

Implementing a Pilot E-Tandem Project at Technical University of Cotopaxi¹

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Abstract

E-tandem language exchange is an online learning method that positively influences learners to gain knowledge and improve their linguistic and communicative competences. The main aim of this qualitative research was to analyze the advantages and drawbacks of an institutional, non-integrated e-tandem developed between a group of English learners from the Technical University of Cotopaxi, Ecuador, and Spanish learners from Miami University in Florida. Data were collected by using observation files and students' journals. The study shows that this e-tandem project positively influenced students' language learning, culture, and motivation. The students demonstrated positive attitudes toward language learning and interest in participating. Nevertheless, there were some drawbacks: technological problems, scheduling problems, the lack of a tutors' guide, compatibility of e-tandem partners, and a low level of the target language. We assert that most of these problems were related to the mode of implementation—institutional and non-integrated. Furthermore, the lack of infrastructure and an administrative process affected the benefits that e-tandem offers. Based on this finding, we suggest strengthening the current project by integrating it into the curriculum so that students have a better learning experience.

Resumen

El intercambio de idiomas en teletándem es un método de aprendizaje en línea que influye positivamente en los alumnos para que adquieran conocimientos y mejoren sus competencias lingüísticas y comunicativas. El objetivo principal de esta investigación cualitativa fue analizar las ventajas y desventajas de un teletándem institucional no integrado desarrollado entre un grupo de estudiantes de inglés de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi, Ecuador, y estudiantes de español de la Universidad de Miami en Florida. Los datos se recopilaban utilizando archivos de observación y diarios de los estudiantes. El estudio muestra que este proyecto teletándem influyó positivamente en el aprendizaje de idiomas, la cultura y la motivación de los estudiantes. Los estudiantes demostraron actitudes positivas hacia el aprendizaje de idiomas e interés en participar. Sin embargo, hubo algunos inconvenientes: problemas tecnológicos, problemas de programación, falta de una guía para el tutor, compatibilidad de los socios teletándem y un bajo nivel del idioma meta. Afirmamos que la mayoría de estos problemas estaban relacionados con el modo de implementación: institucional y no integrado. Además, la falta de infraestructura y un proceso administrativo afectaron los beneficios que ofrece el teletándem. Con base en este hallazgo, sugerimos fortalecer el proyecto actual integrándolo en el plan de estudios para que los estudiantes tengan una mejor experiencia de aprendizaje.

Introduction

Tandem (Karjalainen et al., 2013), Teletandem (Telles & Vassallo, 2006) or E-tandem (El-Hariri, 2017) is a virtual language learning environment that consists of pairing two learners, speakers of different mother tongues, so that they can collaborate to learn each other's language through reciprocal cooperation. Before the evolution of the internet, tandem was developed face-to-face in a physical space. Online communication tools now make e-tandem available to more language learners with access to the internet. Students can connect from different countries at a low cost. E-Tandem partners interact for about fifty minutes (half of the time in their native language and another half in their partner's language) by using different video communication tools such as Zoom or Skype. Cziko (2004) describes e-tandem as an approach to second language learning for the 21st century, with reciprocity and autonomy being its main principles. It is attractive for EFL teachers as it increases oral practice hours for students outside the classroom, miming an immersive environment which is often lacking in the classroom. During the interaction, each member is alternately placed in the role of a learner and the role of an expert speaker. This double role makes language learning especially rich and motivates students to use the language in authentic communication.

Extensive international research studies have reported positive outcomes of using e-tandem collaborative projects when learning languages, particularly in learners with few opportunities for authentic communication (e.g., Appel & Mullen, 2000; Bruen & Sudhershnan, 2015; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Wang, et al., 2012). However, there is not any research study about the advantages and drawbacks from both students' and tutors' experiences with e-tandem. Empirical evidence about it is thus needed in order to

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determine administrative and academic implications to implement a macro e-tandem project effectively. Analyzing advantages and drawbacks together could help to minimize difficulties when implementing this type of learning. All in all, we expect teachers, administrators, and researchers find useful insights in this study to implement this virtual autonomous learning method.

This paper aimed at identifying advantages and drawbacks of implementing a pilot e-tandem project in the English Language Major at the Technical University of Cotopaxi in Ecuador. To achieve this purpose, we devised two research questions:

1. *What are the advantages of implementing a pilot e-tandem project in the English Language Major at the Technical University of Cotopaxi?*
2. *What are the drawbacks of implementing a pilot e-tandem project in the English Language Major at the Technical University of Cotopaxi?*

Literature Review

E-tandem is a virtual, collaborative and autonomous methodology for learning foreign languages in which two students help each other to learn each other's languages by using text, voice and webcam, and image resources of any video communication tool (Telles & Vasallo, 2006). Telles (2015) explains that "within this virtual context and under the supervision of a teacher mediator, teletándem partners collaborate online and make their own choices regarding the path, rhythm and content of learning the language and culture of each other" (p. 604). This collaborative interaction allows developing communicative competence, cultural awareness, autonomous learning and digital skills. As in formal classroom environments, e-tandem learning also focuses on form and corrective feedback (Cziko, 2004). Several desirable characteristics of an e-tandem partner involve: being curious, nice, talkative, helpful, polite, mature, punctual to get online, knowledgeable about his or her country and culture, and so on. E-tandem partners seek to improve communication skills, learn more about the person and their culture, and learn from the partner's personal or professional experiences.

There are three modes of e-tandem: non-institutional, institutional non-integrated, and institutional integrated. The first one occurs when e-tandem partners are not affiliated to an institution, the second one when tandem sessions are developed as extra-curricular activities, and the final one is when sessions are part of the academic program (Aranha & Cavalari, 2014). Telles (2015) warns that "... the three distinct modes of implementation have an impact on the ways, responsibility, and seriousness with which the students consider the practice of a teletandem" (p.606). He suggests that it is better to administrate an institutional integrated e-tandem program. It requires some necessary elements such as training participants, integrating tasks, and assessing students' progress (Aranha & Cavalari, 2014). Any mode of e-tandem must be developed taking into account three main principles: languages must not be mixed, there must be reciprocity, and there must be autonomy (Brammerts, 2003; Vasallo & Telles, 2006).

In general, e-tandem is well received by students because it has a positive impact on second or foreign language learning. They improve their oral competence and gain grammatical, lexical, and syntactical knowledge. They develop negotiation skills as teletandem participants try to establish the partnership conditions (Garcia, 2010). Moreover, e-tandem exchanges contribute to a better learning of cultural aspects than the traditional teaching resources and help to increase cultural awareness in communicative practices (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Kabata, 2007; Kabata & Adasawa, 2011; O'Dowd, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002).

Because of characteristics such as language learner potential, learner fit, teacher fit, meaning focus, authenticity (positive impact), and practicality, e-tandem is a motivating method for language learning (Chapelle, 2001). In tandem projects which are not part of the curriculum, students decide to participate voluntarily looking for language immersion opportunities. Ryan (2014) explains that participants in his research joined the project because they wanted to speak in their target language with native speakers and develop friendships. E-tandem also "encourages familiarity and solidarity, reduces anxiety and, over time increases confidence" (Appel & Gilabert, 2002, p. 18). El-Hariri's study (2017) showed that e-tandem has great potential for reducing the fear of speaking and talking to real speakers of the foreign language.

Canga Alonso (2012) reports, students develop social skills like patience, empathy, tolerance, turn-taking, and a better attitude towards learning a new language and culture. Students can develop autonomous and collaborative learning as long as they work responsibly. They can set their own learning objectives, decide

on the learning strategies, forms of feedback, and the topic they want to talk about. E-tandem also helps to develop digital competence in native and foreign languages. Liu, et al. (2014) report that students develop better attitudes to the use of computers for language learning. Using computers supports second and foreign language learning and the acquisition of language skills

Nevertheless, there are some drawbacks which we must not overlook. Some information tandem partners share can be unreliable because of their educational or cultural backgrounds. In addition, it could be that both tandem partners are not compatible and they can feel uncomfortable during the language exchanges (Appel & Mullen, 2000; Brammerts & Kleppin, 2006), which makes learning difficult. With beginners in e-tandem, communicative tasks are much more guided, and as a consequence, they lose their autonomy—an important principle of this type of learning (Brammerts, 2003; Telles & Vassallo, 2006). The lack of guidance from a teacher or tutor can also affect learning (Cavalari & Aranha, 2019). In addition, there are possibilities of failure in students with very low proficiency levels. Therefore asynchronous tandem is better for this type of students. However, it depends on individual differences because there are cases of students with low proficiency levels that demonstrate progress (Menéndez González, 2015). Kabata and Edasawa (2011) claim that in tandem interactions, “the amount and type of incidental learning may depend on the students’ proficiency level” (p. 104). Other aspects that can affect learning include: a) the tendency to form distracting friendships putting learning at risk, b) demotivation due to too few or too many corrections, c) a lack of autonomy of the learner, d) an inability to develop autonomy (Appel & Mullen, 2000; Ojanguren & Blanco, 2006), and e) technological problems (Wang et al., 2012).

Methodology

Research design

This was a qualitative study in which we collected and analyzed data to understand opinions and experiences about the implementation of an institutional non-integrated e-tandem project in a public university.

Research site and participants

The research was conducted at the Technical University Cotopaxi which is a public institution where English is studied as a foreign language. Twenty-nine students majoring in English participated in the study: 44.8% of the students were in their third semester, 37.9% in their second semester, and 17.2% in their first semester. They were between 19 and 25 years old. Five students were at A1 level, 17 of them A2, 6 had B1, and one student had her PET certificate. Information about students’ language proficiency comes from the results of an official paper-pencil *KEY English Test* from Cambridge ESOL (2008). The reading, writing, and listening sections were supervised by the classroom teacher while the speaking part was developed by a native English speaker with a degree in English teaching.

Data collection

Data were collected during the implementation of a pilot e-tandem project in the Fall, 2018 and Spring, 2019 semesters. There were 36 sessions and more than 70 students participated. For the scope of this study, we collected data from students who had participated in at least four sessions. Twenty-four per cent of students participated in 4 or 5 sessions, 17% in six or seven sessions, 50% in 8 to 10 sessions, and 10% participated in more than 10 sessions. As for the time of day, 55.20% participated in the morning, 24.1% in the afternoon, and 20.7% in both. We designed an unstructured observation file to take notes about positive and negative aspects of each session and to add any comments about the experience. Twenty e-tandem sessions were observed. Students were asked to write a journal entry after each session addressing three main questions: a) How do you feel after this virtual session? Why? b) What were the positive aspects of this session? c) What were the negative aspects of this session? We collected 116 journal entries from those who submitted them voluntarily and 20 observation files.

This pilot e-tandem project was institutionally non-integrated. E-tandem sessions were not part of the curriculum. Participants joined them voluntarily during two academic terms. The sessions were held in a language lab of the university, which had 21 computers with Skype accounts, one for the lab assistant and the others for the students. We chose sessions from a schedule established by Miami University’s *Virtual Immersion Spanish-English Program*. We had an introduction session to give students instructions, guidelines on how to participate successfully, and a planning topic format. Before each conversation, students chose the topic and prepared themselves. An e-tandem partner was given randomly in each; they did not have the same partner in each session. The students at the Miami University develop the e-tandem

sessions within their schedule and under the supervision of their Spanish teachers. We contacted with the lab assistant 10 minutes before each session to start the video calls, and our students sat in a computer as they arrived.

Data analysis

For the data analysis, we used the triangulation technique that consisted of the validation of data through the cross verification from students' journals and the teacher' observation files. First, we read each journal entry and highlighted sentences related to positive (in yellow) and negative aspects (in orange). Then, we organized the information into categories: language learning, culture and motivation as for the positive aspects; and schedule, lab, teachers' guide, e-tandem partner, and English level as for the negative aspects. We did the same with data from the observation files. Finally, we compared data with students' opinions.

Results and Discussion

To answer the question about the advantages of the pilot e-tandem project, we analyzed the learners and tutor's excerpts taken from the journals and observation files. The main advantages identified were language learning, culture, and motivation.

Language learning

Excerpts from the students' journals:

Pude mejorar mi listening y speaking [I could improve listening and speaking.]

He aprendido la pronunciación, más vocabulario y expresiones que no estan [sic] en el libro. [I have learned pronunciation, more vocabulary and expressions that are not in the book.]

Aprendí formas de interactuar y maneras de hacerme entender. [I learned ways to interact and make myself understood.]

Mejoré mi fluidez, el stress y la entonación. [I improved my fluency, stress and intonation.]

Pude aplicar lo que aprendí en la clase de inglés. [I could apply what I learned in English classes.]

Me siento más segura al hablar. [I feel more confident to speak.]

Asistí a 10 sesiones y mi inglés es mejor ahora. [I attended 10 sessions, and my English is better now.]

Entendí la utilidad de la gramática en la comunicación real; ahora si el inglés fue útil. [I understood the usefulness of grammar in real communication. Now, the English language was useful.]

Fui capaz de pensar en inglés, no necesité traducir. [I was able to think in English. I did not need to translate.]

Fui capaz de practicar el inglés oral. Me ayudó a perder el miedo a hablar. [I was able to practice oral English. It helped me to lose fear to speak in English.]

Excerpt from the tutor's observation file:

Los estudiantes están recibiendo input real [Students are receiving real input actively.]

A pesar de los errores de pronunciación y gramática, los estudiantes Americanos [sic] entienden a mis estudiantes [In spite of many pronunciation and grammar mistakes, American partners understand my students.]

En este tipo de comunicación, los estudiantes necesitan más vocabulario y fluidez [In this type of communication, students need more vocabulary and fluency.]

Los estudiantes se esfuerzan por comunicarse. Esto no sucede en el aula. [Students make effort to communicate. It does not happen in the classroom.]

These results suggest that there are many advantages of e-tandem in language learning. Students learned vocabulary, grammar, fluency, stress, intonation, communication strategies, and so on. They felt they had improved listening and speaking skills because they interacted with real recipients of the target language (Kabata, 2007; Kabata & Adasawa; 2011; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002). Moreover, the study showed the potential benefit of e-tandem in reducing anxiety, increasing confidence (Appel & Gilabert, 2002), and reducing the fear of talking to native speakers of the foreign language (El-Hariri, 2016). Many students were relaxed and felt confident to speak without the pressure of being assessed. Students who participated in ten or more sessions said that they had improved their English a lot since they had more time for oral practice, which is limited in the classroom. They had more opportunities to receive authentic language input and to negotiate meaning.

Cultural awareness

Excerpts from the students' journals:

Tú puedes aprender más del otro país, nuevas costumbres, lugares turísticos y platos típicos. [You can learn more about another country, new customs, tourist places, and traditional dishes.]

Aprendí acerca de una nueva cultura. [I learnt about a new culture.]

Veo que la forma de vida y de pensar es diferente. [I see that the way of life and thinking is different.]

Pude compartir mi cultura. [I could share my culture.]

Entendí que necesito conocer más sobre mi cultura [I understood that I need to know more about my culture.]

Excerpts from the tutor's observation file:

Muchos estudiantes no pueden responder a ciertas preguntas de realidad nacional. [Many students cannot answer certain questions about national culture.]

Los estudiantes de la universidad de Miami tienen temas de carácter cultural mientras que muchos de nuestros estudiantes solo [sic] hacen preguntas personales. [The students from the Miami University have cultural topics, but many of our students make personal questions.]

Another advantage of this pilot project was the possibility of a positive effect on cultural competence. Students mentioned that they learned a new culture and could share their own. They understood culture as an important element of communication with recipients of other cultures. Some students noticed that they needed to know more about their own culture and described their interests in learning the target culture. The connection between language and culture in tandem interactions seemed to help students reinforce their own culture and develop tolerance toward others. Thus, the ideas of O'Dowd (2003), O'Dowd & Ritter (2006), and Belz & Kinginger (2002) with respect to the benefits of e-tandem in cultural awareness has been observed during the implementation of this pilot project.

Motivation

Excerpts from the students' journals:

Mi inglés no es bueno, pero puedo aprender y este me ayuda. Me da confianza. [My level is not good, but I can learn and this helps me. It gives me confidence.]

De esta forma puedo aumentar mi nivel de inglés, quiero continuar participando para mejorar mi nivel de inglés. [In that way I can increase my level of English. I want to continue participating to improve my English.]

Me ha motivado más a continuar estudiando inglés, definitivamente soy de esta Carrera. [It has motivated me more to continue studying English. I am definitely from this career.]

Fue una experiencia inolvidable, lo tradicional se deja afuera para adoptar una forma más dinámica e interesante de aprender. [It was an unforgettable experience. The traditional is taken away to adopt a more dynamic and interesting way of learning.]

Pude hacer nuevos amigos y aún mantengo el contacto con ellos, les ayudo aprender español y ellos me ayudan en inglés. [I was able to make new friends. I still keep in touch helping them learn Spanish and they teach me English.]

Es algo innovador, me divertí y disfruté. [It is something innovative. I had fun and enjoyed.]

Excerpt from the tutor's observation file:

La mayoría de los estudiantes están emocionados antes, durante y después de las conversaciones. Aunque algunos estudiantes con bajo nivel de inglés están un tanto nerviosos. [Most of the students are excited before, during and after the conversation. Low level students were a kind of nervous though.]

Muchos estudiantes piden más sessions a pesar de que saben que no recibirán ninguna nota. [Many students ask for more sessions in spite of knowing that they will not receive any score.]

Lastly, motivation—an important feature in second language learning—is another advantage. Students were motivated and felt happy because it was the first time they had talked to native speakers. All of them described their experience in e-tandem learning with expressions such as “fantastic, awesome, innovative”, and “motivating”. Students reported feeling highly motivated during the interactions, participants joined the program knowing that they would not be evaluated. They wanted to talk to native speakers and make new

friends. This finding is similar to Ryan's study (2014), in which participants were interested in the program for opportunities to interact with native speakers and for developing relationships.

The second research question is: What are the drawbacks of the pilot e-tandem project? To answer this question we analyzed the learners and tutor's statements taken from the journals and observation files. The main drawbacks identified are: technological problems, schedule, students' autonomy, compatibility of e-tandem partners, and language level.

Technological problems

Excerpt from a students' journal:

Las computadoras destinadas para las conversaciones no funcionan de forma correcta, la cámara y el audio no valían y se desconectaba de la conversación. [Computers intended for conversations did not work the right way. The camera or audio did not go well and the conversation disconnected.]

Excerpt from the tutor's observation file:

Cuando agrupamos más de dos usuarios, hay problemas con el audio. El técnico no puede solucionar este problema. [When grouping more than two users, there are problems with the audio. The technician cannot solve this problem.]

El mismo problema de siempre! los micrófonos no funcionan bien y el background noise dificulta la conversación. El asistente de laboratorio de la Universidad de Miami casi siempre reporta estos problemas en el formato de Virtual Immersion Session Feedback [The same problem again; microphones do not work well and the background noise makes communication difficult. The lab assistant of the University of Miami often reported these problems in their Virtual Immersion Session Feedback Form sent by e-mail.]

Hubo conflictos con el horario del laboratorio. Tuvimos que cancelar algunas clases para usar el laboratorio para las conversaciones. [There were problems with the lab schedule. We had to cancel some classes to use the lab for the conversations.]

There were some technological problems with cameras and microphones. We do not have our own lab for tandem sessions, which inevitably causes problems. These difficulties disrupted the learning process and caused attrition of participants and tutors. Wang et al. (2012) assert that technical problems can discourage students and tutors. Therefore, like any other e-learning project, this demands a basic infrastructure with technological equipment and technical staff to maintain and upgrade the infrastructure, train the users, and provide technical support. This will contribute to achieving the required academic goals.

Problems with the schedule

Excerpt from a students' journal:

Algunas conversaciones inician muy temprano, algunos no vivimos cerca de la universidad y es difícil para nosotros llegar a tiempo. [Some conversations started very early. Some of us do not live near the university, and it is difficult for us to arrive on time.]

Excerpt from the tutor's observation file:

Muchos estudiantes llegaron atrasados y algunos faltaron. Tuve que buscar estudiantes de otros cursos para completar el grupo. [Many students were late and some were absent. I had to find a student from different classes to complete the group.]

Algunos estudiantes comunicaron que ya no asistirán porque la sesión es muy temprano; si vienen, tendrán que esperar muchas horas para sus clases normales. [Some students communicated that they would not come anymore because the session was too early. If they come, they will have to wait many hours for their classes.]

No se puede escoger las conversaciones tomando en cuenta el horario de los estudiantes debido a que el ciclo académico de nuestra Universidad no coincide con el de la U de Miami. [Conversations cannot be chosen based on the student's schedule because the academic term of our university does not match with the University of Miami.]

Si las conversaciones estuvieran dentro del horario de los estudiantes se evitaría muchos problemas. [If the conversations were part of the students' schedule, we would avoid many problems.]

There were problems with the schedule because the academic terms of both partner universities are different, and the sessions are not part of the students' regular class. Students who had classes in the morning had to attend the afternoon sessions and vice versa causing the withdrawal of some participants. Telles (2015) warns that "... the three distinct modes of implementation have an impact on the ways, responsibility, and seriousness with which the students consider the practice of a teletandem" (p.606). He

suggests that it is better to use an institutional integrated e-tandem project. In that way, students and their teachers become more involved.

Tutor's guide

Excerpts from the students' journals:

El tema que seleccioné no fue apropiado para la discusión, deberían darnos un tema para cada conversación. [The topic I selected was not appropriate for the discussion. A topic for each discussion should be given.]

Los profesores; deberían guiarnos más [The teachers; they should guide us more.]

Al principio no sabía de qué hablar pero luego la conversación fluyó. [At the beginning I did not know what to talk about, but the conversation flowed later.]

Excerpt from the tutor's observation file:

Muchos estudiantes no planifican ningún tema para la conversación, improvisan. No se puede controlar esto porque es voluntario. [Many students do not plan any topic for the conversation, they improvise. We cannot control it because the activity is voluntary.]

Los weak students si planifican un tema, pero los strong students no. [The weak students did plan a topic, but the strong ones did not.]

Students had problems in selecting the topics and claim for tutors' guide. Participants were from different classes, and their teachers were not involved in the process. Planning e-tandem sessions and monitoring learning progress is necessary, but students did not do it. This finding suggests that the teachers' guide plays a crucial role for carrying out successful e-tandem projects. Telles (2015) explains that tutors' guide through orientation sessions or reflective conversations that focus on learning strategies and linguistic and cultural aspects is necessary. Students seem to have difficulties establishing learning goals and managing their own learning towards those goals. Hence, it is necessary to help students set clear learning goals because it leads to appropriate selection of topics, responsibility in planning the sessions, and reflection.

Lack of compatibility with the E-tandem partner

Excerpt from student journals:

Mi compañero de conversación tenía preguntas simples, la conversación no fluyó. I

Algunos estudiantes de la Universidad de Miami no son sociables. La comunicación fue aspera [sic]. [Some students from the University of Miami are not so sociable. The communication was very rough.]

No fue una Buena interacción a pesar de que sí me prepare. [There was not a good interaction in spite of the preparation I had made.]

Algunos estudiantes de la u de Miami [sic] prefirieron no hablar y dejar que el tiempo pase. [Some students at the U of Miami] prefer not to talk and let the time pass.]

Compartí la conversación con mi compañera. Ella habló más que yo. Fue un poco molesto. [I shared a partner with my classmate. She spoke more than me; it was a bit annoying.]

Hoy no entendí mucho, habló muy rápido y con un inglés más avanzado. [Today, I did not understand very much; he/she spoke very fast and with an advanced English.]

Excerpt from the tutor's observation file:

La Universidad de Cotopaxi tenía más participantes que la Miami. Tubimos [sic] que agrupar a los estudiantes. Ellos no tuvieron suficiente tiempo para practicar. [The Universidad de Cotopaxi had more participants than Miami University. We had to pair students. They did not have enough time to practice.]

Algunos estudiantes de Miami tenían preguntas. Ellos estaban escribiendo las respuestas por lo tanto perdieron tiempo. [Some students from Miami had questions. They were writing the answers, so they lost time.]

Ví que algunos estudiantes de Miami no querían hablar [I saw some students from Miami did not want to talk.]

Some of the problems encountered with e-tandem partners were: They spoke fast, they used advanced English, some of them did not want to talk, they just asked questions to complete a questionnaire, and others were not sociable. Problems of compatibility of e-tandem partners analyzed by Appel and Mullen (2000) and Brammerts and Kleppin (2006) were also present in this study. This can demotivate students and disrupt the learning, too. Lack of compatibility might be because of the absence of a set of

communicative purposes by the partners, which may take them to an asymmetrical relationship. Students with a good level of Spanish controlled the conversation. They did not provide feedback and mixed languages. It is important to offer tandem orientation sessions in both partner universities so that students can learn tips on how to be a good e-tandem partner, how to provide feedback, and how to use communication strategies. Students also need to develop their negotiation skills (Garcia, 2010 as cited in Cavalari & Aranha, 2016).

Level of the target language Excerpt

from the students' journals:

Las conversaciones virtuales son interesantes, pero mi nivel de idioma no es muy alto para entenderlas. Pude hacer muy pocas preguntas. No pude entender bien lo que decían. [Virtual conversations are interesting, but my language level is not very high to understand them. I could make very few questions. I could not understand what they said.]

Algunos estudiantes sabían poco español, por lo que no podíamos comunicarnos. Aprendí un poco. Creo que necesito mejorar mi inglés antes de participar. [Some students spoke little Spanish, so we could not communicate. I learned a little. I think I need to improve my English before participating.]

Me di cuenta de que necesito mejorar mi inglés. No pude comunicarme. Tuve dificultades, pero a veces si me entendía. Cometí errores porque estaba nervioso. [I realized that I need to improve my English. I could not communicate. I had difficulties, but sometimes she/he did understood me. I made mistakes because I felt nervous.]

Excerpt from the tutor's observation file:

Hubo muchos participantes con nivel A1, pero algunos abandonaron el programa. Los estudiantes con bajo nivel pudieron comunicar información muy básica. Simplemente hicieron preguntas; no interactuaron. [There were many participants with A1 level, but some of them quit the program. Students with low level were able to communicate very basic information. They just asked questions; they did not interact.]

Planificaron un tema, pero aún tenían problemas. [They planned a topic, but they still had problems.]

Algunos con buen nivel de español controlaron la conversación. Algunos con bajo nivel de español hablan más en inglés. No proporcioné comentarios. [Some with good level of Spanish controlled the conversation. Some with low level of Spanish speak more in English. I did not provide feedback.]

Finally, we observed that weak students had problems when interacting with their partners. Even though they had planned their topic in advance, they spent most of the time talking in Spanish. They seemed to be nervous and anxious. These results are similar to the findings of Wang et al. (2012) where intermediate-level students evaluated a similar project more positively than elementary-level students. Kabata and Edasawa (2011) claim that in tandem interactions "the amount and type of incidental learning may depend on the students' proficiency level" (p. 104). This is another aspect to take into account when selecting participants for future e-tandem interactions at the Technical University of Cotopaxi. The level required must be A2 or higher because they can manage the conversation. Menéndez and Martínez (2015) mention that there are possibilities of failure in students with very low levels, and they suggest using asynchronous communication. However, the authors say that sometimes low-level students can participate successfully in e-tandem.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the main advantages of this institutional non-integrated pilot e-tandem project were: a) it fostered language learning, b) it helped to develop cultural awareness, and c) it increased motivation. On the other hand, the drawbacks identified were: a) technological problems, b) problems with the schedule, c) a lack of guidance, d) a lack of compatibility with the e-tandem partner, and e) a low level of the target language. In spite of many drawbacks experienced during the implementation of e-tandem learning, students demonstrated high interest in the project. Thus, it is recommended that the Technical University of Cotopaxi continue developing e-tandem sessions, but we must change to an institutional integrated e-tandem mode in order to have a better academic and administrative organization that reduces the drawbacks.

Telles (2015) has said that the institutional integrated tandem projects give better results because sessions are carried out within both participating institutions, in their labs and mediated by their teaching assistants, language instructors and/or professors. The mode of e-tandem— institutional non-integrated— affected the organization and support that students require in order to have a safer and more assisted learning experience. The study revealed that there are many challenges for tutors and students in an e-tandem

project which is not integrating it in the curriculum. E-tandem learning goes beyond putting students in front of a computer with native speakers. It requires the two learners, with the tutor's guide, to work together responsibly to learn from each other a new language and culture.

These findings are subject to certain limitations: sample size, number of sessions students attended, and data collection procedures. We did not have information from all participants—just from those who gave us their diary entries voluntarily. Further research needs to be done on how to connect e-tandem learning to the classroom teaching and how they contribute to each other.

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