (UN) país que es muy multicultural. Hay la música de ("MUSICA RAP" NO "DE RAP") Rap que es muy rápida. Empieza en las (LOS) ochentas (OCHENTA, MEJOR SIN "S" AUNQUE NO ESTÁ MAL) por los afroamericanos y es muy popular entre la gente urbana de los Estados Unidos. Algunos de los artistas son Tupac, Notorious BIG, 50 Cent, y Jay-Z. sabes de ellos? (ES MEJOR DECIR: "¿LOS CONOCES?) R&B, una otra (OTRO TIPO...) tipo de la ("DE MÚSICA, SIN "LA") música, es más despacio que Rap. Es la música de alma (CREO QUE TE REFIERES AL "SOUL" EN ESPAÑOL LO CONOCEMOS CON EL NOMBRE INGLÉS "SOUL" ASÍ QUE NO HACE FALTA QUE TRADUZCAS EL NOMBRE A ESPAÑOL, SÓLO DI "SOUL". Muchas de las canciones de este género son de amor y las relaciones [...]

Last week you send my this email. So, here are the corrections:

Salud (it's plural, "saludos"), Sonsoles, ¿que tal? Viernes en la clase de español, discutimos los estereotípicos (spelling: estereotipos) que los estudiantes españoles digan que ven. [...] ¿Que más...? OH! Los políticos de George Bush? Puedo decirlo en inglés para ayudarme en mis palabras? I hate George W. Bush more than any politician who has ever lived. [...]

You explain it very good in spanish so, you don't need to put it in english, but I understand you that you feel more comfortable speaking in english.

Ah!!!!!!!If you want I change the colour because there are people that don't like this colour. Tell me.

Las correcciones:

“a few time ago i watch” probablemente quieres decir “A while ago I watched”. No se dice “a few time ago” y también es en el pasado, y necesitas decir “watched” “I like a lot one called Memento” queires decir “I really like Memento”, yo comprendo pero es un poco largo.

Each of these examples shows an awareness of the need for error correction, although the levels of sophistication are very different in each. The first error correction example seems to be more complete or clearer than the others, because the sentences or structures that have been corrected appear alongside the errors in the same line or paragraph within the e-mail. The second and third examples present lists of corrections. However, there are various differences between them: the student in the second example gives a more detailed explanation of the errors, and also tries to negotiate basic error correction procedures with his partner (i.e. by using a different colour if his partner does not like red), while the third example shows the student merely correcting the errors without any kind of explanation. The corrections were generally accurate, but while some students spent considerable time on correcting and were able to give helpful explanations using some form of metalanguage, other students' metalinguistic comments were incomplete or simply non-existent.

Error correction is an essential aspect of tandem partnerships and many students showed that they were aware of the fact that, in order to make the partnership work, they had to correct and support one another on a number of levels. However, this awareness did not always translate into adequate error correction within the partnership. For this reason we believe that certain improvements could be introduced in future projects, such as giving students guidelines regarding basic error correction procedures. In addition, more would need to be done to persuade students that critical reflection should play a central role in their error correction. Finally, regular face-to-face sessions should be carried out in order to analyze the feedback students offer and receive.

CONCLUSION

We regarded the experience of being involved in a e-mail tandem language learning project as extremely positive, despite the difficulties which arose, in view

of the fact that it is impossible to guarantee a trouble-free tandem partnership for every student who takes part in this type of project. In order to minimize these problems, in future we intend to organize an informative session before the exchange begins in order to explain and discuss in detail all the relevant aspects of tandem learning (and, therefore, learner autonomy) with the students. We hope this will allow us to be able to advise and guide those students who are either not familiar with innovations in the language classroom or are not acquainted with the principles of autonomy and reciprocity, both crucial principles if tandem learning is to be successful.

The data we gathered from the students confirmed that they also considered tandem learning to be a valuable experience, one that had helped them improve their communicative competence in the target language, especially with regard to vocabulary acquisition, writing skills and foreign culture awareness.

What the students did not seem to realize is that tandem language learning by e-mail provided them with an opportunity to become autonomous learners by taking responsibility for their own learning process as well as that of their partners'. This was reflected in the students' negotiation of the content and process of their language learning. In terms of reciprocity we can state that students spent a considerable amount of time on corrections and tried hard to establish a true partnership. This mutual effort was rewarded with a significant increase in motivation.

In conclusion, we can confidently claim that we found plenty of evidence to support the view that e-mail tandem can be used as an effective framework for language learning.

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