TEACHING ENGLISH TO MIXED-ABILITY SECONDARY STUDENTS THROUGH E-TANDEM[*]

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Abstract: This paper will point out how language and culture can be taught through collaborative work among mixed-ability British and Spanish secondary students belonging to different social backgrounds. We will illustrate how they deal with several topics using e-tandem and autonomous collaborative work and we will discuss the results of their work comparing both groups. Finally, we will refer to the language and cultural exchange we have established thanks to this e-tandem partnership.

Key Words: Mixed-Ability Students, e-tandem, autonomous language learning.

Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objetivo mostrar un modelo de aprendizaje del inglés basado en el e-tándem aplicado a estudiantes de secundaria con diferente capacidad. Así, indicaremos la forma en que los participantes abordaron diferentes temas utilizando el e-tándem y el trabajo autónomo y cooperativo. Para concluir presentaremos un análisis de los resultados del trabajo de ambos grupos de alumnos. Finalmente, nos referiremos al intercambio lingüístico y cultural que hemos establecido como una parte más de nuestra colaboración.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes de diferente capacidad, e-tándem, aprendizaje autónomo.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will be divided in three parts. I will start with a brief explanation of the main features of **e-tandem** and its close relationship with autonomy, collaborative language learning and the *Common European Framework*. After that, I will refer to the origins of our teaching project based on e-tandem with an emphasis on the characteristics of the Spanish students who have taken part in the programme.

Secondly it will be shown how this e-tandem project has been included in the 4th ESO curriculum, i.e. the way we have evaluated our students' progress and the methodology we have followed. To finish with this part we will present the evaluation of the project by the teachers involved as well as by the students who took part in it.

The last part of this article will be devoted to analysing the way we have organised the exchange we have established due to this e-tandem partnership by explaining how we combine teaching with leisure and cultural activities.

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2. E-TANDEM, AUTONOMY AND THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK

Since the 1980's and having in mind Holec's definition of autonomy (1981: 3) "to take charge of one's own learning," some authors, e.g. Helmut Brammerts, began to develop a different approach to foreign language learning. At the beginning, it was aimed at undergraduate students by means of intensive courses, whose main concern was to make students with different mother tongues work together using different tasks, so that they could improve their linguistic competence in the foreign language. This approach to language learning was, and is still called *face-to-face tandem*. Brammerts defined it as follows:

> When learning a language in tandem, two people with different mother tongues work together in order to learn from each other. In so doing, both set out:
> - to improve their communicative ability in their partner's mother tongue;
> - to get to know their partner better and learn about his or her cultural background, and
> - to benefit from their partner's knowledge and experience […]. (2003: 28-29)

This way of learning a new language is based on two main principles:

> *Reciprocity*
> Language learning in tandem occurs in a learning partnership, to which each partner brings certain skills and abilities which the other partner seeks to acquire and in which both partners support each other in their learning. The mutual interdependence between the two partners demands equal commitment in such a way that both benefit as much as possible from their working together.

> *Autonomy*
> Each of the two partners is responsible for their own learning. Each decides *what* they want to learn *how* and *when*, and what sort of help is needed from their partner. (Brammerts 2003: 29)

These two principles are closely related to the views that Benson (1997), Little (1991, 1996, 1997 & 2000) and Nunan (1999) have on autonomy in foreign language learning, as they understand it as mutual collaboration among students to improve their linguistic competence in the target language. They believe and support that learning is achieved when there is a strong relationship between the structures students learn and their use in connected speech.

On the other hand, tandem language learning has a lot to do with two terms traditionally associated with autonomy, namely: *collaborative language learning* between two people who share the idea of improving their communicative competence in the target language, and *negotiation* to reach an agreement on how they will deal with the tasks they have to face together.

Thanks to this approach, students establish an intercultural communication with their partners as they belong to different societies and countries. Stickler y Lewis proved this by saying:

- it offers communication between individuals who are representatives of different cultures
- these individuals are well-informed about their respective culture(s) of origin and can therefore be used as "cultural informants"
- it offers authentic communication in that the topic and form are not scripted, selected or restricted by a tutor as tandem learners are autonomous in choosing their goals and materials
- it provides an arena in which the interlocutors can negotiate intercultural meaning
- this implies managing relationship between their respective cultural systems (beliefs, meanings, behaviours) […]
- it offers an opportunity to practice social skills with feedback from an L2 representative; it can even be used for the learning and practice of behaviour
- it is a dynamic form of communication, developing on a personal level as well as […] on a factual or learning level. (2003: 97-98)

Nowadays, this idea of intercultural communication is quite remarkable thanks to the *Common European Framework* which understands foreign language learning as an active process in which learners should not only acquire the grammatical and phonological features of an L2, but should also be aware of the way people live and behave inside the target language community. This approach to the target language community is called *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram 1997). Once the learner is able to recognise differences and benefit from this knowledge, they become more critical learners, what Benson (1996, 1997 & 2002) calls "social character of autonomous learning" and Pennycook (1997: 47-49) defines as "a pedagogy of cultural alternatives".

In the 1990's with the development of ICT, e-tandem began to spread mainly in Europe. It is based on the same principles as face to face tandem (autonomy and reciprocity). E-mail becomes the means by which partners get in touch and exchange views and information. E-mail is the authentic text, such as Little defines it: "[…] the record of any communicative act in […] writing that was originally performed in fulfilment of some personal or social function, and not in order to provide illustrative material for language teaching.[…] authentic texts have the capacity to draw language learners into the communicative world of the target language community [...]" (1997: 225).

By means of their partners' e-mail, students come closer to the language and culture of the target language community and this fact could make them aware of the similarities and differences between the native and the target language, so they become reflective learners and more autonomous students.

E-tandem is based on an asynchronous communication:

> [...] Communication by e-mail […] is asynchronous: in other words the writing and the receipt of messages are separated in time. […] Any reactions to questions and misunderstandings are deferred. On the other hand, messages remain accessible and can be re-read as often as required and used in different ways. [....] (Brammerts & Calvert 2003: 49)

Thanks to this asynchronous communication, students can analyse the content of the message they receive and they can make any comments they consider relevant to the tandem partner, so that their learning can be more effective.

Besides, e-tandem is a key benefit for students who use it because thanks to it, they can establish a close relationship with students of their same age, who at the same time belong to the target language community and they can talk about topics they both consider interesting. This communicative context tends to increase students' motivation in the foreign language as they can check that they are capable of using the target language to communicate with native speakers, and they have more freedom to deal with the topics so they become more self-confident and autonomous learners and they try to progress in their learning process. What's more, Gläsmann and Calvert (2001: 6), after having analysed the work of students belonging to different countries who used e-tandem as the main communication system under the Lingua D Funding Project, support that learners tend to answer quite positively to ICT due to the novelty of writing e-mails as it means a change from traditional lessons and this fact makes students feel more active and motivated to foreign language learning.

If we go back to the reciprocity principle, e-tandem helps equality between both tandem partners because both of them must help each other in order to achieve the learning goals they have previously set. To achieve these goals tandem partners should use their native and target language in each message, the ideal situation is when they write half of the message in each language. Using both languages also implies that e-tandem has a lot to do with *learning from the partners' model*, which means:

> Learning from a partner's clarifications, explanations and information [...]
> Learning forms of utterance and behaviour from a partner [...]
> Learning from the partner's corrections [...]
> Learning through co-operation with their partner [...]
> The required level of knowledge and support [...]. (Brammerts & Calvert 2003: 50-54)

By *Learning from a partner's clarifications, explanations and information*, we understand that learning is also achieved by *dialogue* (Brammerts & Calvert 2003: 52). The dialogue will benefit from the fact that both learners are interested in the language and culture of their partners, have previous knowledge of it and can learn from comparisons.

Learning forms of utterance and behaviour from a partner "involves its productive use by learners" (Brammerts & Calvert 2003: 52). This process has a lot in common with intercultural learning because you, not only need to be grammatically and phonologically competent in the L2, but you also need to know the context and the cultural connotations that may be implied in the words you say or write.

Learning from the partner's corrections implies, as Brammerts and Calvert point out, that "they must state clearly what should be corrected in what way and at what time, and if necessary, give hints to their partner" (53).

Learning through co-operation with their partner implies self-reflection and mutual collaboration between tandem partners. On the one hand, self-reflection implies reflection upon their own native language, mainly when learners have to answer their partners' questions or doubts, and upon the target language, whenever they have to use it as a means of communication. These two aspects are closely linked to autonomy and autonomous language learning as learners need to reflect on their learning process as a previous step to becoming autonomous language learners. Little shares this view when he states:

> Tandem language learning is rooted in language use. Yet, in the role of the native speaker, tandem learners are obliged to provide their partners with feedback. This obligation stimulates reflection on both mother tongue and target language, and helps to ensure that the social and metacognitive dimensions of learner autonomy interact with one another in a mutually reinforcing way. At all levels of proficiency, foreign language learners are autonomous to the extent that they manage their own learning and are self-reliant in target language use. It is in the very nature of tandem partnerships that they facilitate the development of these capacities. (Brammerts & Calvert 2003: 45)

As regards *the required level of knowledge and support* (54), tandem partners should be able to understand simple utterances from their partner and be able to produce writing texts with the help of support materials. In addition they should employ useful learning strategies and techniques to avoid possible breakdowns in communication.

However, as we will prove with our students' work, most learners, especially teenagers, are not ready to perform all these activities on their own, they need some extra help. This need is closely related with the concept of autonomy in language learning and the new role, we as teachers have in the foreign language classroom. The teacher is no more the only source of knowledge but a facilitator of language learning and its transmission: "[…] teacher as facilitator of learning, as a helper whose role is to facilitate learning […]" (Voller 1997: 100) and as a counsellor "[…] teacher as counsellor to whom learners turn from consultation and guidance […]" (103). Once students have difficulties in their learning progress they will come to their teachers in need of advice and counselling. Teachers do not have all the power in the classroom situation (*teacher-centred classroom*) but they progressively give it to their pupils through collaboration and negotiation (*learner-centred classroom*).

By using this methodology, we aim for our pupils to achieve productive learning through deep reflection upon their own experiences as language learners. To sum up everything we have referred to in the first part of this paper, we could maintain that e-tandem is closely linked to Vygotsky's constructivism (1978) and it is also related to Freire's critical theory (1974) which emphasizes the importance of a critical view of language learning in its social and cultural background. Benson proves this hypothesis when he says:

> […] individuals construct their own unique personal meaning systems on the basis of the same personal objective reality. Learning [...] consists in the reorganization and restructuring of experience rather than the gradual internalization or discovery of predetermined knowledge. (Benson 1997: 21)

> [...] Autonomy can be promoted at different points on the scale of political engagement. These would include:
> 1. authentic interaction with the target language and its users.
> 2. collaborative group work and collective decision making.
> 3. participation in open-ended learning tasks.
> 4. learning about the target language and its social contexts of use. [...]
> 5. discussion and criticism of target language norms. (33)

All these reflections are present in e-tandem through the interaction and cooperation between tandem partners whenever they have to develop a particular task. They always have the chance to adapt the task to their own needs and they can learn the target language in its social context thanks to the help of their tandem partner, so they will be able to start and develop an intercultural communicative competence.

Having all these aspects in mind, we are going to analyse the Project we have been running together with Lancing College (West Sussex) since October 2001.

3. DULCE NOMBRE DE JESÚS/ LANCING COLLEGE E-TANDEM PARTNERSHIP

We started our e-tandem partnership with Lancing College during the school year 2001-2002, thanks to a Proyecto de Innovación Pedagógica partly supported by Consejería de Educación y Ciencia del Principado de Asturias. At first, we decided to apply the Project to our Programa de Diversificación Curricular students and particularly to the group belonging to 4th E.S.O. These groups are formed by students who have learning difficulties and/or a lack of motivation towards formal learning and particularly towards foreign language learning. Using this methodology, we intended to motivate our pupils so that they felt the need to get in touch with a foreign culture and discover the importance of foreign language learning for any jobs they would choose in the near future.

In order to find a partner school we got in touch with the Tandem Server at the Ruhr Universität in Bochum (tandem@slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de). We had to fill in a form about the age of our students, their English proficiency and some features about our school. After that, they paired us with Lancing College a private boarding school located in West Sussex (England).

Before our students began with the e-tandem link, the teachers who are responsible for the Project tried to organise and coordinate the topics and the tasks our students were supposed to develop during the e-tandem exchange.

One of the first agreements was to organise the work ourselves without advising or counselling by the Tandem Server, as we thought this would make things easier and quicker for our students. We would be the counsellors for our pupils in case of doubt and when communication broke down, we would support them with tricks and techniques to solve possible misunderstandings. Besides, we tried to pair the pupils according to their proficiency in the target language so that they could help each other in case of difficulty.

We started our partnership with fourteen students (7 from Lancing and 7 from our school). During the school year 2002-2003, we doubled the number of participants as we included our 3rd Diversificación Curricular students, so we had twenty-eight in all (14 Spanish and 14 English). Last year, we thought it would be a good idea to compare mixed ability Spanish students, i.e. those belonging to Diversificación Curricular and others who do not have noticeable learning difficulties, and check if they could achieve their learning goals even though their learning abilities were different. That is why we lengthened the number of students for the second time up to fifty participants (25 Spanish students all of them from 4th E.S.O., eight of whom belonged to Diversificación, and 25 English)[1]. This

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[1] It is important to notice that all British participants do not have learning difficulties.

school year we are working with one hundred and fifty-eight pupils (seventy-nine belonging to each school, and seven of whom belong to Diversificación Curricular).

3.1. Goals

The main purpose we established once we started with this e-tandem partnership was to try and make our students aware of a different culture and to make them realise that learning a language is closely related to being aware of the cultural aspects that influence on their people. To attain this goal, participants, as it was mentioned in the first part of this paper, should be able to analyse and answer properly to their partner's e-mails, so that they can acquire knowledge about form and meaning in the target language. The idea is to benefit from the partner's messages, paying special attention to those aspects they are most interested in. Thus, students should study carefully the message they receive and the mails they write and send, avoiding, as much as possible, typing misprints or grammatical mistakes which can make understanding more difficult for the partner.

Secondly, both pupils should learn colloquial language usage through collaboration and cooperation between the members of the pair. Each of the members of the pairing should advise and help their partner when to use a colloquial expression and how to use it.

In order to attain all the goals mentioned above, communication should be adapted to the knowledge and language command of each of the members. It is communication that will show and measure learners' progress and acquisition of the target language.

Finally, participants should check and correct their mistakes, so that they can improve their foreign language command and they could avoid repeating the same mistakes all the time. They should correct their mistakes by negotiating what, when and how to correct them and corrections should be done with a positive intention i.e. giving contexts and explanations to help partners identify their mistakes and avoid making them in future exchanges.

3.2. Tasks

We organize tasks according to both coordinators' ideas, paying close attention to our students' needs and interests. We sometimes ask them about topics they would like to talk about. We intend to create a positive and supporting atmosphere, so that our students' motivation for the task will be as high as possible. Besides, we have taken into account several suggestions about e-tandem tasks that are available at the Tandem Server website (http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de) and also at a useful Tandem Guide by Roza, *et al.* (2001).

Our e-tandem partnership is developed from the end of September to the beginning of May for one hour a week in the IT room. As far as the Spanish students are concerned, we devote, at least, one hour to explain what the e-tandem partnership is about and what students are expected to achieve using this methodology. We try to give them some tips to make their communication easier and as fluent as possible. We also insist on the importance of correcting mistakes by negotiating with the partner how to correct, using native and

target language in all messages and paying close attention when writing in the native language to avoid typing misprints. Coordinators are in charge of forwarding their students' e-mails, they do not correct mistakes they just check that students refer to the task and not to any other aspects which are not related to it and to be sure that all students get the messages from their partners. Once they receive the messages they pass them on to the students.

We always start with an introductory e-mail and we ask students to talk about themselves (personal information, hobbies, etc). The aim of this activity is learn a bit more about the tandem partner and show if they have the same or different interests.

Once our pupils know a bit more about each other, we start with the activities related to culture. We have done quite a few during these four years, but I will concentrate on two of them which they found quite interesting.

First of all, I will refer to school. This has become the most interesting thanks to the exchange because all the participants want to know more about their partners' school, especially those who take part in the exchange. We usually do this task a month before we have the first leg of the exchange. Once we have analysed our students' productions, we have not noticed remarkable differences between Diversificación Curricular students and those belonging to an ordinary group, so e-tandem seems to be a successful a tool to be used in the foreign language classroom.

Finally, I will refer to colloquialisms, a topic we introduced last year as we could note some differences between Diversificación students and those belonging to an ordinary school classroom. Diversificación students write the whole message in Spanish and explain some colloquialisms quite well, but they break the reciprocity principle, while those who do not have learning difficulties use both languages showing a good command of the situation.

3.3. Evaluation

3.3.1. Teachers' evaluation

We measure and evaluate the learning progress of our students continuously as they do their tasks under the guidance and support of their teachers. At the end of each term Spanish students should write a paragraph related to the topics they have dealt with during the term, e.g.: Talk about festivals in England. The mark they obtain is the one they have for their writing paper, which constitutes 20% of the final mark of the term.

3.3.2. Students' evaluation

We think that it is also important to take into account the idea students have about this e-tandem partnership, that is why at the end of each school year they should fill in a questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided in two parts. Firstly, we ask them their feelings about the experience. Most of them give a positive answer to all the questions and they acknowledge that e-tandem is a better teaching methodology than the conventional

classroom. They support their views by saying that it is better to learn with somebody your own age who is a native speaker and lives in the place where the target language is spoken. Besides, they find it motivating having new messages at least twice a month and some of them suggest the introduction of direct communication through chats or MSN. They all believe that their English has improved and they feel more confident when they have to write a text using the target language. However, they do not think that e-tandem has made them better computer users. Finally, when asked to give a mark to the e-tandem experience most of them evaluated with a 4 or 5 out of 5, which means that they were happy with this methodology.

In the second part of the questionnaire, they answer questions about the topics discussed during the year and also about the cultural aspects implied in the e-tandem partnership. All Spanish students can name, at least, three cultural aspects they have learnt and they can remember something related to their partners. Besides, they can write about the topics they have worked on during the year.

3.4. Conclusion

Once we have analysed the work our students have done during these four years, we can say that e-tandem is a useful tool in foreign language learning, as it favours and facilitates the development of autonomy and control over language learning. Learners tend to be more autonomous, as well as having the ability to reflect on their own learning, as we could see when revising the diaries they have written during the school year. On the other hand, thanks to our Project, we can say that e-tandem is a useful methodology to be applied with mixed-ability groups as there are no remarkable differences in performing between Diversificación Curricular students and students without learning difficulties.

Most of the learners have improved their writing skills in the target language and they are less afraid of making mistakes, as they have noticed that their e-tandem partners also make mistakes when they use the target language. Nowadays, they see making mistakes as a part of language learning, not as something bad and annoying. However, something else should be done about the treatment of mistakes as they tend to avoid correcting or even mentioning mistakes as far as the project goes on. This fact makes their speech difficult to understand at certain times. We, as teachers, have to look for mechanisms and techniques that would make our students improve error correction.

All in all, we can say that thanks to e-tandem, our students are, on the one hand becoming more autonomous, as they themselves acknowledge and on the other hand, they show a greater interest and motivation towards the foreign language. That is why we decided to keep on with our partnership and we started with an exchange three years ago.

4. DULCE NOMBRE DE JESÚS/ LANCING COLLEGE LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE.

The main idea of our exchange was that the students who participated in the e-tandem partnership could meet each other and spend some time in direct contact with the foreign

language culture. We started with fourteen students (7 English and seven Spanish), 24 took part last year and this year we had 30. Due to organizational reasons in both schools, we decided that the British would visit our school just before Easter and we would travel to England on the second half of April and we established that the exchange would be a week long.

Students would host their tandem partners either in their homes or at the boarding houses (as most of *Lancing College* students are boarders). The goal is that students can notice how people live and behave in Spain and in England, so that they can establish similarities and differences between both countries. For this reason we have tried to combine teaching with leisure and cultural activities. As far as teaching activities are concerned, students should *shadow* their exchange partner, i.e. they should attend the same lessons and do the same activities their partners do. In Spain, students attend classes with their partners and they also have lessons to improve their target language competence.

Culture is also present in our exchange as we usually organize two excursions. Last year we visited the Cider Museum where they learnt how cider, one of the most typical products in Asturias, is produced and the Mining Museum as mines were an important financial resource in Asturias during the 20th century. We obviously visit the most remarkable monuments in Oviedo (the town hall, the cathedral, Campoamor Theatre, the pre-Romanesque churches and the old part of the city) and we also take them to some typical villages on the coast e.g. Llanes, Gijón or Luanco. We always finish the Spanish leg of the exchange with an *espicha* where they can eat and drink the most typical products in our region.

When in England, we follow the same pattern and our students attend classes and practice sports with their English partners. We also do two excursions and we visit the most remarkable building in Brighton (The Royal Pavilion). For the second trip we visit a typical British town close to the school (Chichester). We always close the exchange with a typical English meal.

At the end of the exchange Spanish students fill in a questionnaire about the experience. All the Spanish students think that it was very useful as far as language improvement is concerned as well as a personal experience because they could develop a stronger relationship with their English partners. All of them emphasized the overwhelming attention they received from their exchange partners when in Lancing. They suggest lengthening the exchange for a couple of days. Finally, they give special value to the free time they could share with their partners once they finish the lessons.

According to their view, the activities were well planned and organised and they want to mention that teachers were also very kind and understanding with them. All of them would take part in future exchanges if possible.

In conclusion, the experience has been successful and that is why we are encouraged to keep on with it in following years.

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