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Integrating e-tandem in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper describes the experience of the pilot project “E-Tandem-Projekt Valköln”, between a group of German learners at Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) and a group of Spanish learners at the Language Learning Center of TH Köln during the summer semester of 2015. Following the philosophy of the tandem methodology, the aim of the pilot project was to promote action-oriented learning, *autonomous learning*, and effective *communication skills* in all domains (reading, *writing*, *speaking* and listening), intercultural exchange and international collaboration by the use of web 2.0-tools. For the realization of the asynchronous online-based collaboration a wiki software was used as virtual learning environment. For synchronous conversations students used Skype where they exchanged information about their academic lives. The project also involved a synchronous online session with the two language courses by using the virtual meeting tool Adobe Connect. This project was carried out within an institutional context. Therefore, it is important to focus the preparation and collaborative facilitation between the two institutions. The results of the e-tandem pilot project shows that students were more motivated and felt more interested in engaging in conversation with native speakers and exchanging personal and academic information.

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1. Introduction

Learning foreign languages is a constructive, active and especially interactive process. One of the challenges in distance language learning is the lack of speaking opportunities (Hurd, 2005). Using different Web 2.0 tools

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(Skype, Facebook, video conference, Wiki, etc.) provides the ability to communication with native speakers worldwide, to cooperate, to exchange information, work together on distance and, in particular, to enable online learning and e-tandem projects (Pomino/Meuter, 2011). The relative absence of Spanish native speakers in Germany and German native speakers in Spain has made it difficult for students to be engaging in authentic communication situations. In this project we designed e-tandem activities to help students practice speaking Spanish and German, get in contact with native speakers and keep on learning after the language course.

2. Description of the project

The project ValKöln was a 10-week pilot project starting at the end of March, 2015 and carried out with Spanish native speakers learning German at the level A2 and German speaking students learning Spanish at the level B1. The project included 6 weeks intensive e-tandem-activities, plus one week reflection and feedback completing a questionnaire. During the 6 learning weeks, participants worked on five tasks with their e-tandem partner about: “*Introducing yourself*” – short presentations of the project participants, “*Language Learning Biography*”- reflection on language learning and personal experience, “*My Home*”- talk about their apartments/homes and “*My University*”- students talk about their university and discuss the similarities and differences between the Spanish and the German system. The e-tandem partners corrected each other’s written and oral work. The Web 2.0 tools chosen for this project were Wiki, Skype and Adobe Connect. The aim of the project was to promote the development of students’ linguistic skills and intercultural competence through the e-Tandem exchange. Based on action-oriented tasks students focused on improving their communication skills through the exchange of information about their academic lives, cultures and areas of study.

This project was carried out within an institutional context (Vasallo, Telles, 2006, Castillo-Stock, 2015). Therefore, instructors selected the topics, integrated the project into the course syllabi and designed a wiki space in which the wiki serves as documentation of student work. Both courses were held at the same time so that synchronous online session was planned in advance. All tandem tasks were incorporated into the course syllabus. The Cooperation in e-tandem was integrated into the Spanish course and included 35% of the workload. The bases of crediting were the tandem tasks.

3. Participants

A total of 32 students participated in this project. The participants were students from Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) (12 students) and from the Language Learning Center of TH Köln (20 students). The students from UPV were native Spanish speakers learning German in elementary level courses (A1.2). Students at the Language Learning Center of TH Köln are native German speakers in intermediate Spanish courses (B1).

4. Preparation

At the beginning of the project the participants received an introduction to the e-tandem project and the method of language learning in tandem including the two principals of tandem learning autonomy and reciprocity (Brammerts, 2001). Reciprocity means that both language partners support each other in their learning activities. The reciprocal interdependence between the two partners requires equal commitment that both benefit as much as possible from their working together. Autonomy stands for the responsibility of the two learners for their own learning. They decide what, how and when they want to learn and what support is needed from their tandem partner (Brammerts, 2003). The teacher explained the project guidelines, assigned partners, demonstrated how to use the wiki, and explained the grading criteria, meeting times, dates and topics for each session.

5. Project aims

General aims of the ValKöln-Project were to promote intercultural exchange for a internships abroad and to start an international cooperation with a foreign university.

The specific aims were to:

- Develop autonomy and proficiency in academic contexts by distance tandem with digital tools.
- Enrich the language (vocabulary, grammar, and spelling) with the help of tandem partner.
- Promote action-oriented learning, autonomous learning, effective communication skills in all domains (reading, writing, speaking and listening),
- Motivate language learning and collaborative learning with the use of Web 2.0
- Give the students the opportunity to interact with native speaker and using the target language also outside the classroom.

6. Digital tools for e-tandem learning

A wiki software was used as virtual learning environment where the students could find all e-tandem tasks and project information. All written tasks and collaborative activities were documented on the wiki. Skype was used to promote oral expression and listening comprehension. Facebook was used as an additional communication tool of the students.

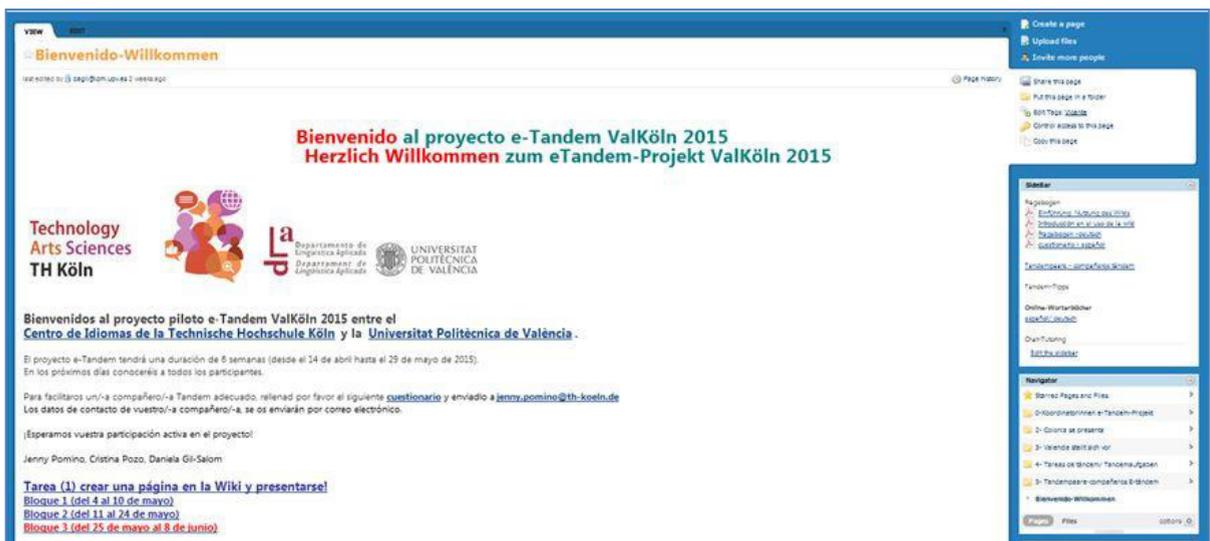


Fig. 1 Wiki as virtual learning environment

7. Task description

In this project there were five tasks to do. Students were given two weeks to work on each task. For each task, negotiation with the e-tandem partner on how to proceed took place, suggested reading was provided and language structures were discussed.

7.1. Introducing yourself

The objective of this task was to create an own page in the wiki and to write a short presentation in the target language. This page was important for the initial contact with the e-tandem partner and to get the first information about the partner. The information included: Name, age, hobbies, knowledge of foreign languages,

reasons for learning Spanish/German, wishes regarding the tandem partnership. The partner had the task to read and comment the page and to correct typographical and grammatical mistakes.

7.2. *Language Learning Biography*

The learners wrote a text about their language learning biography. They reflected about the difficulties and competences of language learning. The partners had to read and comment the language biography of their partners. The similarities and differences should be reflected in language learning.

7.3. *My Home*

The goal of this task was to describe the home/apartment. Learners should speak about their student apartment/home via Skype and talk about different living styles in their home country. At the end the partners wrote a final version of the apartment description in the target language and presented it on the wiki.

7.4. *My University*

The learners described their university to their e-tandem partner via Skype following these questions: *What's your favorite place at your University? What services are available (such as a library or cafeteria), etc, What subjects you prove this semester? What is your timetable?* As a first result of this task a written text was presented on the wiki. The similarities and differences should be reflected. Subsequently, participants should record a video, in which they presented their Faculty/ University briefly and answered also the following questions: *Where do I spend the most time? Where do I meet my fellow student? Where do I have lunch?* The video should then be uploaded to the wiki.

7.5. *My Future*

This task was preparing for the online live session. Students should reflect on their career plans “When I finish my studies, I would like to...” The results should be written on the wiki pages. In the live session the tandem pairs spoke verbally about the subject plans for the future.

8. Learning results and assessment

The writing process, video- and audio recordings produced by the students were uploaded on the wiki. Thereby all participants had the opportunity to see the feedback and comments from their tandem partners and from the teachers. The cooperation in e-Tandem was integrated into the Spanish course and included 35% of the workload. The students in València took voluntarily part in the project. They received an extra point for their active participation. The students in Germany were evaluated on their writing skills through the Wiki tasks and on their speaking skills through the video- and audio recordings. They were assessed on vocabulary, grammar expression/comprehensibility, coherence and creative realization of the task. Each writing text was required to have a minimum of 200 words. Each video- and audio recordings had a length limit of 2 to 5 minutes.

9. Project evaluation

A questionnaire has been designed to assess and evaluate the pilot project. 13 students of TH Köln and 5 students of Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) have participated in the survey. Regarding the tandem experience the German students rated the use of wikis as a learning platform and the e-Tandem as a method of language learning as positive. Students also indicated positive response to the videoconferencing in the classroom, to the collaboration with the Tandem partners via Skype and the helpful corrections of native speakers.

Negative aspects were the short duration of the project and the delayed feedback from the tandem partner. The responses of the 5 questionnaires completed by Spanish students shows that the use of wikis as a platform was

interesting and helpful. They also mentioned that the tandem method promotes independent learning. For some students it was a new way to work with others students online and on distance. They also found it very important to communication with native speakers and to improve their language skills by the corrections from the tandem partner. Negative aspects were the workload and task complexity. They also mentioned that the wiki software wasn't used intuitively. They had also difficulties to arrange a Skype meeting with the tandem partner.

In the following tables the data are collected regarding the participation of German and Spanish students in the different tasks and activities by date:

Table 1. Participation Block 1: from 4 to 10 de may

| Block 1 | TH Köln (20) | UPV (12) |
|---|--------------|----------|
| Task 1 (<i>Introducing yourself</i>) | 18 | 11 |
| Task 2 (reflection about language learning) | 18 | 10 |
| Task 3 (comment) | 14 | 9 |

Table 2. Participation Block 2: from 11 to 27 may

| Block 2 | TH Köln (20) | UPV (12) |
|---|--------------|----------|
| Task 1 (types of housing) | 16 | 11 |
| Task 2 (writing text about <i>My home</i>) | 16 | 11 |
| Task 3 (questions) | 9 | 4 |
| Task 4 (Skype) | - | - |
| Task 5 (text correction) | 6 | 4 |

Table 3. Participation Block 3: from 25 may to 8 june

| Block 3 | TH Köln (20) | UPV (12) |
|---|--------------|----------|
| Task 1 (writing text about <i>My University</i>) | 16 | 4 |
| Task 2 (comments) | 1 | 0 |
| Task 3 (video <i>My University</i>) | 6 | 2 |
| Task 4 (comments) | 1 | 0 |
| Task 5 (reflection <i>My Future</i>) | 13 | 4 |

The tables show that the participation of German students was higher. This is due to the fact that the project was part of the course at TH Köln. Moreover exams approached the UPV. In Germany, however, the abandonment is more progressive. Skype sessions were not recorded during the project.

10. Conclusion

The idea of this pilot project between Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) and the Language Learning Center of TH Köln was to motivate foreign language students to engage in conversations with native speakers and learn about their academic live and culture. Students valued the opportunity to experience an e-Tandem communication with a native speaker. The majority of the students developed more confidence in their speaking skills and worry less about making mistakes when they speak or write with a native speaker. Students reported that the e-tandem exchange project was a good chance to improve their academic speaking, listening and writing skills in the target language.

Some students were experiencing problems: students did not participate in writing comments on their partners' wiki page. The lack of participation demotivated some students. Participants wanted to receive more input

and feedback from their tandem partner. The reasons of lack of participation on the wiki platform and the low exchange between some students during the e-tandem project were due to different facts that some students were heavily involved in their main programme of study. Therefore they preferred to concentrate their time on their studies and rather than take part in the feedback activities on the wiki.

Although some participants pointed out that the wiki environment was well organized with a good structure but for saving the learning activities it was not so practical. Instead of using the wiki platform many participants used Facebook, e-Mail and WhatsApp to give feedback. Moreover, the Spanish students in Valencia were approaching the end of the exams and this fact had also an influence on the active participation. Students also expressed their desire to have more time preparing their topics in class. O'Dowd (2007) emphasizes that the success of any online exchange partnership is based on its proper integration into the language curriculum.

The ValKöln e-Tandem project shows that an e-Tandem exchange is effective in the language learning process when it is incorporated into a course syllabus and set up the basis for further Spanish-German cooperation and future e-tandem projects in our language courses.

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