Connecting Cultures, Languages, and Students through Teletandem:

Building Bridges to Enhance Learning and Understanding

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Abstract

This paper reports on the design, implementation, and outcomes of a Teletandem language

exchange program jointly delivered by the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies at

Lomonosov Moscow State University (FFLAS MSU) and the World Studies Media Center at

Virginia Commonwealth University (WSMC VCU) between 2015 and 2016. The study was

primarily focused on the interactions between two groups of students that collaborated routinely

during the course of the 2015-16 academic year. The sessions took place in the classroom, outside

of class, and in the language resource centers (LRC) of both universities. The MSU group was made

up of 10 English learners from Russia. The VCU group had 10 Russian learners from the United

States. The courses were appropriate for students with intermediate-level skills, although the actual

competencies in the target language (L2) varied among students. The 7-hour time zone difference

between Moscow and Richmond prompted the project leaders to customize the Teletandem design

and method of delivery. Practitioners and researchers at both sites drew on a multidisciplinary range

of theory, methodology and practice to coordinate student-to-student, group-to-group, and

class-to-class online student interactions. The interactions were conversational and collaborative

and students were given tasks to complete in pairs. Time was divided equally and all sessions were

mutually beneficial. Both groups were asked to document and share their work in an online

wiki-style portfolio. At VCU, most of the activities were carried out in a language lab equipped

with a Sanako™ Lab 1200 system. Use of technology proved to be helpful in the management of

the tandem environment and in the assessment of students and the project as a whole. The findings

of the study showed that Teletandem is an engaging, high-impact learning activity that provides

opportunities for meaningful immersion and practice in the L2. Findings also showed that

Teletandem can be enhanced with use of targeted learning interventions and with an enhanced instructor's role. The sessions were analyzed through collective observations of the program, evaluation of the data, and intensive reflection and interpretation of the action research. Based on the observations of Teletandem implementation, delivery, and outcomes, there appears to be immense value in pairing domestic and foreign students in classroom settings in order to share ideas, work together, and foster better linguistic and cultural understanding in foreign language courses. As a learning activity, Teletandem may have value in other subject areas as well.

Introduction

The activities for this tandem language exchange project were planned and delivered in alignment with the core principles of Teletandem, autonomy and reciprocity (Vasallo & Telles, 2006). The instructional objective was to provide students with opportunities for authentic immersion and practice in the L2 through a series of online face-to-face interactions.. Each session was between 50 and 60 minutes in length and all sessions were scheduled and prepared cooperatively by the participating instructors and staff members from FFLAS MSU and VCU. The sessions were delivered in two parts: one Russian-speaking and one English-speaking. The time devoted to each language was divided equally. The paired learners collaborated as language partners in a synchronous face-to-face environment that was conducive to learning and sharing. Some of the interactions were carried out in a group-to-group configuration through a single Skype call, and others were multi-point one-on-one pairings in a language lab environment. The primary goal on both sides was to observe how well if at all Teletandem induced the 5 C's—Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, Communities—as stipulated by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in the '*Standards of Foreign Language Learning, Preparing for the 21st Century, Executive Summary*' (1996).

The study explored the Teletandem activities in depth from the perspectives of both groups, and sought ways to refine and optimize the design and implementation processes. There is currently no formal Teletandem training for teachers, but the practice and research of telecollaboration as a learning activity has significantly evolved in recent years (O'Dowd, 2015). Educational researchers and practitioners have experimented with various telecollaborative contexts, designs, setups, purposes, and ideas to enhance impact on learning. The literature suggests, however, that

Teletandem, as a learning activity, can be very challenging to implement due to the many factors in play; technical, social, instructional, and even political. In most schools, there is no support structure in place to facilitate the implementation of Teletandem.

Helm (2015) believes that telecollaboration is a learning activity that has evolved and continues to evolve with new models and practices in theory, scope, learning outcomes, perceived value, and shared challenges. Telles (2015) suggests that online intercultural contact opens innovative possibilities for foreign language teachers to promote intercultural contact with all that is different. Telles underscores that Teletandem is a human learning activity, and is, therefore, as unique and transcultural as the human participants themselves. The characteristics, needs, and goals of the human participants are as different as the languages, cultures, and schools involved. Therefore, the one-size-fits-all model is rarely a suitable approach to Teletandem design and implementation.

<div align="center">Methodology</div>

At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU)

The project leaders at VCU relied on action research and ethnography to observe and assess the use of Teletandem and to measure its impact on student learning. The VCU instructor, the WSMC staff, and the FFLAS MSU instructor worked together to develop a systematic way of observing and describing events, behaviors, and artifacts produced in the Teletandem learning environment. These observations enabled the instructors to identify the factors that led to the successes and failures of Teletandem at the implementation level. The instructors developed a structure and workflow for student-to-student, group-to-group, and class-to-class configurations.

The VCU and MSU teams worked together in all phases of the project: observing student perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, and measuring the impact on language learning. The research goal was to explore Teletandem in search of new information that could shed light on ways to improve it as a learning activity. The strategies used to record and analyze the data included the archiving of videotaped sessions, screen captures, audio recordings, and transcripts of Teletandem sessions. All participants' identities were protected and evaluation data was not published or linked to individual learners.

The VCU portion of the project was manifested through the curriculum of an optional intermediate-level Russian language course titled *RUSS 311 Conversation and Media.* Pre-program meetings for the instructors and LRC staff helped both VCU and MSU teams to stay focused and connected. Learning time devoted to Russian and English was divided equally. During the preparation period, students worked in pairs to develop a presentation on Russian and American magazines and newspapers. They were asked to correct each other's use of the L2 and report the mistakes most frequently made by their partners. This prompted students to comparatively analyze Russian and English. Both groups of students were given details on how to prepare the final presentation and research the selected topic. At VCU, Sanako™ Lab 1200 was used to explore the various possibilities for managing paired interactions in a multi-point, group-to-group computer lab setting. The Sanako tools helped to optimize the delivery, management, and monitoring of sessions.

At Lomonosov Moscow State University (FFLAS MSU)

To make the Teletandem course more visible and tangible, The Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies of Moscow State University (FFLAS MSU) created a site on

wikispaces.com called Teletandem Project. In the site menu, the following sections were listed: Notice Board—to make announcements for participants; About the Project—a description of the project and the principles of Teletandem learning; How Learning is Organized—information about the structure (videoconferences and tandems' links) and the content of the project (topics for discussions and presentations); Important Dates—dates of general videoconferences; Learning Materials—references to theoretical articles about Teletandem learning, links to sites with information which can be used for preparing presentations on the agreed themes; List of Participants. Weblogs were made to document each tandem. This helped the instructors to observe the autonomous work of tandems, assess student progress, and collect data for analyzing and improving the project methodology.

The project started with the first general meeting of all participants via single-;point group-to-group videoconferencing session. Students briefly introduced themselves in the L2 (Russians in English, Americans in Russian) and provided background information about their education, hobbies, and work. The tandem partnerships were formed and the themes for discussions were selected. Students were required to create a tangible final product of their learning that could be shared, reviewed, and discussed. There were two videoconferences summarizing discussions of themes. The main theme was national/ethnic holidays and festivals. In addition, each tandem session had a sub-theme dealing with traditional and regional customs and seasonal festivities. During the final videoconference, students commented on each presentation and compared cultural peculiarities of the presented phenomena, and they asked questions.

During autonomously initiated contact via Skype, students worked in tandem to aide each other with the resources they selected for their presentation. They discussed and clarified some

extra linguistic details and specific cultural points of phenomena under study, and they prepared text descriptions for slides in their target language, exchanging them with their partners for constructive comments, suggestions, and corrections if necessary. It is important to consider that students used the L2 to collaborate, negotiate, and communicate about presentations. They quickly adjusted to the workflow of online collaboration. In general, both groups were motivated to work together and complete tasks jointly. Students had no problem asking questions when necessary, and getting immediate answers concerning the usage of the language with all its difficulties and nuances. To give an equal chance to both partners, the contact time was divided in half, one portion in English and an equal portion in Russian. This way, both tandem partners could practice their target language and get valuable guidance from their new peer student partners.

The report about every such contact was uploaded on a corresponding page for each tandem pair on the Wiki site. This allowed the teacher to "see" the whole process without interfering (the autonomy principle) and allowed the students to return to the content (if necessary) to review some complicated cases of language usage and to have a portfolio for tracking the progress of their learning.

On completion of the project an evaluation survey was disseminated to obtain feedback from the students to find out their attitudes and perspectives about the teletandem method of learning (Moore, 2002). The students were unanimous in their assessment of the method as an effective, user-friendly, and student-centered approach to language learning. They saw the opportunity not only to improve their language and communicative skills but to acquire a vital experience of cross-cultural communication and connect with a peer in a foreign country.

The action research methods of this project gave instructors an observational lens to look at telecollaboration more closely and to better understand its impact on language learning. The sessions were generally referred to as "Teletandem". The interactions between students were planned in a virtual, autonomous, and collaborative context that primarily used Skype™ to pair students in different countries for synchronous face-to-face language exchanges (Vasallo & Telles, 2006).

Findings and Analysis / Discussion of Outcomes

The primary value of Teletandem was that it created real opportunities for authentic immersion and meaningful transcultural experiences. Such a scenario would appear to be most beneficial to learners of foreign languages. The ubiquitous nature of Skype™ and online communication has made telecollaboration a very realistic option for today's 21st century foreign language classrooms. Still, one must consider the challenges that inherently come with Teletandem implementation, particularly with multi-point connections in large classes. There are numerous technical and administrative tasks that must be dealt with and carried out in order to achieve an optimal result. Moreover, there are vast disparities between the two culturally and linguistically different societies that cannot be ignored (Telles, 2015). Partner schools in different time zones will be one of the first and most cumbersome challenges to await the novice instructor. The 7-hour time zone difference between Moscow and Richmond prompted the leaders of this project to deviate from traditional delivery methods. Because of the time-zone difference, the instructors explored new possibilities by creating a customized Teletandem scenario and work-flow. It was through this

new workflow, that the project was able to use Wiki sites and Sanako tools to build on traditional models of Teletandem.

A customized project plan also made it easier to track student progress and gain their appreciation of the opportunity to work with a peer abroad to improve their own skills. In fact, a "trial and error" approach and constant tweaking of the Teletandem apparatus led instructors to cultivate a deeper understanding of the contexts, processes, and tools needed to design task-based telecollaborative activities without impeding the free-flowing conversational nature of Teletandem.

The most compelling observation made by instructors was that Teletandem seemed to address all of the main themes from ACTFL's (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century,"* also known as "The Five Cs"—Communication, Culture, Connections, Community, and Comparisons (1996).

Teletandem fostered language production. Students communicated the language naturally in real life situations. It facilitated collaboration by bringing students from different countries together to share language and culture. It provided an authentic immersion experience in a safe environment where students did not feel inhibited, mainly because their partners had similar skill levels and learning goals. Students experienced the nuances of their partner's culture in every interaction because Teletandem was real and non-threatening. This helped domestic students to develop a more global perspective. It also helped them to understand how their partner's point of view, way of life, and place in the world were different. They were able to connect with their own cultural identity by having a real and meaningful point of reference with which they could compare their own language and culture.

Teletandem facilitated connections. It brought students together from different countries to share in one another's language learning journeys. Teletandem helped build communities. With the advent of social media, teachers and students can easily build new transcultural communities online, where students with similar interests and career goals can tap into new global networks of interconnected learning.

Teletandem fostered comparisons. Students naturally compared and contrasted languages and cultures (Telles, 2015). Students discovered patterns and analyzed the similarities and differences between languages and cultures, resulting in enhanced understanding of both languages. Telles (2015) referred to this discourse as performativity—a dialogue characterized by differences of identity, which can impact learners' social contexts through the repetition of social practices. The intercultural contact created by Teletandem provided students with opportunities to notice and to express these differences.

The Teletandem conversation encompassed rich social interaction in a transcultural setting where both languages and cultures co-existed equally. Furthermore, the conversations allowed students to explore the target culture by asking direct questions about it. They applied the grammar structures and verb tenses learned in class. Teletandem broke down cultural and linguistic barriers and provided a less threatening, more comfortable and enjoyable learning environment.

<div align="center">Summary of Findings - Action Research Observations</div>

Online collaborative learning exchange projects such as Teletandem appear to be an effective and inexpensive way to invigorate the foreign language curriculum. Teletandem speeds up the path to fluency and connects students with real people in other parts of the world. It is generally

perceived by language instructors as a viable option for supplemental instruction. Teletandem may also be a way to bring the internationalization movement into the classroom. When a Teletandem partnership with a foreign school is established, new lines of bilingual communication, cooperation, and virtual co-existence can be developed. This idea is in line with 21st-century models for integrating social media in the curriculum, creating engaging high impact activities, connecting students with online learning communities, and optimizing valuable classroom time with flipped-classroom concepts. Teletandem impacted student learning in the following ways:

- Motivated students to devote more time and energy to practicing the L2;

- Inspired confidence in the L2;

- Fostered relationships between domestic and foreign students and meaningful interactivity;

- Provided effective means for building cultural and communicative competencies;

- Built new online learning communities through connections with peers abroad;

- Provided students with real experiences to make cultural and linguistic comparisons.

The following actions were noted as being critical factors in the implementation of Teletandem:

- Performed a rigorous partner search;

- Organized a pre-teletandem orientation;

- Planned a site visit to partner school;

- Devised a custom plan to meet needs, goals, and expectations of both schools;

- Addressed the differences in time zones and academic calendars before implementation;

- Developed new strategies to strengthen cooperation;

- Tested computers, software, bandwidth, Skype accounts, and connectivity in advance;

- Held a pre-Teletandem orientation for students;

- Used lab management software that converted the teacher's computer into a master console capable of monitoring sessions in real time and in the form of thumbnails. This functionality gave the VCU instructor the ability to remote into any given student computer to join a tandem session or to assess a live interaction;

- Assessed and documented program activities and outcomes frequently.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that optimal Teletandem implementation depends on a series of processes that include a partner search, project set-up tasks, and recurring cooperation with the partner school combined with frequent assessment of Teletandem programming, design, implementation, and outcomes. There are many contexts in which Teletandem can be realized. It can have different forms, configurations, goals, challenges, and requirements. When a novice teacher uses a one-size-fits-all model for teletandem, the outcomes may not meet their needs or expectations. Moreover, an unprepared teacher may be overwhelmed with the vast amount of details that must be addressed when coordinating telecollaborative activities for the classroom (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009).

Well-planned telecollaborative activities can bring about high-quality learning experiences focused on inquiry, discovery, and sharing in a global environment. Poorly planned projects can result in missed sessions, connectivity problems, and mismatched pairings. Our action research objective was to glean new insight about the design and implementation of Teletandem learning activities. The FFLAS MSU and VCU instructors sought to learn as much as possible about Teletandem delivery and identify areas worthy of further research and practice. Teletandem is more

effective when it is managed in a classroom setting with an instructor present and less effective when students are asked to do Teletandem on their own. Findings also showed that the quality of the teletandem experience was corollary to the level of cooperation between the instructors at the two sites. The use of Sanako and the Wiki sites helped instructors better manage programming and technical issues that emerged, sometimes unexpectedly, as the program progressed. The shape and context of Teletandem is always evolving.

Teletandem appears to be be well suited for the instructional goals and strategies of the flipped classroom model. The ubiquitous nature of mobile and handheld devices further expand the realm of possibilities for moving beyond textbook learning toward a more engaging and enjoyable language learning experience with successful outcomes. Teletandem enables learners to develop linguistic and cultural competencies by sharing language and making connections with real native speakers. It is a mutually beneficial exchange that can lead to the building of new international learning communities. Teletandem presents an innovative and efficient way of achieving what foreign language education has always sought to achieve—to build cultural and linguistic competencies in the target language for use in real meaningful human interactions.

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