Promoting Student-Centred Language Learning Via eTandem
The Case of Mexican and South African Students

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Abstract   eTandem is a type of virtual and synchronic way of learning an additional language in collaboration with peers who speak the target language and who are also learning their counterparts' language. eTandem is usually incorporated as part of the activities that students have to complete whilst learning a language. However, these virtual activities are seldom part of the curriculum or the course syllabus and they are hardly ever part of the assessment process. The aim of this paper is to highlight the benefits of learning a language as the means of promoting a student-centred learning approach through autonomy, peer and self-assessment, self-reflection, feedback and by using the language to understand cultural and intercultural differences. The study was carried out via eTandem activities between Mexican students learning English and South African students learning Spanish. The results suggest that virtual exchanges whilst learning a language foster a wide ray of social, cultural and pragmatic means of learning a language in context. This paper has implications in promoting the inclusion of blended language learning in higher education settings.

Keywords   eTandem. Student-centred learning. Language learning. Telecollaboration. Intercultural encounters.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Method. – 2.1 Participants. – 2.2 Instructors. – 2.3 Platform. – 2.4 Dynamics. – 3 Results. – 3.1 Strategic Competence. – 3.2 Confidence Enhancement. – 3.3 Monitoring. – 3.4 Feedback. – 3.5 Cultural and Intercultural Awareness. – 3.6 Learning Strategies. – 4 Discussion, Limitations and New Directions. – 4.1 Limitations. – 4.2 New Directions. – 5 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

eTandem is a telecollaboration practice for language learning in which two or more speakers of different languages meet on a virtual platform or app (e.g. Facebook, Skype, Whatsapp, Zoom, Hangout) to communicate and to practice the target language they are learning (Cavalari, Aranha 2016; Dooly 2017). This target language can be the first or second language of the peer, and the participants can be located or not in a place where the target language is spoken (Kohn, Hoffstaedter 2017). This type of language exchange practice is quite flexible and it can also be implemented institutionally to promote cyber language exchange, culture and intercultural exchange.[1] In such cases, the interaction is usually mediated by a language coordinator and IT support.

At the institutional level, eTandem finds its roots in self-access language centres created in the 1980s to promote language learning through conversation clubs and physical tandem collaboration between language learners. The idea was to foster autonomy whilst learning a language (Cziko 2004; Lewis 2003; Schwienhorst 2008). Autonomy was then achieved, according to Holec (1981), by setting objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods, monitoring the learning process and evaluating outcomes. These basic concepts still apply, but with e-tandem now there is another important component: a peer to interact with (Lee 2011). So reciprocity, peer-assessment, mutual support, error correction and modelling are also part of the interaction and autonomous learning process.[2] With the advent and growth of information and communications technology (ICT), the tandem model has been upgraded to an eTandem version, which allows language learners to interact with peers from all over the world (Leone, Telles 2016; O'Dowd 2007). This activity goes beyond the classroom and it fosters an intercultural approach with a more global perspective of learning a language by which students interact with people with a different idiosyncrasy and view of the world.[3]

There are many benefits in implementing these activities in the classroom because eTandem fosters a comprehensive student-centred learning framework in a wide range of areas. Firstly, these activities follow the principles of autonomy, reciprocity and separation of languages (Schwienhorst 2008; Salomão 2015). That means that students are engaged in their own learning process, they collaborate with their peers by providing support while they try to communi-

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1 Cappellini 2016; Lee 2009; Lewis, O'Dowd 2016; Salomão 2015; Schenker 2012.
2 Akiyama 2017; Vinagre, Muñoz 2011; Ware, O'Dowd 2008; Ware, Pérez-Cañado 2007.
3 Nissen 2016; Sauro 2013; Tellez, Vassallo 2006; Ware, Kramsch 2005.

cate in the target language (Akiyama 2017; Cunningham, Fägersten, Holmsten 2010), and they also split each session in both languages so that both parties can benefit from learning the target language (Cavalari, Aranha 2019). In addition, eTandem allows space for incorporating various assessment practices such as self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment through mediation (dynamic assessment).

eTandem also facilitates a more meaningful pedagogical setting by including integrated tasks that promote cultural learning, intercultural exchange and social interaction with peers of similar age (Akiyama 2017; Ramos 2013; Salomão 2015). All the above result in more engaging learning process of the target language (Tian, Wang 2010).

The core component of a telecollaboration activity is to promote an exchange that allow learners to develop their awareness of other cultures (Jauregi et al. 2012). These activities are authentic for students because they do not only engage in 'the real use of the language', but may also bond whilst connecting with someone who is from another culture and who is also the user of the target language (Belz 2003; Kötter 2003; O'Dowd 2005; Yang, Youngjoo 2017). By engaging in this type of activities, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning a language might also increase (Jauregi et al. 2012). The desire to travel, to meet people or simply to interact with someone with a different culture may also increase (Cappellini 2016; Sauro 2013; Thorne, Black 2011).

Because the tasks are meaningful and similar to real-life activities, the atomisation of a language into four skills (i.e, reading, writing, listening and speaking) becomes unnecessary and students use all sort of resources to communicate and to avoid the breakdown of communication.[4] There are several online platforms that allow the use of text, video, audio, screen sharing and document uploading, all of which facilitate the natural integration of all skills during the conversation.[5]

The role of the instructor also encompasses a wide variety of activities. The idea of teacher-centred learning does not really apply in this context and the teacher becomes more the observer of the interactions between peers and the mediator that guarantees that the platform and the internet connection, among other things, are working adequately (Cavalari, Aranha 2019). There is less need to monitor and to follow each of the conversations because peers often enhance the opportunities for a collaborative learning, help their peers

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[4] Clavel-Arroitia 2019; Cunningham, Fägersten, Holmsten 2010; Silva-Oyama 2010; Romaña 2015.

[5] Akbaba, Baskan 2017; Akiyama 2014; Andujar, Medina-López 2019; Mullen, Appel, Shanklin 2009.

when they cannot express what they want to say, correct them when necessary, explain cultural aspects or intercultural differences (Lee 2009, 2011; Ware, O'Dowd 2008; Telles 2015). Thus, the role of instructors is very different from the one they have in a physical classroom (Tian, Wang 2010).

Instructors can also use different instruments to guarantee a successful online session. For example, they decide on the topic or the task during the activity (Cappellini 2016). They also have to provide the means that students will use to assess and monitor their progress. This can be achieved by using a dairy or a journal in which learners can plan their intervention according to the topic they have been given to them. They can also get feedback from their peers regarding their performance (e.g. pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure), and finally, they can also self-assess their performance and identify what is needed to work on to improve their conversational skills.[6]

Several eTandem studies have been carried out in many different ways. For example, Cavalari and Aranha (2019) carried out studies to understand the teachers' role and perception of eLearning-teaching in computer-mediated environments. Other researchers have looked at students perceptions, corrective feedback, motivation, autonomy, corpus and discourse analysis.[7] But most of the aforementioned studies have been conducted either by analysing emails or text chats or through surveys or interviews (but see Clavel-Arroitia 2019; Kohn, Hoffstaedter 2017; Tian, Wang 2010 for studies on video-based environments). The present study contributes to filling the gap on the recent, yet scarce, studies that have been carried out whilst observing students interactions in computer-mediated environments. Thus, the aim of the paper is to answer the following research question: "How do video-based environments foster student-centred language learning?"

2 Method

2.1 Participants

17 students enrolled in the first and second year of Hispanic studies at the University of the Witwatersrand and 17 English students enrolled at the National Autonomous University of Mexico participated in the study. The proficiency level of South African students of Span-

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[6] Dooly 2017; Furstenberg, Levet 2010; Sauro 2013; Schwienhorst 2008; Ware, O'Dowd 2008.

[7] See e.g. Akiyama 2017; Jauregi et al. 2012; Lee 2009, 2011; Lewis 2003; Ware, Pérez-Cañado 2007.

ish was A2 and B1 according to the CEFR, and B1 and B2 for Mexican students learning English.

2.2 Instructors

Two Spanish instructors affiliated to the Witwatersrand University, one academic coordinator and IT support from UNAM.

2.3 Platform

Zoom with the possibility of recording sessions in audio, video and chat. This interactive space gives participants the opportunity to use a camera and chat, share their screen, documents, photos and it has a blackboard. The platform also allows the creation of individual virtual rooms in which the participants can have one-to-one interaction. The instructors can access each virtual individual classroom and monitor the interaction between students.

2.4 Dynamics

During the first semester of 2019, a pilot project was conducted with eight participants with a B1 level (South African students learning Spanish) and eight participants with a B2 level (Mexican students learning English). Five sessions were organised for these two groups of students, and the aim was to promote cultural exchanges between them. During the first session, students received a short introduction on how to use Zoom and a briefing on the dynamics and the activities. At that stage, each South African student was paired-up with a Mexican student for this and the four following sessions. During that first session, they introduced themselves to their peer, they talked about their personal life and they covered the first given topic: university life. The following topics that were assigned were:
- My city (what to visit and to eat?)
- Public holidays in my country
- Two extra sessions with free topics

During that initial session, two Spanish instructors in South Africa and the academic coordinator monitored the sessions for future feedback in a classroom context, but also to identify possible technical problems. Due to the time difference between South Africa and Mexico (8 hours), students were asked to coordinate with their peer the remaining four sessions according to their availability. They were requested to have four more sessions, once a week during the

following month, in any sort of social media (e.g. WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook or Hangout). Unfortunately, sometimes students forgot to connect or they were not very committed in following-up the activities with their peers.

After this first experience and with the feedback given by students, we continued the project during the second semester of 2019. During the first session, students were given a 30-minute induction session on how to use the Zoom platform. They also received the general guideline about how to make the most out of each session, and they previously received a learning diary in which they would plan their intervention according to the topic assigned for each session. This diary was useful to identify errors, to take notes, to keep track of the feedback provided by their peers and to identify areas of opportunity for future interactions.

The topics selected for the students were the following:

For A2 students	**For B1 students**
• Describe your city. Plans for a visit. • Your last weekend • What I have not done in my life. • Shopping in your city. Compare with Mexico • Your last visit to the doctor • Independence Day in Mexico / South Africa: what is celebrated? • Your childhood • Your favourite character: biography	• Recommendations to visit Johannesburg-Mexico City • Opinion and stereotypes about South Africans and Mexicans • Traditions in South Africa and Mexico • What could be improved in Mexico City and Johannesburg? • Migration in South Africa and Mexico • The government system in South Africa and Mexico • Ancient cultures in South Africa and Mexico • Gastronomy in Mexico and South Africa

We also decided to implement slight changes based on the previous experience during the pilot project. Firstly, we planned eight weekly sessions instead of five and each session, Mexican and South African students covered two different topics that were previously assigned by their instructors. Each hour session was then split into three parts: 25 minutes for the discussion of topic "A", 25 minutes for the discussion of topic "B", and 10 minutes for feedback. It is important to highlight that the topics were selected to promote both cultural exchange and intercultural awareness.

Secondly, we decided that all the sessions would take place in Zoom with two possible dates (Tuesday or Thursday) and with a fixed time (11 a.m. in Mexico City and 6 p.m. in South Africa: at this time of the year the time difference is only 7 hours). This change allowed students to have a fixed schedule and also to interact with different students each session.

Thirdly, we decided to record all the sessions for several reasons. During the pilot project, several students reported that they felt uncomfortable when the instructors suddenly showed up in the virtual classroom, and would stop talking or would start hesitating because they felt intimidated by the abrupt presence of the instructor. Unfortunately, the virtual room in Zoom does not allow yet for instructors to be in an 'invisible mode'. We also thought that by recording the sessions, we would have more opportunities to give students individual feedback, and also to systematise the correction of common mistakes that could have arisen during the conversation (i.e., pragmatic, sociolinguistic, linguistic and strategic flaws).

Finally, although the activity was not embedded in the class syllabus, nor counted as part of the assessment of the course, we decided to include all the first and second year students who were learning Spanish in South Africa. In the case of Mexico, students voluntarily approached the media lab to be part of the eTandem.

3 Results

There was a total of eight eTandem sessions, twice a week during eight weeks, although students only had to participate once a week either on Tuesday or Thursday. In general, there were more Mexicans than South Africans during each session, so quite often two or even three Mexicans were paired up with one South African. The sessions were recorded at the media lab by Mexican students and with their peers' consent. A total of 38 recordings were made, which accounted for 28 hours and 44 minutes of recordings. The shortest recording was 19 minutes and 10 seconds and the longest one was 63 minutes and 35 seconds. The average time of the recordings was 45 minutes and 20 seconds. The information provided in the recordings was useful to give students individual feedback, but also to address collectively during class common mistakes or issues that might have arisen during each session.

All the recordings were then organised per session and the two Spanish instructors reviewed the videos and chats in order to collect general and detailed information regarding the performance of each student. Overall, students followed the rule of speaking half of the time in Spanish and half in English. Mexican students, who were in a media lab at the university, were given reminders by the administrators of the session when they had to switch languages.

In what follows, I will provide information that was drawn from the recordings and that shows the effectiveness of eTandem activities in a wide array of areas: use of strategies to avoid breakdown during the communication; increase of motivation and confidence while speaking; peer-assessment and monitoring; and raising of intercultural and cultural awareness.

3.1 Strategic Competence

One of the most important and basic rules of communicating in a foreign language is to negotiate meaning and to repair the conversation when it breaks down due to the lack of proficiency in the target language (Clavel-Arroitia 2019; Foster, Ohta 2005). The fact that Mexican students were more proficient in English than South African students were in Spanish allowed them to switch languages when they had to clarify something or when they had to explain concepts or translate words to their peers. This was especially the case of South African students at the A2 level of Spanish, who needed more translation and clarification of meaning in English. For the South African students the activity was more challenging and they showed more difficulties in sustaining a conversation in Spanish for more than 3 or 4 minutes, but the codeswitching from English to Spanish enabled them to speak for the allotted time.

> Example:
> SA   Mi favorito um… *Movie. What's movie*?
> M   Película.
> SA   !Película! Ok. Mi favorito película es… Um… *I don't remember the name. But I have it here* [student stands up and looks for the movie]. *The lost City* [student shows the movie].
> […] Um… [student is thinking] *Plot*… [student looks for the Spanish Word of plot in his/her mobile]. El… ¿la trama?…
> M   La trama.
> SA   La trama es una expedición por un *English man*.
> M   Una expedición por un hombre inglés.
> SA   Hombre de inglés a Sudamérica.
> M   Hombre inglés a Sudamérica… […]

Students did their best to maintain the communication despite technical problems or language barriers on one or both sides. Kötter (2003) has also pointed out that when students face communication problems they will try to overcome issues by repeating, rephrasing or exploring different ways to express themselves. Even when the information made no sense, students found other ways to maintain the conversation, so they changed the topic completely in order to avoid a breakdown in communication. That shows the need to communicate despite the difficulties encountered while speaking.

Example:

SA   Me escucho el músico alemán e inglés y ¿*Danish*?

M   ¿Inglés? [The Mexican student did not understand the Word "Danish"]

SA   Inglés, alemán y ¿*Danish*? Es un pequeño lengua.

M   Ok, porque… ¿en qué zona se habla?

SA   ¿Qué?

M   ¿En dónde se habla? [The student rephrases her sentence and speaks slowly].

SA   *Speak it*? Sí, hablo *Danish*. Yeah…

M   Ok. Ok. [The Mexican student seems to be confused with the answer, makes a pause and changes the subject] You read? You read in Spanish?

3.2   Confidence Enhancement

The eTandem interaction fostered a balanced relationship among speakers. Several students, especially those at the A2 level, were afraid to speak and to make mistakes, but the fact that their peers were also learning a language made them feel more comfortable and willing to engage in the conversation. During the pilot project some students also reported feeling intimidated when the instructor suddenly appeared in the virtual classroom to observe the interaction. During class, while discussing the eTandem dynamics and activities, some students mentioned that they would prefer to communicate with their peers without the instructors' intervention. Sometimes students do not feel free to speak or to give their opinions in front of the instructor due to the hierarchical relationship between them. Without the instructor, students felt more comfortable to speak and share opinions, perhaps due to a more neutral communication between language learners who are experiencing similar difficulties whilst learning a language.

Example:

M1   Ok. It is time to change to Spanish.

SA   Ohhh… [Student panics]

M1   We are going to speak very slowly for you. Don't worry.

SA   Ok. You can ask me questions, but no judgements, please.

M2   No, para nada.

M3   We have many problems in English too.

SA   But your English, all of you guys, is very good and compared to my Spanish…

M1   No te preocupes.

M3   Es la manera de aprender. […]

3.3 Monitoring

Students displayed all sorts of strategies to monitor their peer's participation. Sometimes they did not say anything when they identified a mistake, sometimes they would repeat the correct word or rephrase the sentence in the correct way, and sometimes they explicitly pointed out the mistake the peer was making. Some students even made the effort to try to explain to their peer the type of mistake they were making, but obviously they lacked the sufficient metalanguage awareness and knowledge that only those who have been trained to teach possess. Students, however, were more interested in communicating and in avoiding the conversation to break down than in receiving a grammar explanation. They seemed to be aware that they were not language instructors, and thus they did not have the tools nor the pedagogic background to explain grammar concepts.

Example:
SA   La música en general aquí es tipo… Nos tenemos… un… Nos tenemos un… ¿Nos propios?
M1   ¿Nos apropiamos?
M2   Oh, como… ¿su música propia?
SA   Sí, sí, las músicas propias. ¿Propia o propias?
M2   Propias. […]
M1   Hay algún artista que podamos escuchar que nos recomiendes que sea de allá.
SA   Sí, um… tenemos Sho Madjozi. Yo voy a escribir. Yo escribo. [The student uses the chat].
M2   Algo te quiero decir de tu español. Hablas bien. Puedes sobrevivir si vienes a México.
SA   Yo perciebo… entiendo… Yo entiendo mucho, pero cuando yo hablo yo tengo muchos problemas.
M2   Pero solamente es práctica. Se entiende muy bien. A veces conjugar el tiempo, pero es normal. Me gusta como usaste los conectores. Solo una cosa, música es general, no tiene plural. […]
M3   Lo que necesitamos tanto en español como en inglés es más práctica. Y hablarlo mucho.
M2   Te comiendo que escuches música y Netflix. Hay muchos shows en español lentos.
SA   Sí, yo veo… [the student enlists several TV series].
M2   Pero, ¿le pones subtítulos o sin subtítulos?
SA   Ah, yo pongo subtítulos.
M2   Pero muy bien […] Si lo lees y lo escuchas vas asociando lo que escuchas a la gramática.

3.4 Feedback

More than half of the Mexican students have participated in other eTandem activities so they were used to the dynamics and to the feedback they needed to provide at the end of the activity. After the first sessions, South African students did not really know how to give feedback to their peers, but they learned very quickly and through the sessions, they were able to provide more insightful feedback for their Mexican peers. Students also showed high motivation and enthusiasm in receiving feedback from their peers. Again, it seems that they saw their peers as equals and although they sometimes were shy when they received feedback, they felt comfortable with it. The following example shows how the feedback provides some strategies, identifies areas of opportunity and also plays an important role in motivating a peer.

Example:
M   Tienes muy buen acento en español.
SA Muchas gracias, yo he practicado en videos en Youtube. He tratado de imitar a los youtubers. Ustedes también hablan muy bien.
M1 Muchas gracias. ¿Cuál sería tu recomendación para que mejoráramos en nuestro aprendizaje de inglés?
SA Mmm... la pronunciación de algunas palabras. La pronunciación es clara. Todo lo que dices es muy claro para mí.
M1 OK. Gracias.
M2 ¿Para los dos?
SA Para ti, habla un poco más claro. Nada más. ¿Y tus recomendaciones por mi español? Sobre mi español.
M   Tienes buena conjugación de verbos, de lo que escuché. Hablas claro, ocupas bien los pronombres. Este... me llama la atención que conozcas ya datos de la Ciudad de México, de México, de la universidad. Eh... tu acento no se escucha que fueras nativo de aquí, pero sí podrías pasar [...] me suena a acento colombiano. ¿Tus maestros son españoles?
SA Aprendí de videos grabados por colombianos. Eso tiene sentido.
M   Pues muy bien. Fíjate que veo que... escucho que te ha funcionado esa técnica de los videos. El que trates de imitar el acento hace que tu pronunciación sea muy clara [...]. ¡Qué bueno que estás aprendiendo el idioma y que encontraste tu técnica adecuada de aprendizaje! Y síguele.

3.5 Cultural and Intercultural Awareness

Students had general topics to follow in Spanish and in English. The topics were selected to promote cultural and intercultural awareness among students, but students were also allowed to address other topics, especially when those topics were related to their own experience and interest. In terms of cultural aspects, students were very interested in knowing more about the history, festivities, food, and cultural aspects attached to the country (e.g. important musicians, singers, movies etc.). They also wanted to learn more about the places they can visit, museums, touristic places and nature.

Example:
SA [...] Si tengo la oportunidad de ir a México, voy a ir a ese lugar. ¿A ustedes que les gustaría conocer sobre Sudáfrica?
M Ah, pues por mi parte, ¿qué lugares me recomendarías visitar y por qué?
SA Pues tengo que decir que la Ciudad de Port Elizabeth [...] pues la gente es muy amable, muy cordial, la ciudad es bonita. Eh.. en mi opinión... eh... y pues la playa es muy tranquila, más tranquila que en otras ciudades, Cape Town y Durban. Ah, pues también la Ciudad de Johannesburgo porque... pues, es el centro económico del país y hay muchas cosas que hacer. Puedes visitar muchos museos, parques. También el Kruger National Park. Nuestros parques nacionales. [...]

Students were also motivated and engaged in conversations in which they shared who they are and their view of the world through their own lens. They were also enthusiastic and keen on talking about the country and the way their own society perceives and reacts to specific issues that are tied to intercultural exchanges.

Example:
M [...] We are taking about stereotypes here in Mexico, but what about there... in South Africa?
SA Am I supposed to speak in Spanish now?
M Yeah! Te escucho.
SA [Student chuckles].
M Sí, sí, relax. I listen.
SA [Student laughs] I'll try... I'll try... Ok. ¿Qué conoces o qué sabes de Sudáfrica?
M [...] He escuchado principalmente cuestiones políticas. ¿Sabes? La historia del apartheid y cosas que tienen que ver con tensión. Eh... recientemente, bueno, por el 2010, a través del mundial de fútbol, como que el mundo pudo conocer un aspecto un

poco distinto de Sudáfrica, ¿no? Pero realmente creo que todo lo que tenemos presente es esa cuestión política, la lucha.

SA   Mmm.. […] ¿Y… de las personas, en general?

M   De las personas… p's nunca había tenido el placer de conocer una hasta estas sesiones de tándem. Yo diría, por lo que he conocido, que son bastantes agradables y comprensivas. Sobre todo porque escuchan y te ayudan.

[…]

SA   Ok. Ah.. es interesante que pienses que [student chuckles] los sudafricanos son agreable [the student meant to say "agradables"] porque en general las personas… Eh… Pienso a Europa, por ejemplo, Ah… ellos piensen que los sudafricanos y todo el África, todo el resto de África… piensen que los sudafricanos son eh… ¿un poco violente? O que hay mucha violencia en Sudáfrica. Eh… que hay mucha violencia en general y que somos antipático porque no reciben las personas eh… ¿cómo dice? De manera simpática. Y que no nos gustan los extranjeros, que somos los africanos blancos y que… ya… en general es muy agresivo y hay mucha violencia en general. Es el estereotipo de Sudáfrica.

M   […] Creo que sí, generalizar es algo que… impide que conozcas una cultura o un país.

3.6   Learning Strategies

Students also showed a high degree of awareness regarding the utility of sharing learning strategies with their classmates. All these strategies were empirical and largely reflect what worked for them whilst learning a foreign language. Some of the strategies the students shared were very broad, such as practicing and speaking more, but some of them were quite detailed. Students, for example, highlighted the benefit of listening to songs and Youtube videos to learn pronunciation and vocabulary. They sometimes added that by singing a song the learning process speeds up because of the effort required to try to copy what the singer says. Learning a language through movies and TV series was also a frequent strategy reported by students. Either with or without subtitles, they agreed that engaging in an activity such as watching a movie, listening to a song or reading a book increases the motivation and also helps to acquire the language in a more meaningful way. They also mentioned that by reading literature in the target language there is a substantial increase in the vocabulary and in the development of grammar and awareness of the sentence structure.

Example:

M   Entonces, trabajamos en la pronunciación.

SA   ¡Pronunciación!

M   Pronunciación. En las estructuras de las oraciones y en el plural y singular para ti. ¿Te parece?

SA   Sí.

M   And for me?

SA   For you. Um… You are actually really good, though. Um… Vocab.

M   Vocabulario.

SA   You are good. I can't think of anything you did wrong. You did pretty well.

M   Maybe you can read a book in Spanish. Maybe let me think about that and send for you and then speak about that. I think. Do you agree?

SA   Yes, I agree. And you just practise English. And… I have an idea. If you listen to an English movie or something, see what they say but try to sound exactly like them and you will get the English accent.

M   Ok. Thank you!

M   For me is a good experience this lesson because I don't have contact for another country in English because all my friends want to speak in Spanish and all the time speak in Spanish.

SA   Mis amigos hablo alemán y inglés pero no español. So…

M   It is the same case.

4   Discussion, Limitations and New Directions

The aim of the present study was to identify how telecollaboration fosters the development of language learning based on a student-centred approach. Learning a language, however, is not restricted to the acquisition of grammar rules, syntax and vocabulary, but it encompasses a set of skills and fields of knowledge that can only be developed in contact with people from other cultural backgrounds where the language is spoken. Thus, the ability to communicate in an additional language becomes more meaningful when students are able to interact with speakers of the target language. In developing countries, such as Mexico and South Africa, students often do not have the opportunity to travel abroad and engage in real life situations where the target language is spoken. In the case of South Africa, for instance, students would have to travel far distances to be able to interact with Spanish speakers. Therefore, sometimes the only input they receive comes from various reading and visual media that does not promote spontaneous interaction outside the classroom nor the exchange of life experiences, cultural background and points of view.

Unfortunately, when the language is only restricted to the classroom, the activities students perform become artificial and that is probably the reason why motivation and interest in learning a lan-

guage declines. When students share their personal life and experience as well as different cultural and intercultural perspectives, there is a better chance that interest and motivation in learning a foreign language increase. This occurs in a more natural setting because students are given the chance to bond with someone who lives in a place where the target language is spoken.

Based on the videos and the interaction between students, there were many positive examples that showed various ways in which this form of eTandem fosters a more student-centred approach towards learning an additional language. For example, it was clear that the role played by the peer represents a great source of confidence and support for language learners. In this case, the English proficiency level of Mexican students was higher than the Spanish proficiency level of South Africans. However, Mexican students showed themselves to be very patient and understanding about their peers' difficulty in trying to express themselves in Spanish. The interaction, mediation and moderation between students fostered a friendly and confident learning environment that allowed them to practice without worrying too much about making mistakes or about being 'observed' by the instructor. This resulted in an opportunity to improve students' communicative language skills without the need of the instructor. In a real situation, the interlocutor might not be as patient and willing to understand what the other person is trying to say, so these activities certainly increased the level of confidence and students willingness to engage in a communicative activity.

The eTandem activities proved useful in promoting cultural exchange and intercultural awareness. Mexican and South African students were keen on learning about their peers' countries, culture, society and mindset. This motivation went beyond having a better understanding of the culture, the idiosyncrasy, or general facts about the country. Students showed a genuine motivation to get to know their peers, which was perhaps why they often digressed from the topic to talk about themselves and what they like. This is important in learning a language, because it enhances the students' communicative skills and also provides them with a valuable opportunity to know more about the cultural and intercultural differences.

Finally, recording the eTandem session allowed the two language instructors in South Africa to work with students one-to-one but also to address grammar and syntactic issues with the whole class. Students also mentioned during class that despite possible technical difficulties, this form of eTandem was a valuable opportunity to learn the language, but also to use the language as means for understanding a different culture.

4.1 Limitations

There are two salient limitations that are worth mentioning. The first one has to do with the time difference. Due to the seven-hour difference between South Africa and Mexico, the activity was conducted early in the morning for Mexican students, but late in the afternoon for South African students. Whereas Mexican students worked in a media lab with all the technological resources available there (i.e., IT support, computers, internet and headsets), South African students had to deal with systematic load shedding problems that are currently affecting the country, lack of Internet or a computer at home to work with. It was also more difficult for South Africans to be available at 6 o'clock in the evening because of other personal commitments.

The other issue that arose was related to the nature of the activity. This was an optional activity offered to all students because this sort of blended learning is not part of the curriculum and therefore it was not considered as part of the teaching-learning-assessment process. Unfortunately, students tend to be busy throughout the semester and they tend to focus more on mandatory activities that have an impact on their final class marks and their overall grade point average. This is why this blended learning option should be promoted and incorporated in the curriculum and in the syllabus at the university level (O'Dowd 2013). There is a clear need for more participation of those involved in the curriculum design, but also from those in the position to make decisions across language departments to incorporate this learning modality in the teaching-learning-assessment process. Eventually, although students overtly acknowledged the benefits of this type of learning, the only way to guarantee their full participation and commitment would be to include eTandem as part of the mandatory activities they have to perform during class.

4.2 New Directions

Future studies in this form of telecollaboration should include interviews with students or focus group sessions in which students share all the benefits they gain through this learning modality. It would also be important to investigate how other forms of communication such as nonverbal communication (i.e. gestures, eye contact, body movement and facial expressions) influence the development of the verbal communication in a positive or negative manner. The benefit of eTandem is that it allows for the use of video to compensate flaws in the communication versus regular phone calls or other written means of communication (e.g. emails, chats and blogs).

5   Conclusions

eTandem and other means of virtual learning incorporated in the language classroom represent meaningful and enriching experiences for learning a language without being physically present in a place where the target language is spoken. In developing countries students struggle even more to travel abroad, and an e-learning activity may represent the first contact with a foreigner. Learning a language does not mean to formally learn the structure in a vacuum, but rather to understand that it is embedded in the culture where it is spoken. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most institutions were reluctant and doubtful about including blended language learning programmes in the curriculum. However, after the quick transition from face-to-face interaction to virtual classes, the approach towards various forms of telecollaboration is bound to change drastically in the coming years. Thus, higher education institutions will be more proactive in incorporating blended learning courses in the curriculum and as part of the teaching-learning-assessment process.

Acknowledgments

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