



Learning Languages via Telecollaboration: “Variation on the Theme”

Alla Nazarenko¹

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia¹

Abstract

The Teletandem method of learning languages is a kind of telecollaboration of two native speakers, agreed to help each other in reciprocal learning of their mother tongues. In the course of their tandem interaction they constantly rotate their functions of teacher and learner. Their collaboration is autonomous, they are equal and equally interested in learning their partner's language (principles of reciprocity and parity of languages). MSU (Russia) and VCU (USA) adapted the Teletandem method to enhance their students' mandatory foreign language learning (English and Russian, accordingly). Tandem partners communicate via Internet videoservices. A free independent tandem is transformed into an institutional one (i.e. included into the students' curricula as an elective learning activity). The article discusses the results obtained from students' feedback, suggesting possible objective and subjective causes of advantages and limitations of the Teletandem project and also some ideas how to increase the efficacy of the method.

Keywords: *Teletandem, telecollaboration, online learning, distance learning.*

1. Introduction

In Western tradition the notion of Telecollaboration have been known to FLT specialists since the early 1990s and the approach has been widely used, though under various names. O'Dowd [1] cites several variants of this phenomenon and explains this variability by an astonishingly low level of academic community awareness about what is going on in FLT as far as the language exchange method is concerned. Other researchers [2] distinguish two main categories of telecollaboration: t-Tandem (Teletandem) and the Cultura model. It is noteworthy, that telecollaboration developed mostly in the field of linguistic education. However, there are quite a few cases of successful multidisciplinary application of this method (the X-Culture and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)). It is also worth mentioning, that although the variability was quite large, with more or less the same goals and objectives, the telecollaboration method survived in all its forms thanks to the sustainability provided by the preservation of its fundamental didactic principles, as well as the extraordinary flexibility and adaptability to different learning contexts.

2. Methodology

This article considers (from the Russian side) one specific version of "telecollaboration": the Teletandem language exchange project of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies of Moscow State University (FFLAS LMSU) and the World Studies Media Center at Virginia Commonwealth University (WSMC VCU). The project has existed for only a few years, but its specificity has already been determined, interesting results have been obtained, the analysis of which will help work out recommendations for improving this particular cooperation with, perhaps, some more global perspective. It is based on most common form of institutionalized online tandem, in which students from universities around the world are paired and collaborate to learn each other's native languages [3,4]. Institutionalized tandem learning is included one way or another in a university official curriculum. Thus, at VCU the Teletandem project with Russian students is an extension of the learning environment of their compulsory Russian language course. At FFLAS, it is included in the program of an optional special course. In this case, one of the core principles of the Tandem method - its *autonomy* (complete independence from external factors, apart from the agreement of two individuals) is violated. But *autonomy* as an absolute non-interference of an educational institution in the process of language exchange, is fully preserved. In addition to autonomy, *equality / parity of languages* and *reciprocity* [5] are also backbone didactic principles. The first assumes that tandem classes must have two parts, each taking place exclusively in one of the studied languages, which should never be mixed. Thus, learners are encouraged to use their target languages, and difficulties, that might arise in communication, can be removed when they switch to their native language. This, in turn, increases students' motivation and involvement in the learning process. The second one provides for a change in the roles of participants: they act alternately as students (pupils) of their target language and



instructors (teachers) of their native language and speak equal time in their L2. This, according to the researchers [5] increases their self-esteem and puts them in equal conditions. Implementation of the core tandem principles is a powerful motivation factor and must be observed in all types of teletandems.

The functioning structure of the discussed teletandem is simple. At the joint introductory videoconference Russian and American students present themselves, tell (in their L2) about their studies, academic and extracurricular activities. Also Russian-American tandems are formed and a topic for a joint discussion is proposed. At the final videoconference, the tandem's presentations are introduced for general discussing in (students' L2) [6].

During the autonomous online collaboration the tandem partners work on the language material found in the Internet, preparing for a presentation: discuss and clarify cultural peculiarities, write texts in their target language, provide them for commenting on to their native speaker partner, engage in practicing their L2. The contact time should be divided equally between the two languages ("language parity"), so that both partners could practice their target languages, get help from the "teacher"- partners and also act as teachers.

To monitor autonomous collaborative learning of the tandems in the period between introductory and final videoconferences in order to obtain data on its effectiveness, the "Teletandem-Project" site on the Power School Learning platform was created for FFLAS students. The site has pages for announcements of the project leader, for reference materials on the history and theory of the tandem method and personal pages of each tandem for brief regular "reports" on each communication "session". This is meant to help the project leader assess student progress, and collect data for analyzing and improving the project methodology. The report includes the following information:

- date and time of online partners' meeting;
- how the collaboration went on (reading, writing, speaking);
- what material was used to discuss the topic and prepare the presentation;
- what difficulties (of linguistic or sociocultural character) were encountered during communication with your partner;
- what, to your mind, was successful in this «class»;
- what new language phenomena you learned;
- what linguistic difficulties you explained to your partner.

Another source of feedback from the students is a survey to find out their opinion of the project [7]. The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. What did the participation in the project give you (new skills)?
2. What have you learned (cultural characteristics of your partner's country? new linguistic means? other?)?
3. What are you especially pleased with about the project?
4. What was unfortunate about your participation in the project?
5. Possible suggestions for improving the project
6. Other things not covered by the questionnaire.

3. Findings and discussion of outcomes

Analysis of personal "reports" on the website and student reviews showed the following:

1. Participants unanimously appreciated the didactic and cognitive potential of the Teletandem method for the opportunity :
 - to get acquainted with their American counterparts, to learn directly from them about the life of young people in the country of their L2, the culture of the country and the mentality of its people;
 - to learn about their L2 culture not from books presenting information in a generalized way, but from natives of the same social status and age;
 - to improve their target language through direct communication with a native speaker.
2. Of their "achievements" there were mentioned:
 - the opportunity to meet with a representative of a foreign culture, to establish long-term contact;
 - continued communication outside the project and even visiting each other during the holidays;
 - overcoming the language barrier;
 - overcoming their stereotypes about American culture;
 - the opportunity to get to know their own culture better by looking at it "through the eyes of an alien";



- getting their first experience in the role of teacher.
3. New "discoveries" of students:
- ideas about the national character of Americans, obtained from personal communication, are not consistent with those obtained from textbooks on intercultural communication;
 - differences in the organization of certain aspects of social life and cultural phenomena in Russian and American cultures.

At the same time, many critical reviews were received, indicating both objective and subjective difficulties in effectively conducting the Teletandem project. The *objective* difficulties include the following:

- time difference between Moscow and Richmond, USA (7-8 hours);
- different levels of knowledge of target languages: Russian students' proficiency in English is as a rule, higher than that of American students in Russian. So, sometimes the communication (for convenience) took place in English. Russian students were upset by the minimal practice in English they could have;
- heavy workload of American students (due to the specifics of the American education system) prevented them from communicating regularly with their partners;
- the availability of Teletandem learning for a very limited number of FFLAS students despite a large demand: a rather small number of American students (7–10 people) register for their optional Russian course, which determines the number of Russian partners.

Institutionalization of a free tandem may cause difficulties of a *subjective* nature:

- The students do not choose their partners, they are assigned randomly, might have different temperaments and not feel psychologically comfortable in communication;
- lack of psychological compatibility provokes attempts to avoid cooperation, which gives both tandem participants a feeling of frustration.

All this has a detrimental effect on motivation — the true driving force of Teletandem learning.

4. Conclusion

With all the complexity of achieving the optimal organization and functioning, the Teletandem method has a powerful didactic and motivating potential which is worth trying to realize. From the beginnings of the Internet, foreign language educators have seen the great benefit in connecting language learners with their counterparts in other countries in order to give them unique experiences of authentic communication in other languages [1]. In addition, each participant in Teletandem learning gets an experience of teaching his/her mother tongue, which is especially valuable for FFLAS students as future teachers of FL.

Another positive tendency, which is observed in this Teletandem experience, is an increased emphasis on studying the partner's culture, although the initial purpose of the tandem method, as was indicated, is language exchange. In their reviews, all the participants emphasized as an advantage of the method the opportunity to get acquainted with the culture of their L2. Apparently, the statement, that the development of intercultural competence is inseparable from the language development and occurs parallel to it [8], can be extended by adding that the development of linguistic and communicative competences is inseparable from the development of intercultural competence, as through communication with a representative of another culture one cannot but get in touch with it.

Therefore, FFLAS and VCU intend to try to refine and optimize the Teletandem implementation process via:

- carrying out preliminary orientation of students regarding the specifics of the Teletandem method and to tune them in to a creative and initiative approach;
- selecting groups that will match in terms of foreign language proficiency.

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