# Pan-American teletandem language exchange project

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**Abstract**

This paper describes a TeleTandem language exchange project between English speaking Spanish students at Georgia College, USA, and Spanish speaking English students at Universidad de Concepción, Chile. The aim of the project was to promote linguistic skills and intercultural competence through a TeleTandem exchange. Students used Skype and Google Hangouts for monthly synchronous conversations where they interviewed each other, and exchanged information about their lives and cultures. The project also involved a monthly blog and a video report where students talked about their TeleTandem partner and reflected on their learning experience.

**Keywords:** Telecollaboration, tandem, teletandem, institutional tandem, language exchange project, synchronous communication, oral communication, interlanguage learning, intercultural competence.

## 1. Description of the project

The project involved American students majoring or minoring in Spanish taking an Intermediate-Mid level [1]/B1 level [2]. It also involved Chilean students taking a B1 level Communicative English course and majoring in the sciences or engineering fields. Students' age ranged from 18 to 24 years old. The American group was predominantly females and the Chilean group was predominantly males.

The Web 2.0 tools chosen for this project were Skype, Google Hangouts and public blogs. Students who were grouped in pairs used Skype. Several students were partnered in trios because the Chilean group outnumbered the American group. These students used Google Hangouts because it allows group interaction of more than two users. Most of the students had used Skype before and just few where unfamiliar with Google Hangouts.

The aim of the project was to promote the development of students' linguistic skills and intercultural competence through the Teletandem exchange. Students focused on improving their communication skills through the exchange of information about their lives, cultures and areas of study. The project followed the three main Tandem principles: languages must not be mixed, reciprocity and autonomy (Vasallo & Telles, 2006). This project was carried out within an institutional context (*institutional tandem*) (Vasallo & Telles, 2006). Therefore, it was necessary to have a pedagogical control that modified in certain degree the principle of autonomy. Consequently, instructors selected the topics, integrated the project into the course syllabi and designed individual assessment tools that reflected each course's learning goals. In each session students negotiated meaning, exchanged information, spoke in the target language, and helped their partner(s) practice the target language acting as mentor or instructors (Little & Brammerts, 1996; Vasallo & Telles, 2006).

Sessions were scheduled once a month, throughout a semester and lasted from 40-60 minutes. Sessions were held in a language lab setting with a language lab Coordinator assisting during the sessions. Instructors recommended interaction outside the classroom in order to increase oral communication practice and to promote the principle of autonomy (*independent Tandem*), which was not possible to achieve in the classroom.

## 2. Topics, steps and tasks of the Teletandem project

### 2.1. Topics and steps of the project

Each course had a different set of topics reflecting the course material. Topics in the English course focused on preparing a study abroad trip to the USA. Topics for the Spanish course reflected the grammar and cultural themes of the textbook. During the last session students were allowed to talk about their personal interests. Figure 1. Shows the organization of the topics.

| Sessions | Session 1 | Session 2 | Session 3 | Session 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| GC<br>(USA Group) | Likes and dislikes, entertainment, music, holidays, and festivities in Chile. | Past events, Past trips, Childhood, Family in Chile. | Future Plans, College life and job opportunities in Chile. | Open Topic |
| UdeC<br>(Chile Group) | How to apply to a US college. Future plans: job, under graduate and graduate studies. | Trips, tickets, airlines, security rules at airports. | Opening a bank account, types of accounts, credit or debit cards, buying clothes, and textbooks. | Open Topic |

Figure 1. Organization of topics for each course.

To keep structure, the project consisted of a series of four steps. The first was to collect contact information from both groups. The instructor in the English course grouped students in pairs or trios according to career interests.

The second step was a training session where the instructor explained the project guidelines, assigned partners, demonstrated how to use the blogs, explained the grading criteria, meeting times, dates and topics for each session and brainstormed ideas related to the topics. All the students using Google Hangouts practice on their own before the first session.

In the third step, classes met at in their respective language labs, and students established initial contact in a synchronous communication that lasted 40 minutes. Students received additional clarification concerning the discussions and vocabulary used during the sessions to follow. The language lab Coordinator was in charge of giving technical support as needed. At the end of the session, the instructor asked students to share their experiences and to provide feedback. Instructors shared this feedback, commented on the session and made necessary changes to the project.

In step four, students in both classes reported their Teletandem learning experience using the task designed by their instructors.

### 2.2. Tasks

The main task was to communicate orally in a synchronous Teletandem exchange learning. Students had to interview each other using an informal conversation approach and following the topics designed for each session. If students completed the tasks

before the end of the session, they were encouraged to discuss any other topic of choice.

The Spanish course learning goals concentrated on reviewing basic grammar concepts and improving students' writing skills. Students in this course had to open a blog account and write in Spanish summaries and reflections of the learning experiences and interactions with their Teletandem partner(s). American students shared the blog with their Chilean partner(s) with the goal of establishing an additional written communication with their partner. The English instructor strongly suggested to her students to comment on Spanish students' blogs.

Students in the English course had to present at the end of the semester a video where they had to talk about their American partner, reflect on their learning experience and give feedback on the project.

## 3. Assessment

Assessment is an integral part of online collaboration and should reflect the learning goals of the course. The Spanish students were evaluated on their writing skills through their blog entries. They were assessed on content, organization, grammar and vocabulary following the criteria designed by Lee and Van Patten (2003) for assessing writing assignments in language learning. Each entry was required to have a minimum of 300 words. The instructor focused on the correctness of the linguistic discourse and evaluated the intercultural competence. Students compared and contrast both cultures.

The author does not have much information about how the English students' videos were evaluated or the grading criteria the instructor used to assess them.

## 4. Evaluation of the project

Even though positive feedback was received from both groups, the author only analysed the feedback made by students in the Spanish course.

The American college is geographically located in a rural area in the Southeast of the United States. For this reason, it is difficult for language instructors to expose students to real interactions with native speakers of the target language. Thus, students valued the opportunity to experience a synchronous Teletandem communication with a native speaker. They found the experience very innovative, stimulating and appealing for learning a language. The Teletandem exchange became an alternative and innovative classroom activity by which students expressed a high level of motivation. The nature of the project was a determinant factor for such motivation.

Students also expressed that different aspects were influential in their learning process, among them: the linguistic knowledge acquired and the intercultural competence gained. Students expressed that Teletandem exchange is more effective in the language learning process when it is incorporated into a course syllabus than when used independently. Most students found structured suggested topics to be useful.

In addition, a majority of the students felt more comfortable encountering unfamiliar words, developed confidence in their linguistics abilities and worry less about making mistakes. Students thought that the Teletandem exchange project was key in improving their speaking, listening and writing skills in their new language, especially when compared to other course related material and activities.

With regard to intercultural competence, students reported that the Teletandem experience helped them gain more in-depth cultural understanding and diminished some preconceived stereotypes; however, they did not elaborate on any specific stereotype. Students also stated how exciting it was to learn how similar the life of a college student is in the US and in a Spanish speaking country. This aspect of the

project promoted rapport among partners and might be an element that improved the learning outcome.

## 5. Difficulties experienced

Some of the most common and difficult to predict issues with any Teletandem project are technical difficulties. Through the project both groups had problems with Sykpe, headphones, webcams and computers in general. Students in both groups received technical assistance from language lab Coordinators and their instructors. During the initial session, the instructors and the lab Coordinators worked hard to solve several technical issues and students had to begin communication through Facebook. This social media was helpful on helping to break the ice and lower students' affective filter but students felt frustrated because they could not orally communicate with their partners.

Other problems were: time zone difference, time difference between scheduled classes, odd number of students in each group, students' accountability, and different learning goals and outcomes for each group. Also, English students did not participate in writing comments in their Spanish partners' blogs. Out of 14 blogs, only one student received one comment in her blog from her partner. This lack of participation from the English students could de-motivate Spanish students when writing their blog entries.

Students also expressed their desire to have more time preparing their topics in class. They wanted to receive input and feedback from their instructor. For the instructor point of view, this is an important lesson learned. For future Teletandem exchanges, it is necessary to create more meaningful activities related to the topics and to develop them in-class the day before each session (Martins Moiteiro, 2009).

## 6. Conclusions

Teletandem exchange projects are a good practice for interlanguage learning and intercultural competence. Through a Teletandem project students can have a one-on-one oral communicative exchange with a native speaker who will help them improve their linguistic skills and learn about the target culture.

In this Teletandem exchange project, students valued the opportunity to communicate with students of the target language. They made the most of the experience by improving their linguistic skills and overcoming their fears when communicating with a native speaker. During the project, students also became mentors and learned from each other.

Students as well as instructors learned valuable lessons from the experiences. There were some difficulties that were possible to adjust while others were more difficult to control. These challenges showed the instructors how to improve the design and integration of the Teletandem exchange project in the language curriculum. The success of any online exchange partnership is based on its proper integration into the language curriculum (O'Dowd, 2007), and the lessons learned in this project set up the foundation for the appropriate incorporation of many more successful Teletandem projects in our language classrooms.

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**Notes**

[1] ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012).

[2] European Union Council Resolution (2001).