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Just the two of us? The “¿Qué tal?” e-tandem project for translation students

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Abstract

Within the academic year 2012-2013, “¿Qué tal?” email tandem project was implemented amongst the students of the first course of Translation at Pablo de Olavide University and students from several North American universities. The primary aim of the project was to promote the autonomous practice of literacy in L2, while reflecting upon the linguistic codes and pragmatics of L1 and L2 through the correction of errors. Alongside previous work (Appel, 1999; Appel & Mullen, 2000 & 2002; Appel & Gilabert, 2002; Braun, 2006; Muñoz Vicente, 2013; Schenker, 2012; Ushioda, 2000), the present study is based on the axiomatic principles of autonomy and reciprocity in order to detect weak points in the project. The varying levels of motivation within the tandem pairs and an insufficient command of the native language are identified as the main pitfalls.

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the acquisition of a solid base in foreign language and culture continually presents itself as a challenge to higher education. Language teachers "are no longer expected to deliver language information" and they seek to create new stimulating opportunities with which the students can experiment and generate authentic discussion in the target language (McDonal, 2003, p. 455). In the last two decades, various European universities

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(Sheffield, Fontys Hogeschool Sittard, Salamanca, Bochum, Oviedo…) have implemented language learning programmes in which students of different native languages cooperate together in order to improve their skills in the foreign language and gain knowledge about the culture in a more realistic context. Tandem learning is growing in popularity, as it is open to a virtual and an onsite environment, and to communication that can be either asynchronous or synchronous. In addition, it does not have any cost, or the cost is minimal.

Until the beginning of the 90’s, tandem learning was associated with face-to-face meetings (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003) and, in fact, numerous university programmes have maintained this modality. However, the development of Information Technologies (IT) has given rise to new formulas, and tandem learning, a minority interest before the revolution of the internet (Lewis, 2005), has spread worldwide. Currently, the advances of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and portable electronic devices, such as smartphones, permit the pair of speakers to communicate in a synchronous and asynchronous form by the means of chats, video calls, email, Whatsapp, etc., without the necessity of sharing the same place of residence.

The project “¿Qué tal?” email tandem was put into operation at Pablo de Olavide University in 2012-2013. This pilot project offered the opportunity of a linguistic exchange by email between students of Translation and Interpreting of English and North American students from several universities. This paper analyses the obstacles encountered during the implementation of the tandem activity, the benefits that the students obtained and the improvements that should be introduced in the project.

2. “¿Qué tal?” e-tandem

2.1. Description and methodology

The “¿Qué tal?” project integrates itself in the subject “Language B1 (English)”, an obligatory nine ECTS-credit subject for students in their first year of Translation and Interpreting of English. The syllabus is oriented to the acquisition of a B2 level of English within the CEFR. An evaluation of communication skills is continuous and written homework contributes to 20% of the final grade.

In order to launch the project, 25 students of “Language B1” were paired with 25 North American students from the International University Center at Pablo de Olavide University. The American students came from different universities in the US. They did not share language courses, did not know each other, were not subject to any type of supervision, and did not receive credits for participating in the project.

The “¿Qué tal?” e-tandem was conceived and as a means of promoting linguistic and cultural awareness through written expression. The initial project in 2012-2013 spanned two months, and in the case of the Spanish students, it involved the completion of a portfolio that was worth 2.5% of the final grade.

The project was based on the principles of autonomy and reciprocity. Reciprocity refers to the more or less equal contribution of both participants. In practice, this translates into two conditions: first, that members of the tandem will have the opportunity to “to practice speaking and writing in their target language and listening to and reading text written by their native speaking partner” (Appel & Mullen, 2000, p. 292). That is to say, it is desirable to provide the non-native speaker with authentic and realistic reading material, written in a colloquial and current language, which can be used as a model when writing in the foreign language. Second, it is expected of the native speaker to provide information on the errors committed by the non-native, resulting in greater linguistic awareness, both in the native language and the target language. To meet these requirements, each pair had to send a minimum of four emails in each language (L1 and L2) that consisted of 150 or more words. In addition, the participants had to detect and correct the errors made by their pairs in L2, which would prompt reflection upon the importance of form and content. However, the students did not receive any guidelines in regard to the aspects they should correct. They were expected to design their own strategies to develop their autonomy and become more involved in the process (Morley, 2006). In order to test the students’ motivation to write in the L2, the language they should use in their comments was not indicated either. As McPartland argues (2003, p. 200), the passive knowledge of a foreign language is bigger than the active knowledge, and sometimes learners prefer to be active producers of the non-native language during the exchange, rather than mere recipients.
The students were given a list of possible topics, while still having the freedom to choose others that would facilitate communication. The purpose was to promote decision-making and autonomy, the second pillar of tandem learning (Little, 2003), in order to optimize the results (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003).

To obtain a reliable corpus of analysis based on interaction between participants is considered one of the problem areas in email tandem (Appel & Mullen, 2000; Appel & Gilabert, 2002; Appel & Mullen, 2002). With the aim of avoiding previously reported issues (copies of emails not sent to the coordinator, duplicates, disorganized or manipulated copies of emails, etc.) the Spanish students had to turn in an electronic and a printed portfolio. The electronic version would constitute a valid tool for future evaluation and research (Shin, 2013), while the printed version would make the students more aware of their progress and the importance of form.

2.2. Methodological difficulties

Various obstacles were found during the initial setup of the “Qué Tal?” tandem. Initially, many North American volunteers did not maintain correspondence with the Spanish students, or their contribution was irrelevant. This fact confirmed the theory that, when one of the groups is not sufficiently homogenous or is not held accountable by a coordinator, its members find it difficult to maintain enthusiasm and the initial commitment (Strobl & Caracho, 2006).

Additionally, the students did not abide to the requirement of sending a response in less than two days. Their corrections were not systematic either: sometimes the participants made comments; at other times they simply corrected the errors. Sometimes corrections were included; at other times feedback was forgotten or sent late, etc.

Especially significant was the varying duration of the exchanges that, in many cases, extended further than the originally established eight weeks. This delay was not just related to the slow responses between the pairs: a close reading of the portfolios reveals that some participants maintained contact outside of the activity (via Facebook, chat, Skype or Whatsapp). This fact highlights the affective dimension of email tandem and how it plays an important role in “fostering the development of learner autonomy through the reciprocity on which successful tandem learning is founded” (Ushioda, 2000, p. 121).

Of the 25 portfolios originally submitted for assessment, only 10 featured the three main criteria: 1) four emails in each of the languages; 2) emails in L2 consisting of a minimum of 150 words; 3) the production of corrections between the tandem pairs in L2. In order to create a reliable corpus of work, the remaining 15 portfolios were ruled out.

3. Results

Since “¿Qué tal?” was mostly conceived for the development of written competence in L2, the analyzed data was extracted exclusively from the production in the foreign language. Fig. 1 shows the activity of the 10 selected tandem pairs and the type of feedback employed. In every instance, the Spanish students initiated communication in English and the North American students sent the first corrections.

Initially, three types of feedback, as defined by McPartland (2003), were expected: “positive feedback”, “expansionist feedback” and “corrective feedback”. However, the results revealed a more detailed classification. Each exchange presents one or more types of correction that have been marked with a point in the table and are classified as follows:

- **C0**: No correction.
- **C1**: Some errors are undetected (more than 3 errors in emails of more than 150 words or any errors in emails of less than 150 words).
- **C2**: Detected and corrected errors, without added explanation.
- **C3**: False correction.
- **C4**: Corrected errors and explanation given. The letter “E” appears in column C4 if the students sent their comments in English. The letter “S” indicates a comment written in Spanish.
The C1 type is usually combined with C2 and C4 when the students make corrections but miss errors. Types C0 and C1 coincide if the participants do not provide feedback when it is necessary. When the correction is not necessary, C0 is marked.

The bottom part of the table shows the type of correction most frequently used by the tandem pairs in each exchange. There are scarcely any cases in which students did not provide the necessary corrections (pattern C0 +C1, illustrated by Shawn and Erica). Type C4 should have been predominant, but the most frequent types are C4 and C1. The C2 type increases during the last exchange, yet contrarily, the use of C4 is higher in exchanges 1 and 2, and shows a downward trend in the last two. In general, C1+C4 is the most frequent combination. The amount of precise corrections (cases in which the models C2 and C4 appear isolated) is very small, but higher in the C2 model.

![Tandem pairs and email exchanges](image)

As can be observed, the participants did not always follow their partners’ model of corrections. In the case of the C4 model, there were only two perfect cases of reciprocity (tandems 3 and 6). In tandem 7, Rocío (b) follows the C4 model of her tandem, except in the last exchange. As for the C3 type, tandem 5 is the best example of reciprocity. The motivation of the participants in tandems 5, 6 y 7 also translates into higher production of L2, as the next figure reveals.

Fig. 2 compares the average number of words within each tandem. The Spanish students always wrote the longest emails (excluding tandem 7) and completed the requirement to write a minimum of 150 words by email, except Carmen and Paloma (tandems 2 and 4), who wrote an average of 148 words in L2. On the contrary, only three North American students (tandems 3, 6, and 7) exceeded the minimum of 150 words.
This tendency reflects a higher motivation of the Spanish students to practice writing in a foreign language. In fact, 62% of Spanish students, compared to 33% of North American students, chose L2 to write their comments. A small percentage alternated L1 and L2 (13% of Spanish students as against 17% of North American students), and only an individual (Elesa, tandem 3) used both languages at the same time in the same exchange.

The benefits of using both the L1 and L2 can be observed in tandem 6, in which the Spanish participant uses phrases and expressions in English from the feedback generated by the English-speaking pair (“it sounds better to say…”, “this works but…”, “your writing would flow better if you said…”, etc.).

4. Conclusion

The implementation of the project “¿Qué tal?” revealed some problem areas inside the tandem via email. Firstly, the study shows a correlation between the amount of autonomy of one group of participants (the North American students) and their lower degree of involvement and reciprocity. On the contrary, there is a greater motivation when the tandem is integrated in the syllabus of a specific course and the students receive some kind of credit for their participation.

In fact, the Spanish students showed a greater regularity in correspondence, they generated more extensive emails, more detailed corrections and more comments in L2 about the errors of their peers. For them, the activity was obligatory and they had the opportunity to exchange opinions on it and consult a tutor. Additionally, as students of the first course of Translation and Interpreting, they presented a profile of clear linguistic orientation and were
expected to provide more accurate feedback. However, the practical results of the tandem show only 25% of corrections made with precision (C4 type).

In order to improve the programme, an agreement with another institution of higher education should be established. A double Spanish-North American coordination would have played a decisive role in stimulating reciprocity and a regular exchange of emails between the partners. All in all, the project fulfilled its assignment from a pragmalinguistic perspective and there is evidence that it gave participants the opportunity to be connected beyond the project’s boundaries.

In a scenario where the opportunities to study abroad may be scarce or subject to budget cuts, training in tandem claims official inclusion in curricula as a controlled and successful formula of linguistic and cultural exchange.

References

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