Experience of Tandem at University: how can ICT help promote collaborative language learning between students of different mother tongues.

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Abstract: The importance given to language learning has been increasing regularly in France, with the compulsory study of a foreign language for both graduate and undergraduate students and with the introduction of the European Framework of References (Council of Europe, 2001). Hence, new learning environments have been developed to provide more efficient settings for language learning and promote more autonomous learning, with the help of ICT (Internet and Communication Technology).

Tandem consists in gathering two people with different native languages so that they work together in pairs, and learn each other's language. Two environments are currently offered at Lille 3 University (France): face-to-face tandem and Teletandem Brasil, a network that offers distant learning. A description of both settings, that have been introduced recently at Lille 3 Language Resource Centre (LRC) where the study has been conducted, will help determine which are the essential elements of the environment for an efficient learning. The introduction of ICT to organise the pairs or to go through the learning process and a well-balanced mixture of institutional guidance and autonomous learning seem to be the key elements of Tandem.

An online questionnaire has been distributed to the students involved in tandem, in order to check the perception the learners have of the setting. Hence, we will be able to establish a typology of the environment required for a collaborative language learning both online and face-to-face.

Keywords: Tandem, collaborative learning, foreign language
Introduction

French universities have recently gone through a major redefinition of the place devoted to languages in the curriculum. With the impulse of the Common European Framework of References (Council of Europe, 2001), that sets new goals for language learning throughout Europe, the study of at least one foreign language has become compulsory both for graduate and undergraduate students. The level to be reached has not been strictly defined in all universities, but it will soon be, and new challenges are now facing language teachers.

In that context, new learning environments are being built and tested in order to improve the general level of the French students, which is not fully satisfactory. Although they might have some knowledge of a foreign language, they are very often very shy when oral production is required. Two learning environments are currently being tested at Lille 3 University (North of France), where our research was developed. The first one is a face-to-face Tandem, that consists in establishing contacts between learners of different native languages, in order to help them have cultural and linguistic exchanges and practice their foreign language together in an authentic communication context. The second one is an online tandem, Teletandem Brasil (Telles & Vassalo, 2006). The aim of both environments is to improve language learning and to provide opportunities to use the foreign language in authentic interactions, through a socio-constructivist approach (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005).

The aim of our research is to analyse the impact of ICT to help develop different modalities of tandem that are offered at university: face-to-face tandem (gathering students who are physically on the campus) and teletandem (Lille 3 being a partner of Teletandem Brasil that links students from the University of Assis (UNESP) and foreign students throughout the world.

We will therefore start with a description of the context of language learning in France, nowadays, focussing on the objectives established by the CEFR and presenting the tandem modalities.

Then, we will see how ICT has permitted the development of tandem modalities and present the way the students use the setting. The analysis of a questionnaire distributed to the students involved will provide some qualitative information. We will then be able to determine the assets of the environment that promotes a "better world" for our language learners, thanks to technology.

These results will permit the improvement of the learning environment, focusing not only on the way the interactions take place but on the background in which the setting is proposed, providing guidance and tutoring, in an institutional organisation.
1. The background for an efficient language learning

1.1 - Principles of learning in-tandem

Learning in tandem consists in gathering two people with different native languages so that they work together in pairs, in an open learning principle. The main objectives are:

- to learn more about one another’s character and culture.
- to help one another improve their language skills.
- to exchange additional knowledge.

It can therefore help improve the language proficiency of each of the learners and also facilitate intercultural learning. It doesn’t replace any language course but may be a complement to it, or be included in the course if accompanied by the teachers or tutors responsible for it.

It can be considered as a kind of open learning as it mostly takes place out of class, yet it is generally organised by a learning institution and therefore it is not a complete out-of-class learning framework. Tandem relies on two main principles:

- Learner autonomy: the learners are responsible for their own learning: setting the rhythm of the meetings, for the content chosen.
- Reciprocity: both partners should contribute equally to their work together and benefit to the same extent (amount of time spent in each language, energy and interest dedicated). The interesting feature of that environment is that each student is alternatively learner and teacher, beneficiary and expert.

As a consequence, learners have fewer inhibitions in expressing themselves in the foreign language than they would have in class, as they share the same experience in turn.

1.2 Different modalities: face-to-face tandem, e-tandem, Teletandem

The most striking feature about tandem is the variety of settings it has provoked. Three main modalities can be mentioned, but only face-to-face tandem and Teletandem have been practiced locally.

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1from [http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/learning/idxeng11.html](http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/learning/idxeng11.html)
1.2.1- Face-to-face tandem
Face-to-face tandem started at the end of the 1960s in Germany, with French speakers, at Bochum university (Brammerts 1995; Brammerts & Calvert 2003; Hemling 2002). Since then, different modalities have emerged, the inclusion of ICT being one of the most important steps to facilitate contacts between native speakers.

1.2.2- E-tandem
In addition to face-to-face tandem, some institutions have taken part to the expansion of Tandem, through the International E-Mail Tandem Network. E-tandem focuses on written interactions, using e-mail to communicate.

1.2.3- Teletandem
An important channel of communication was missing though in e-tandem: authentic oral interactions, that used to be at the core of face-to-face tandem. To compensate for that lack of oral practice, new tools have been added, with the use of MSN Window Live Messenger and with the help of a webcam (that permits visual interactions, and use of body language) and especially oral expression (Macaire, 2004). Chat and whiteboard can also be used, providing synchronous communication. Lille 3 University is partner of the specific network entitled "Teletandem Brasil", and we refer to that specific experience of tele-tandem from now-on.

We are now going to analyse two learning environments aiming at University students more specifically, that are being currently developed at Lille 3 University. What is the added value of ICT in these environments (Santos, 1999), what does it enable the students to do? What is the perception the students have of their tandem practice?

1.3- The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL)
Nowadays, new goals are being set thanks to the CEFRL and we need to specify the main elements (Council of Europe, 2001), that are in agreement with tandem principles.
- Use of multimedia for language learning
- Realisation of a task to promote authentic use of the language
- Language learning through interaction
- Promotion of plurilingualism in Europe

Tandem promotes language learning in agreement with the goals set by the CEFRL: realisation of an authentic task (discussion with a native speaker) through the use of ICT (especially for Teletandem Brasil, but also for face-to-face tandem as the first contacts are made online and can continue in a mixed way).
1.4- How can ICT help locally?

Face-to-face tandem has been implemented locally at University Lille 3 (North of France) 2 years ago and is based on the motto "échanger pour apprendre, apprendre pour échanger". Students interested are now asked to register on a specific website at the Language Centre, and a tutor, specifically dedicated to the tandem project organises the pairs and offers guidance. Due to the increasing interest of the students, the need for a computer base (that didn't exist two years ago) became obvious: to increase efficacy and to make the environment open and visible. Thus, this year, we have created a base of learners, interested in authentic language learning, who register online to look for a partner.

Figure 1: tandem in Lille 3 University

As for Teletandem Brasil, some specific local conditions need to be taken into account to understand the benefits that it can offer to language learners: in Brazil and more specifically in Assis (State of São Paulo, where Teletandem Brasil was born) there is no easy access to foreign culture or speakers, as very few foreigners can be met there. In such conditions "achieving communicative and cultural competence in foreign language under such constraining geographical and local conditions is quite difficult" (Telles & Vassalo, 2006). Teletandem Brasil helps Brazilian learners have contact with learners from all over the world, while they wouldn't have the opportunity to travel and meet these learners in "real life". Their motto is "I help you learn my language and you help me learn yours!"

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2 To exchange in order to learn, to learn in order to exchange.
2. The added-value of such a learning environment

The analysis of our corpus is based on information gathered online on the Lille 3 tandem website, completed by a questionnaire, in order to have access to the learners' perception of the environment provided.

A very interesting feature is that tandem permits contacts between learners and native speakers of less-commonly taught languages (MODIME languages in French) and does not only reinforce the development of English as a world language. Hence it promotes a plurilingual approach, as set by the European Council (2001). In Lille 3, the students can register online, filling in a form as appears below:

3 MODIME: Moins diffusée et Moins Enseignée
2.1- The languages involved

More than 220 students have registered to ask for a tandem partner, 150 have found a partner. There is a limit to the pairing device: the law of supply and demand. Many demands concern English or Spanish; yet not enough native speakers are studying on the campus, therefore demands are more easily satisfied in MODIME languages. The advantage of Teletandem Brasil is that it can put into contact native students throughout the world, independently of the place where they study. Among the 75 pairs, 29 students have answered the questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language 1</th>
<th>Language 2</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: list of tandem pairs, by language

Another interesting aspect is that although the context is located in France, tandem involving other languages can take place on the campus (even if less commonly)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language 1</th>
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<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: list of tandem pairs apart from French
The profiles

The language chosen to fill in the profile is significant, as for the learners' objectives. As the context is French, most of them answer in French, yet 16 have preferred to use both their native language and the target language, whereas 11 students (all of them are French) have preferred to use the target language only, which reveals their involvement in the process, and the fact that filling in the form, they are ready to take part. It should be added that this generation of students belongs to the generation of Internet and Facebook and they are not afraid to describe themselves in the profile proposed to them.

The profiles can be classified as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In target language</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No profile</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: language chosen for the profile

As for the content, the profile mainly deals with information about their level and field of study, or their personal tastes. The learners can also ask for a specific partner, if they read a profile that attracts them, as can be seen below in figure 4.

![Figure 4: examples of profiles online](image-url)
2.3- The pedagogical added value

The gains stated by the students in relation to culture, language proficiency and autonomous learning and to the interest of the learning environment are presented in the figure below. The added value of the site to help establish the links is obvious and gets a score of 5/5. The most efficient aspect of tandem deals with culture which gets a score of 3/5 in average, whereas language only gets 2,5/5. The reason for a rather low evaluation (just average) is certainly due to the fact that the questionnaire has been distributed to the students after only 2 months of exchange, and that the results concerning language improvement, will only appear later. The cultural discovery may appear right from the beginning.

![Figure 5: the perceived added value of the learning environment](image)

2.4- The means of communication within the pairs

For Teletandem Brasil, the specified means of communication are MSN Windows Live Messenger with a webcam and are the ones mostly used. For the face-to-face tandem, although the students are present at University, we can note that the meetings take place as much outside the formal place of study as inside, as stated in table 4 below. Further more, they rarely use MSN; email might be enough as they know they can meet physically easily afterwards.
3. The conditions of success and future perspectives

It is necessary to enhance the fact that, to be fully efficient, tandem should not be proposed in a completely open environment, and that its success is linked to the pedagogical framework that is built around it.

3.1- Tutoring and guidance

A pedagogical follow-up is offered to the students. For the Lille 3 tandem, a specific tutor is dedicated to the organisation of the pairs and hold a regular permanence at the language centre in order to meet the pairs or the students who are interested in Tandem. This tutor also organises informal sessions outside the university, to promote language learning in an authentic environment: going to the ice rink together, visiting the local museum, or just having a drink in a typically French "café". The mixture of formal and informal elements is a reason for the success. As for Teletandem, it is also followed by a tutor both in Brazil and in France, who can guide the students.

3.2- Learning journal

The students are asked to write a journal about their language learning: in order to remember what has been going on, to help them organize future sessions. In the questionnaire, it appeared that most of them didn't write such a journal (only 7/29), therefore we see that the role of the tutor is of major importance to provide guidance for the use of such a pedagogical tool.

Help is also required concerning the "learning to learn" principle. This is why a site has been developed by the language centre in order to provide such information to the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saved by</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on the campus</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outside</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by email</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by phone</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by MSN</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: means of communication
3.3- Sticking to the principles of tandem

One of the principles of tandem is "reciprocity". Therefore it was interesting to check whether the students stuck to this principle. In the questionnaire, we got the following answers:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to the day</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half L1 half L2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One language per session</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One language only</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Language used during the sessions

We can see that only a few of them only use one of the languages; most students stick to the principle of reciprocity, because it is of their own interest.

As for Teletandem Brasil, it is stated that both MSN and the webcam are necessary. It appears that due to some technical problems, some students may use other means of communication for a while: email, chat. Yet, to be fully efficient, Teletandem Brasil should include the tools that were planned for it.
3.4- Institutional follow-up

As we have seen above, the pedagogical implications of such settings are not always very clear for our students, who may consider it as a way to make friends rather than a setting for language learning. The learners are no professional teachers and they need to find material and information about what to do with their partners. Several sites are dedicated to such guidance and can be used. Although this setting is not equivalent to a traditional course (and needs to be different), the institution needs to provide tutors and recognition for such practice.

Being a complementary element of a language course is a first possible step; validation through ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) is a second one. Some experiments are being conducted in some courses within Lille 3 with a certain success, and therefore the flexibility of the setting is the most valuable element of it, as has been seen through time, since the first experiments in the 1960s.

Conclusion

To conclude, the different modalities of tandem can find different ways of development but the original concept needs to be kept in mind: reciprocal and autonomous learning of language, that is enhanced or made possible through the use of ICT.

The different results presented here are positive, after one year of existence, and we need to focus more on the guidance to help students become autonomous learners. This guidance can be provided face-to-face but also online.

To summarize, I would like to emphasize the elements that make online-enhanced tandem a very promising and successful learning environment:

- It emphasizes learner's autonomy and facilitates Life Long Learning. It turns learners into actors of their learning process.
- It permits collaborative and reciprocal learning, establishing links between learners of the most distant countries, or from the most different cultures. This is a priceless element in today's world, to promote cultural and linguistic understanding and tolerance. Locally, it permits the integration of the foreign students who discover the French University and helps local students improve their linguistic skills.
- Finally, it permits the promotion of plurilingualism as less-commonly taught languages are central in the setting. It is not because a language is less-commonly taught (see the case of German or Italian in France) that there are no native speakers of that language: and Lille 3 tandem has proved to be a real motor in the promotion and valorisation of such languages, respecting their diversity.
Experience of Tandem at University, WCC 2008 Congress

Bibliography


Sitography


