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Teletandem, Video-Recordings and Usage-Based Tasks: Developing a Socially Situated Scenario for Learning

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Abstract. The article describes how telecollaboration is implemented at the University of Salento (Italy). Particularly, it explores how teletandem, that is peer exchange for foreign language practice via VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) technology, has become the nucleus for developing a socially situated pedagogical scenario, designed to promote basically oral interactional skills and learning in autonomy. The use of information and communication technology is relevant in the whole learning scenario which consists in 12 hrs of teletandem conversations and in workshops during which students do tasks based on the analysis of video-recordings of their virtual meetings in relation to several pedagogical aims. The whole learning scenario is learner-led and is based on students' reflective discussion with peers. Language use and cognitive processes implemented by the task-based pedagogy are useful not only in institutional like situations but can be as well applied to the informal and self-directed learning experience, for instance, when the higher education curriculum is concluded.

Keywords. teletandem, interactional skills, learning autonomy, situated learning, interaction.

Introduction

The paper describes how telecollaboration is implemented at the University of Salento (Italy) and how the experience of peer language exchange with foreign partners via VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) technology has become the nucleus for developing a socially situated learning scenario, designed to promote basically oral interactional skills and learning in autonomy. The instructional program is based on different forms of web 2.0 technology mediated interactions with foreign partners and on workshops during which students are asked to analyse their video-recorded interactions, completing usage-based tasks.

The learning scenario is a part of the language-teaching curriculum of foreign language university degree courses. Teletandem plus workshops and the preparation of a short presentation in which students describe their experience,

following the theoretical framework given during the meetings, constitute a training program for which credits are awarded¹.

In the article, we will discuss:

- Definition of telecollaboration and teletandem;
- Teletandem programs' objectives at Unisalento;
- Descriptions of the learning scenario as a social situated practice;
- Description of usage-based tasks' pedagogy.

Telecollaboration and teletandem

Telecollaboration “refers to the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations with the aim to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work” (O’Dowd, 2013, p. 1). In our university, telecollaboration has been implemented in the form of oral, synchronous exchange. Since 2008, the University of Salento has been part of an international teaching and research network based at UNESP, University of São Paulo State (Brazil; www.teletandembrasil.org.br), whose aims are as follows: (a) to develop oral skills and interaction, an often neglected communicative strategy in second language teaching in higher education as elsewhere in the educational system, (b) to conduct research in the field of intercultural communication and (c) to analyse the structure of computer-mediated oral discourse. The name of the network and of the program is Teletandem and Prof. João Telles is the project creator (Telles & Vassallo, 2006).

Teletandem as language practice/learning is the on-line version of the *presential* tandem (e.g. Brammerts & Kleppin, 2001), that, starting from '80, used dialogue between paired speakers of different native languages as a framework for developing L2 language competence. Teletandem, as tandem, is based on the following principles:

- Reciprocity. Each party must have the same opportunity to develop his/her L2 language competence. For instance, if an English and an Italian expert speakers are involved, the practice of each L2 must last the same amount of time. Therefore, for instance, for the first 30 minutes (or 1 hr) of the virtual meeting, the conversation can be in English, and for the second half it can be in Italian. In order not to favour the practice of any language in the following Teletandem session the practice of the two languages is reversed. At the University of Salento this principle has been adapted to learning objectives of a scenario aimed at developing intercomprehension ability (see *A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures*; FREPA, 2012, p. 7) between related languages, making “the learner work on two or more languages of the same linguistic family [...] being one of these languages the learner’s mother tongue” (i.e. Portuguese and Italian). During the conversation each speaker talks in his/her native language - either Italian or Portuguese;

¹ For instance, for 12 hours of on-line conversations, a seminar of 10hrs, and the preparation of a presentation in L2, 2 European Credits are granted (25 hrs per credit point).

- Collaborative learning. Students cooperate to improve their language ability;
- Autonomous learning. Students must plan meetings together with their partners according to their needs. The language instructor intervenes upon request only to facilitate the use of computer technology and communication and to discuss theoretical topics.

For Teletandem VOIP technology and Internet Relay Chat are employed. Communication therefore involves video, audio and written mode.

Teletandem's learning objectives

According to the needs of their students, learning programs based on Teletandem can have different aims. In tab. 1, most of the recent programs are reported.

Tab. 1 Forms of telecollaboration (oral and written) at University of Salento (Italy), academic year 2013-2014.

Forms of Telecollaboration (Teletandem and/or written interaction)	Programs are aimed to develop:	Experts involved
Italian- English (University of Southampton)	Oral and written computer- mediated interaction	Professors (e.g. English Literature) language instructors Italian/English language
Italian - German (University of Bonn)	Oral computer-mediated interaction	Professors and language instructors
Intercomprehension Between romance languages (Universidade Estadual Paulista) European project: MIRIADI	Oral intercomprehension written intercomprehension	Professors and language instructors

As regards English and Italian languages, teletandem has been combined also with written communication via a blog. This program was based on the discussion of cultural topics established by Prof. Cogo and Prof. Plutino from the University of Southampton (see Cogo & Plutino, in preparation). The program for German and Italian languages was based on the discussion of cultural topics; VOIP and chat technology were only employed for communication. During English/Italian, German/Italian Teletandem conversations, languages are used alternately.

On the other hand, the program for developing intercomprehension strategies between Romance languages (for more details see Galanet, Galapro and MIRIADI)² is mostly based on dialogues during which a Portuguese expert speaker talks in his/her L1 and his/her partner replies in his/her native language, i.e., in Italian. Therefore, in this latter case two languages are simultaneous vehicles of communication.

Programs based on teletandem: socially situated contexts for learning

In the following paragraphs, we will describe the experience of the pair virtual exchange during which students communicate for learning. It follows a description of the workshops during which students are asked to reflect upon their Teletandem dialogues and their communicative experience. In these two contexts, learning is an “integral constituent” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 35) and is the result of the social process.

Teletandem as a social experience

During Teletandem sessions people involved in the project talk with each other about different topics, their learning experience, needs and objectives. Language and contents constitute the dual focus of these particular social communicative exchanges. As research has shown (Leone, forthcoming), the social dimension and the motivation to establish a real relationship with interlocutors and the desire to talk about their learning experiences are very strong. Therefore, when expert L2 speakers are involved, in very few contexts, native speakers repair his/her friend’s non-standard production.

Teletandem sessions are experiences that involve “the whole person” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). Although the scenario is situated, that is, it is grounded in specific contexts, it develops knowledge, skills and abilities transferrable to real life. Its “situatedness” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 32) depends on the fact that language competence and knowledge are co-constructed, as Vygotsky would say. For instance, in the following extract the expert Italian speaker (named Italian L1: ITL1) helps the novice speaker (named English L1: ENGL1) to remember the Italian expression she had previously heard during the conversation, which is the translation for “are you kidding” (i.e. in Italian *stai scherzando*). Furthermore, she writes in chat so to help the interlocutor to better understand what she is saying. Finally, she compliments ENGL1 for her

² URL for the platform for practicing intercomprehension:

- Galanet, <http://www.galanet.eu/>;

- Galapro,

<http://www.galapro.eu/?language=POR+ENG+FRA+ESP+ITA>.

For the ongoing LLP European project *Mutualisation et Innovation pour un Réseau de l'Intercompréhension à Distance* (MIRIADI) <http://miriadi.net/elgg/miriadi/home>.

production. The positive effects of ITL1's attempts for developing her friend's L2 vocabulary competence and ENGL1's motivation to complete the task make the interaction relevant for grounding cognitive processes. The instinctive and spontaneous way by which this "new competence" is developed makes it transferrable also to other contexts.

Es.1- Proper English

ENGL1: let's try to make sure that proper English is supposed to the way we were speaking I think it's I think it is in a proper English ok

ITL1: ((caught))

ENGL1: (xxx) the verb

ITL1: che verbo ti serve-

which verb do you need

ENGL1: =is the one word (xxx)(0.9) (chat: quando sono parlando con lei senso buono)

(chat: when I am speaking with her good meaning)

ITL1: quasi giusto eh eh look eh spetta eh qual è l'ultimo l'ultimo esempio che ti ho fatto are you kidding ti ricordi come si diceva are you kidding (chat: are you kidding=?) ti ricordi come si diceva are you kidding ti ricordi ricordi do you remember ti ricordi

You are almost right eh eh look eh wait, please, eh which is the last example I told you is it kidding do you remember how you say are you kidding (chat: are you kidding=?) do you remember how you say are you kidding di you remember do you remember

ENGL1: ok eh (xxx) ok stai scher scherzando

Ok eh (xxx) ok are you kidding

ITL1: sì sì ok allora

yes yes ok well

ENGL1: I make sure I said scur

ITL1: ((laugh)) brava

good ...

As well as language competence, participants' new knowledge is also experienced in relation to the environment and to the context, which, thanks to communication technologies, is enlarged and includes cultures that, in the past, we perceived as distant. By talking with a partner, student's new culture conceptual representations are grounded in the interlocutor's experience (see Telles, in print). Furthermore, the conversation itself activates cognitive processes and language use which are useful not only in institutional like situations but can be as well applied to the informal and self-directed learning experience, for instance when the higher education curriculum is concluded. The numerous "culture-related episodes" (Telles, Zakir & Funo, forthcoming; Zakir, in preparation), in which Teletandem partners talk about themselves and describe their attitudes, give participants the opportunity to be involved in genuine processes of negotiation, in scaffolding for constructing experience, knowledge and their conception of the L2 culture. In the following extract, an Italian L1 speaker talks about her experience in Lithuania where she spent several months as an exchange student. She describes her holidays and she tells her partner that since Christmas she was deeply missing her country she prepared a big dinner inviting

friends, some of whom were Muslims. Thus the party became an “international Christmas”, as she says, during which she could be in contact with other people, with different traditions and lifestyles. Her friend replies by telling her that since her stepfather is Jewish and in her family they also celebrate Passover. In this specific event participants show their attitude towards intercultural experience and their openness towards different cultures. Like in a conversation outside the institution walls, they have genuinely discussed, shared their life’s events and feelings. Although the one described “is a specific event in specific circumstances” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33), it develops knowledge that transcends this experience.

Es. 2- Christmas

ITL1: for example you know like those kind of habits let's say are so strong in my person in my culture it's so they are part of me of course and when I was in lithuania like I was there from september until january and for five months and when I was there of course I decided not to come back to italy just for you know christmas time and I was in lithuania but like I felt so strong the missing because I wanted to have christmas like I used to have it I prepared a big dinner for a lot of people and we had a christmas together and it was really interesting and funny because among my friends there were some people that were muslim and they did- it was - they- you know their first christmas and it was really nice for me because they you know were so curious after what is christmas what do you do which is your idea about and it was really like an international christmas but so funny and for this reason we had other exchange let's call like this because it was in january the no no it was april ya the easter you know the orthodox easter and we had together a party because it was nice to celebrate also if I am christian in my religion no I am catholic ya for this reason it was like a really interesting exchange and this is the thing that I really like I really love about being with other people and other culture

AML1: ya ya that's true I mean I feel like that can even happens like you know when you don't have to go in another cul- country my mum just married ah ah my stepfather two years ago and he is jewish so now we do a lot of like jewish celebrations you know [now] when I go home in a couple of weeks for easter it's also passover so you're like he teaches us all this like you know traditions and you know we have been to his kids like bar mitzvah the wedding was a jewish wedding so it's it's it's a different culture but it's interesting

In the two extracts, we have seen two examples that show why Teletandem (and also tandem) is a form of a “conversation for learning” (Kasper, 2004). The learning experience it represents can involve language, contents or cultural conceptual representations, according to the participants’ intentions. Since it is a *socially situated* learning context, its positive effects can be easily applied to real life circumstances.

The Corpus and usage-based tasks

Teletandem sessions were video-recorded and were used to compile a

learner corpus³. Besides the oral dialogues, data also consist of the written chat employed during the sessions. Teletandem learner corpus allowed highlighting participants' communicative strategies and the intercultural dimension of the dialogue. Furthermore, it showed "what is difficult for the learner as it is revealed by errors (misuse) but also, most interestingly, by overuse, underuse and avoidance of specific language choice with reference to a selected norm" (Prat-Zagrebelsky, 2004, p. 43). Therefore a learner corpus contains relevant information on how students' communicative competence in L2 progresses and on how students deal with L2 culture. The corpus is named COMETE (CORpus Multilingue di E-learning and TElecollaboration) and, following Reffay et al. (2008), it highlights information regarding the context in which it has been developed (e.g. learning scenario such as description of objectives, materials, and teacher's role; place where teletandem sessions took place [home, university]).

COMETE is employed also to implement usage-based tasks to be completed together with the instructor *in presentia*; during workshops, theories are established through discussion. Before each workshop, students reflect on their experience also referring to video-recordings of their sessions from which they select two or more clips in relation to usage-based tasks' aims.

Usage-based tasks help to develop:

- a) An interactionist perspective of language learning, which is a general conception of language learning as the result of the experience of a social exchange. In Italy, like probably in some other countries, students have a traditional perspective of their L2 learning. They believe that a language is mostly acquired by doing grammar exercises and by learning grammatical rules;
- b) Their intercultural attitude;
- c) The ability to analyse, self-evaluate their production in order to figure out their learning needs;
- d) Their autonomy in language learning.

Usage-based tasks are realized in the following phases:

1. Aim definition (e.g. to analyse meaning negotiation and difficulty in communication);
2. Clip selection from video-recordings;
3. Watching the clips and group discussion in classroom.

³ We bought a 30-user license pack of a Skype video-recording tool, named Evaer; students joining the program are given license keys and are then asked to give them back when the experience is over.

Concerning aim, a) students are asked to select clips in which sequences of focus on form and negotiation of meaning are present (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Language-related episodes are analysed in order to highlight the importance of these sequences in their learning process. Similarly, students are asked to select and discuss clips which present “culture-related episodes” (Telles, Zakir & Funo and Telles, forthcoming). These latter sequences are characterized, for instance, either by intercultural communication problems or by conversation segments in which students talk about cultural aspects or stereotypes in their countries. Concerning students’ abilities in analysis, they are asked to self-evaluate their interactional ability specifically in relation to the use of discourse markers (Council of Europe, 2001; De Marco & Leone, 2012, 2013). The fourth aim is achieved through the objectives mentioned earlier in this part of the paper.

During workshops students are encouraged to investigate their production analysing clips they have selected from Teletandem sessions’ video-recordings. In this way, Teletandem experience becomes the ground on which a corpus-based language pedagogy is developed (e.g. Tognini-Bonelli, 2001; Belz & Vyatkina, 2008). Learners are participants as well as observers of their experience (Gavioli & Aston, 2001; Belz & Vyatkina, 2008) and discussing with their peers and the instructor they develop also their skill of learning how to learn.

Conclusions

So far, the increasing use of communication technology has allowed educators to implement programs in which students can interact with peers who live in different countries and speak different languages. Particularly, Teletandem has shown to be a relevant experience for developing plurilingual language competence since it fits not only the learning needs for developing L2 interactive skills but also those related to intercomprehension between native speakers of related languages (FREPA, 2012: 7). Furthermore, by video-recording different teletandem sessions, it is also possible to implement different usage-based tasks aimed to develop various learner competences, not only those of a strictly linguistic communicative nature but also general competences such as, for instance, intercultural competences, practical skills and know-how and “ability to make effective use of the learning opportunities created by teaching situations” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 107).

In this paper we aimed to show how these programs can become relevant contexts to develop a real student centred pedagogy in which theories, knowledge and language competences are developed as an outcome of a social process, involving students, their foreigner partners and language instructors.

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