

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of an experiment in tandem language learning by e-mail, carried out jointly by the Institute of Modern Languages (1) and the Department of Applied Languages at Antonio de Nebrija University in Madrid and the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) in the United States during the first semester of the academic year 2004-05. While most initiatives involving e-mail exchanges as part of the foreign language learning process are set up using the International E-Mail Tandem Network (2), our project started with a direct agreement between both universities. The purpose of this agreement was to establish e-mail exchanges between undergraduate students (non-specialist learners of English in Madrid and non-specialist learners of Spanish in Amherst) during the first semester of the academic year 2004-05. The immediate objective pursued by the parties involved was to establish a close relationship between the students of both countries, so that they could use their target language in authentic contexts. In addition, we sought to promote autonomy in the language learning process in order to make the students aware of the importance of being responsible for their own learning. Tandem learning provided us with an excellent opportunity to do so, as we shall see below.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Tandem language learning

The concept of tandem language learning has been the topic of much research over the last thirty years. The term *tandem* implies collaboration and simultaneity and when applied to language learning we refer to a partnership between two learners who are learning each other's mother tongue. These learners meet regularly and work together with the purpose of achieving a two-fold objective: to improve their own communicative competence in the target language and to help their partner to achieve the same. Based on this definition, we can see that tandem learning rests on two main principles: reciprocity and autonomy. The principle of reciprocity refers to the idea of exchange and, if this exchange is to be successful, there has to be a balanced partnership in which both participants benefit equally. Brammerts (1996: 11) defines it as "the reciprocal dependence and mutual support of the partners". Esch (1996) calls this principle "shareability", since it refers to two people who give and take in equal shares. The principle of reciprocity lies beneath the collaborative dimension of tandem learning, essential to guarantee the success of the exchange. Collaboration between tandem partners is reflected in the following aspects: mutual support, equal contribution, same extent of benefit and equal roles (as learners or experts).

The principle of autonomy states that learners must take responsibility for their own learning: "they alone determine what they want to learn and when, and they can only expect from their partner the support that they themselves have defined and asked for" (Brammerts 1996: 11). This principle has often been misconstrued as being nothing more than self-instruction and, while it is possible for self-instruction to foster learner autonomy in some cases, it is also true that it often fails to provide successful results. Another misconception related to learner

1- I am truly grateful to my colleague, Maria Lera, for coordinating the exchange and for her dedication to the project.

2- The International E-Mail Tandem Network offers universities and other educational institutions in many different countries the possibility of establishing tandem learning exchanges.



autonomy refers to the belief that, since students are responsible for their own learning process, teachers become mere observers and, therefore, redundant. Although teachers cannot plan the development of learner autonomy in a series of lessons, it is highly unlikely that students will become autonomous without active encouragement from their teachers. As Sheerin (1997: 63) points out, the paradox is that “all learners need to be prepared and supported on the path to greater autonomy by teachers”.

2.1.1. Theoretical background

Learner autonomy is defined by Little (1991: 4) as a “capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action”. In his work on learner autonomy, Little takes into account various aspects of cognitive psychology dealing with active problem-solving, development of new capacities for abstract thinking-learning and George Kelly's (1963) psychology of personal constructs. In his theory of personal constructs, Kelly explains that: “Different men construe [the universe] in different ways (...) Some of the alternative ways of construing are better adapted to man's purposes than others. Thus, man comes to understand his world through an infinite series of successive approximations.” (Kelly 1963: 43).

This process of construing the world is a “continuous process of hypothesis-testing and theory-revision” (Little 1991: 17). Our personal constructs are built mainly upon the shared system of beliefs and values that we acquire as members of a particular society and culture. However, as a whole, they are unique to each one of us and we must constantly reshape our constructs in the light of new experience. As regards learning, personal construct psychology provides an insight into the bearing of each student's own system of constructs on the learning task. Any learning task requires that the student assimilate new knowledge and, therefore, the student needs to constantly adjust and adapt. When this adaptation only requires a few changes in the already-existing personal constructs, learning takes place easily. However, if these adjustments entail a major restructuring of the underlying personal constructs, learning becomes difficult and, therefore, frustrating. In the field of foreign language learning, one consequence of Kelly's theory would suggest that students should understand their own personal constructs if learning is to be facilitated emotionally as well as cognitively. This awareness may not be easy to achieve, in the same way that successful learning might not always follow. However, if success in language learning lies mainly in an increased awareness of the learning process (internal cognitive aspect), learners must be active participants who take full responsibility for their own learning and they must also collaborate with others in solving problems and in restructuring their personal constructs through the making and testing of hypotheses.

Another major influence on the concept of learner autonomy is provided by Vygotsky (1978), who reflects on the importance of social relationships to the development of learning. The central concept in his theory is “the zone of proximal development”, which can be defined as: “[...] the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” (Vygotsky 1978: 86).

This approach stresses the crucial importance of collaboration (external social aspect) in the learning process. Thus, interactive communication should be facilitated through the use of alternative learner-centred environments, where students can work together and help each other either in pairs or in larger groups.



From the points previously discussed, one realises that the internal cognitive aspect (awareness of the learning process) and the external social aspect of learning (collaboration) are inseparable; they are two sides of the same coin. They are intertwined in such a way that they cannot evolve independently. They influence each other and, for learning to take place, these two aspects must both develop. Thus, it is necessary for these aspects to be brought together to reflect on the principle of autonomy.

The principle of autonomy is essential to the process of language learning, since, in order to achieve communicative efficiency in the target language, learners must have “independence, self-reliance and self-confidence to fulfil the variety of social, psychological and discourse roles in which they are cast” (Little 1991: 27). This capacity enables the learner to take responsibility for his own learning in two different ways: a) by reflecting on his TL experience and b) by taking control of the content and context of further contact with the TL in order to maximise the learning benefits (Appel 1999: 13). This approach also calls for a change in the role of the teacher, who should act as a facilitator or a counsellor, helping to create a context which fosters the development of learner autonomy. One of the contexts in which this development of learner autonomy becomes possible is tandem learning by e-mail. In this type of exchange, students use the target language for the purposes of authentic communication with native speakers of their target language and they do so voluntarily. The relationship established between both participants, although based on power (learner-expert or non-native speaker-native speaker) does not remain static, since the above-mentioned roles are interchangeable, which leads to a more balanced collaboration. Furthermore, the native speaker's role is not to lecture on a series of grammatical or cultural issues; on the contrary, it is up to the learner to take advantage of what the native speaker has to offer as an expert in his own language and as a facilitator of the learning process. As Appel (1999: 14) writes in this respect, “for the exchange to be successful the learner needs a minimum of autonomy which will then further develop as a result of the exchange”. Thus, tandem learning places participants in a feedback loop: the more autonomous a learner is, the more autonomous he becomes.

2.1.2. *The role of e-mail in tandem language learning*

The effectiveness of using e-mail as a tool to promote foreign language learning has been mentioned in a wide range of studies. Previous research suggests that e-mail can facilitate communication (Cooper and Selfe 1990), reduce anxiety (Kern 1995, Sullivan 1993), increase oral discussion (Pratt and Sullivan 1994), enhance student motivation (Warschauer 1996a, Ushioda 2000), facilitate social learning (Barker and Kemp 1990) and improve writing skills (Warschauer 1996b).

The use of e-mail provides students with an excellent opportunity for real, authentic communication. It takes place through the written medium in an asynchronous manner, which allows students time to think and compose the message. This delay reduces the anxiety learners may feel when using other forms of communication such as face-to-face or synchronous communication. Harasim (1989) points out that the very asynchronicity of electronic communication is to its huge advantage, as is the fact that it is not place-dependent. Hoffman (1996: 55) states that the “anonymous quality of network communication can be face-saving as well, relieving the learners of the inhibitions associated with face-to-face communication and allowing them to express



themselves more freely...". Other benefits of learning through e-mail are mentioned by Windeatt et al. (2000: 6) who claim that "as a means of communication, the Internet allows students around the world to interact with one another cheaply, quickly, and reliably, opening up the classroom to the real world in a way which has never before been possible". Müller-Hartmann (2000), Sakar (2001), Belz, (2003) and O'Dowd (2003) report on the benefits of using e-mail for cross-cultural communication and other insightful reports on the use of e-mail for language learning can be found in several publications, such as Austin & Mendlik (1993), Aitsiselmi (1999), Little et al. (1999), Warschauer (1996, 1999) and Warschauer and Kern (2000). Another feature of electronic mail is that, although it uses the written medium, it has assumed functions and features usually associated with spoken language as well as formal writing (Davis and Brewer 1997). Therefore, the development of speaking skills in the foreign language in addition to reading and writing skills, is also facilitated. Straten et al. (1996) point out that telematic facilities offer new and important opportunities for collaboration and dialogue with colleagues. Finally e-mail provides learners with the opportunity to look back at their own and their partners' messages and analyse them, thus facilitating reflective learning and fostering awareness.

From the previous discussion we can conclude that, in addition to the many benefits tandem learning via e-mail has to offer in different areas, it seems to be an ideal environment in which to develop autonomy in language learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data and Participants

The e-mail exchange programme was set up on the basis of a previous pilot scheme implemented during the academic year 2003-04. At the end of the course, the students were interviewed and were given a questionnaire in order to find out what they thought of the experience. After obtaining a highly positive feedback from the students, we decided to continue with a more complex form of collaboration between the two universities during the first semester of the academic year 2004-05. Thus, the role of tandem learning by e-mail became more important within the overall course of study and was included as a mandatory activity for all the students taking English Level 4 (Higher Intermediate) at Antonio de Nebrija University and those students taking Spanish courses at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The academic profile of the learners from both universities was similar. Most of the students were between nineteen and twenty-four years of age, except for a few students who were a few years older. They had all enrolled in foreign language courses to complement their higher education studies. Even though none of our students majored in language or linguistics, the study of at least one foreign language was compulsory for the students at Antonio de Nebrija University, whereas Spanish language was taken as an extracurricular or optional subject in the case of the students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The first step was to assign each of the thirty-two students a partner, which we did on the basis of the students' similarities in terms of learning targets and level of proficiency in their target language. The students were then required to exchange a minimum of two e-mails a week, messages that they also had to send to their instructors, who kept a copy of all the e-mails in order to evaluate the entire process on a weekly basis.



The students were given a series of topics to discuss, such as personal information (age, family, pets, hobbies, free time, studies, work, the place where they live, the place where they are from, friends, etc), customs and traditions, music, cinema and television programmes, the educational system, the use of idioms and colloquial expressions, stereotypes, food, festivals, sports etc., which they were to approach from a personal perspective, based on their own experiences. The aim was to encourage a sense of familiarity and confidence, which would hopefully facilitate communication. In addition, we developed a 'common room' on the Internet where all the students involved in the exchange could meet. We developed different sections within the 'common room' so that the students could organise their material and also gain easy access to all the resources the instructors had previously uploaded and those they would upload throughout the semester. The 'common room' we designed had a 'discussion forum' where the learners could post messages and exchange information, a 'files section' featuring a series of folders to organise the material they were working on, a 'chat section' to facilitate the organization of the chat session they were required to undertake, a 'photos section', a 'links section' designed to give the rest of the students access to interesting or helpful websites for their learning process, a 'polls section' and a calendar to help them organise their work in time for class.

Students' activities and impressions were monitored over the twelve weeks of the project, and detailed information was gathered from the students' e-mails and their responses to a self-evaluation questionnaire, which we include in Appendix 1.

Along the same lines as Woodin (1997), we sought answers to the two following questions:

1. What can students learn through participating in e-mail tandem exchanges?
2. Are some students more successful than others at learning through this method and if so, why?

This study did not provide an opportunity for objective assessment of improvement in language proficiency or intercultural communicative competence. However, from the substantial amount of data that was compiled, an attempt was made to assess certain characteristics of the students' involvement in the project that might generally be considered to be indicative of successful language learning. According to Woodin (1997: 23), these characteristics include the following:

- **Exposure to language:** The number of e-mails written and received was considered a relevant factor regarding the participants' success (participants wrote mostly in their L2 although error correction and explanations on formal linguistic aspects took place in their L1). Participation in the discussion forum was also taken into account;
- **Active learning:** Students who seemed involved and interested in their tandem partner and in learning about their partners' language and culture were considered more successful;
- **Negotiation of meaning and information seeking:** These characteristics are of particular importance in tandem learning, since they help establish partner relationships;



- **Error correction:** Participants who took part in error correction (i.e. who corrected others and received corrections) were considered to have been successful; error correction was taken as evidence that their L2 performance was monitored;

- **Use of cultural information acquired by participants:** In addition to discussing different culturally-related issues by e-mail, students had the opportunity to use information obtained from their partners in the discussion forum and in an oral presentation given at the end of the project period;

- **Re-use of language offered by the participants' tandem partner:** Re-use of information and incorporation of corrected errors in subsequent e-mails was taken as evidence of active involvement in the learning process.

All these factors provided the basis for the evaluation of each one of the e-mail exchanges, although, as we mentioned above, we also gathered information on other aspects, such as participants' views of the project, through a self-evaluation questionnaire. This questionnaire was specially designed to determine the students' knowledge of the culture and people they were going to work with throughout the semester, as well as to provide an overall insight into their personal perception of their own communicative competence in the target language. They were asked to answer it in their mother tongue, enabling them to provide clearer and more elaborate answers. This exercise in self-assessment was essential, because an important evaluative dimension of the project depended on the students' perception of e-mail tandem as a mode of language learning. How learners actually felt about what they were doing was likely to have an important impact on their involvement in the learning process. The questionnaire was presented to the students as a tool for stimulating serious reflection and raising learner awareness. It included open-ended questions as well as others where the respondents were simply required to answer "yes" or "no" and was administered online so that the students could enjoy easy access to it and we could examine the results almost instantaneously. At the end of the exchange period, the participants were then asked to fill in a similar questionnaire and to write a composition in their mother tongue, commenting on different aspects of the project. Figure 1 below outlines the data collection process over a period of twelve weeks:



Week 1

Questionnaire administered to determine learners' previous language learning, experience learning with computers, attitudes towards the foreign language and culture, and students' attitudes and expectations. Students were assigned a tandem partner and joined the forum of discussion.

Week 3

Students started sending e-mails twice a week to their partners with a copy to the tutor. Interviews were held with students to sort out problems and provide information on specific issues relating to the exchange, such as error correction. List of topics to discuss with partner was provided.

Week 6

Students were informed they would be giving a presentation on a topic related to American culture/language and that they could ask their partners for help. Additional help could be found in the discussion forum.

Week 10

Students discussed information gathered for their presentation in class and wrote a composition expressing their opinion on their findings.

Week 11

Participants gave their presentations and gave their opinions about the project in writing, together with suggestions on how to improve those aspects they did not like.

Week 12

Questionnaire (as in week one) administered again.

Figure 1 Plan for data collection.

Below are some of the students' commentaries that appeared in their compositions:

"Antes de empezar el intercambio tenía ciertos prejuicios sobre los americanos. Quizá por todo lo que se ve en la televisión o se lee en las revistas y periódicos, que nos están haciendo crearnos una imagen de los americanos bastante negativa; pero después de esta experiencia me he dado cuenta de que los estudiantes americanos son jóvenes con nuestras mismas inquietudes, ilusiones y ganas de pasarlo bien. Por lo que he podido hablar con mi pen-pal entre los jóvenes americanos y los españoles no existe una gran diferencia. Nos diferenciamos más en las tradiciones y costumbres."

[Before starting the exchange I had some prejudices about Americans. These might be because of everything we see on television or read in magazines and newspapers; they tend to create quite a negative image of Americans. However, this experience has shown me that American students are just young people like us, with the same interests, the same worries, the same illusions and the same desire to have fun. From what I can see from my pen pal conversations, American and Spanish young people are not that different. The differences I see have more to do with traditions and customs.]

"Yo nunca tuve un concepto sobre la cultura americana solo lo que vemos de la televisión y de las películas. Siempre pensamos que están armados que son muy chulos que solo piensan en ellos, que son los más importantes. Esto no es así ya que después de conocer a Karen veo que es todo lo contrario."



[I never had any clear ideas about American culture, just the things you see on television or in the movies. We tend to think they all use guns, act cocky and look after number one, because they think they're more important than everyone else. I don't think that anymore; after meeting Karen I realized it is quite the opposite]

"It helped me to learn a lot more about Spanish people and their cultura, and it was nice to know that I was helping someone else to expand their horizons as well."

One of the weaknesses of this study is that it was not possible to study both sides of the partnership in equal detail. However, since we had access to the e-mails exchanged between participants, we were able to gain a rough idea of the relationship between the students.

The project generated a great deal of inconclusive data which raised some interesting points. By way of illustration, I present here some of the data collected with regard to one student, Natalia (3) who had one of the most successful experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. A Case Study: Natalia

A second year student of Journalism, she lived in Puerto Rico as a child and used to travel to the USA regularly. Since then she has developed a strong interest in learning English and about all aspects of American culture and ways of life. She was computer literate and familiar with e-mail before the exchange started.

Natalia wrote and received at least thirty-nine e-mails (4). On average, the messages were 257 words long. These facts reflect the students' involvement in this partnership and their exposure to language, since they wrote at least fifteen e-mails more than the minimum amount required which was twenty-four (i.e. two e-mails per week in a period of twelve weeks).

This partnership fostered a relationship based on equality, one that was defined by the nature of tandem learning and also by the principle of reciprocity upon which tandem learning is based. This meant that the students showed a genuine interest in their partners' life and culture. They sought and offered advice and exchanged personal information, in addition to information relating to other topics. These participants were eager to discover each other's views on different issues and events and each other's opinions on education, politics, films, music, newspapers and magazines, sports, hobbies, festivals, customs and traditions. Idioms, expressions and stereotypes were also openly discussed.

Both partners asked questions, some personal and others of a more general nature, all of which were promptly acknowledged and answered by the other. Various examples are included below (5):

3- The student's name has been changed.

4- I have counted the number of messages I received, although the student reported sending more e-mails than I actually received.

5- Extracts of messages have been left as they were written. Where the original is in Spanish I have translated the information without the students' errors.



"All my family support Real Madrid, What's the team you support?" (From Natalia's e-mail 19/10/04 (6))

"What traditional things you have?" (From Natalia's e-mail 29/10/04a)

"What kind of music is typical where you live?" (From Natalia's e-mail 29/10/04b)

"Do you like reading? What kinds of books and writers?" (From Natalia's e-mail 30/10/04a)

"Do you like going to the cinema? What is the last film you watched?" (From Natalia's e-mail 30/10/04b)

"What about Halloween?" 30/10/04c)

"How many classes you have a day? How many subjects?" (From Natalia's e-mail 18/11/04)

"What about the festivity of Thanksgiving? Do you have fun? What about parties? Of all the Thanksgiving symbols the turkey is the most well known. Is it? The wild turkey is native to northern Mexico and the eastern United States. You celebrate Thanksgiving on the 4th Thursday of November, which this year, 2004, is November 25th. Isn't it?????" (From Natalia's e-mail 27/11/04a)

"What about American magazines and newspapers?" (From Natalia's e-mail 27/11/04b)

In addition to the students' interest in learning about each other and each other's language and culture, which shows evidence of active learning, discussions about more complex issues also took place which provided an opportunity for negotiation of meaning, as can be observed in the following excerpt:

"Please, don't think that Spanish people dress like that. A lot of things that foreign people think about Spanish people aren't true. For example, boys don't dress in tight pants... Each boy dresses with the kind of clothes they like and girls too. Everyone chooses the style they want. We are all different. Also, our society isn't sexist but there are some who are. Spain isn't a religious country, but here you can find people of all types of Religion. I respect all the different thoughts and ideas. Like I told you, we listen and dance all kind of music, not only FLAMENCO, I have to tell you that not even everybody in Spain know how to dance sevillanas. The true is that Spanish people go to bed very late, but this doesn't mean that we don't arrive on time. It depend on the person. Some arrive on time but others are a little bit lazy. Everywhere there are different kinds of people. In Spain exist the "siesta" but not everybody sleeps the siesta. For example, I don't sleep it, I only sleep at night. And if you have work or you have to do something, businesses will not give you time to sleep the "siesta". Usually, Spanish people sleep the siesta on weekends. That's when they don't have to work... (From Natalia's e-mail 29/11/04).

Both partners helped each other with error correction. Natalia was aware of the importance of error correction in the language learning process. In this respect, she thanked her partner profusely for her corrections and looked for ways of correcting her partner in a manner that would be most helpful to her. Thus, she was keen to negotiate error correction by asking questions, giving suggestions and offering encouragement, all of which was aimed at improving the way they corrected each other's e-mails:

"Last week you send me this e-mail. So, here are the corrections (7)... Ah!!!!!! If you want I change the colour because there are people that don't like this colour ... If you don't like this way of correcting the e-mails please tell me because I don't mind if you want to change it." (From Natalia's e-mail 26/10/04a)

6. When more than one e-mail has been sent on the same day, we have used a), b), c) and so on.

7. Corrections appeared in red and placed in brackets after the errors.



"I'm going to correct your mistakes, but I continue saying that your spanish is great. To take it easy I think that it's better to correct them from the text. So, you can see them and you can have a PERFECT SPANISH. The mistakes are in red." (From Natalia's e-mail 26/10/04b)

"Thank you for your corrections. But you didn't tell me if you understand the corrections I did in your letters. So, I'm going to continue doing like this. But I can change it." (From Natalia's e-mail 2/11/04)

"THANK YOU!!!! for the corrections you did to my e-mails. This helps me a lot. I always write all the corrections and I try to don't repeat the same mistakes... About (my) corrections: Do they help you? Do you like it???? Or you prefer in another way????? (From Natalia's e-mail 18/11/04).

Although most errors were corrected, some seem to have been ignored. After analysing the students' corrections, it became evident that they gave priority to the correction of those errors that were crucial for communication purposes, whilst overlooking those which were either unimportant or whose presence did not obscure the meaning of the message. Here are a few examples:

"Todas los veranos trabajo en un "day camp" cerca de Bridgewater. Es 10 minutos de la playa, y 20 minutos de una playa muy linda que se llama Minot Beach, en Scituate, Massachussets. El camp, Camp Wing Day Camp (CWDC) es uno de un organización que se llama Crossroads for Kids. Ayuda a las familias que son de la ciudad, y que no tiene bastante **de** (here isn't necessary) dinero por una casa o un **apartamento** (it's apartamento), y jugar con los hijos y las hijas de las familias (y familias de la **comunidad** (comunidad) local, quien tienen mucho dinero) y enséñelos a nada, enséñelos el arte, enséñelos a usar una canoa y mas. Es una experiencia como ninguna otra... Puedo ayudar las vidas de los ninos que no tienen nada... Quiero hacerlo por una carrera, porque no **peudo** (puedo) ser mas **feliza** (in spanish feliz is the same for a girl than for a boy) que en camp."

[Every summer I work in a day camp near Bridgewater. It's 10 minutes from the beach and 20 minutes from a lovely beach called Minot Beach, en Scituate, Massachussets. The camp, Camp Wing Day Camp (CWDC) belongs to an organization called Crossroads for Kids. It helps families from the city who do not have enough money for a house or a flat and they play with the children of the families from the community who have a lot of money and you teach them how to swim, art, how to use a canoe, and much more. It is an experience like no other... I can help the lives of children who have nothing... I would like to do it as a career, because I am never happier than when I'm in camp.]

As can be seen in the e-mail above, Natalia's corrections appear in red in brackets. However, the following errors were left uncorrected:

- Es/está a 10 minutos (distinction between ser and estar and preposition)
- y 20 minutos/ y a 20 minutos (the same preposition as above)
- el camp...es uno de un organización/ es de una organización (overuse of uno and use of masculine article instead of feminine)
- familias...que no tiene/tienen (familias is a plural noun and, therefore, the verb should appear in the plural)
- dinero por una casa/para una casa (confusion in the use of "por" and "para" due to the use of "for" in English)



- y jugar con los hijos/ y los niños juegan con los niños (the syntactic structure together with the verb form are incorrect; in addition, the use of masculine and feminine (los hijos y las hijas) is unnecessary, since in Spanish the use of the masculine stands for both when there is a mixed gender group)
- quien tienen/quienes tienen (use of singular instead of plural)
- Y enséñelos/ y les enseñamos (use of the imperative when the indicative is the appropriate verbal form; use of "los" instead of "les" as an indirect object pronoun for people)
- experiencia/experiencia (misspelling)
- quiero hacerlo por una carrera/quiero hacerlo como carrera (use of "por" instead of "como"; misspelling)

There is evidence from other partnerships that students did not correct every error and that they understood the negative effect this could have on their partner. However, it appears that the corrections made by Natalia are very different from those which a teacher might have chosen to correct. For example, emphasis on the correct use of the imperative and indicative verbal modes and the position of Spanish pronouns in the sentence tend to be the focus of much attention in the Spanish classroom. However, Natalia decided not to correct those errors (enséñelos/ les enseñamos). Other errors left uncorrected were really basic mistakes, such as those related to gender, number or spelling, which are common to many learners of Spanish.

Although Natalia only showed evidence of using corrections made by her partner in subsequent e-mails on one occasion, she did mention that she wrote out all the corrections and tried not to repeat the same mistakes (8). Furthermore, her interest in trying out different methods of correction (9) provides clear proof of active engagement in language learning.

Finally, Natalia also took part in the discussion forum and gathered information on the films *Vanilla Sky* and *Abre los ojos* in order to prepare a class presentation. The increase in the number of questions she asked in class and the wealth of information she gathered for her presentation would seem to indicate an increase in her language and culture awareness. Her e-mail exchange appeared to be a contributing factor in this process.

5. Conclusions

The skills required for a successful e-mail partnership should not be underestimated. Participants need to form a relationship with a native speaker, negotiate a series of points, exchange information of interest to them and write in the foreign language with the support of little non-verbal communication (10). Through using electronic mail for language learning, our learners are involved in a truly communicative activity. Whilst the communicative classroom can offer a vast range of activities designed to develop all areas of communicative competence needed for real communication, it cannot normally provide the learner with an authentic opportunity to experience the results of her

8- From Natalia's e-mail 18/11/2005.

9- By using bold, italics and capital letters, different sizes and fonts and different colours; by trying to place corrections after the errors in the full text, by taking the errors and corrections and placing them in separate lists, etc.

10- Students used exclamation marks, capital letters and emoticons to emphasize or add stress to a particular point or opinion.



or his successful or unsuccessful communication. We felt that in order to maximize the chances of achieving successful communication, the students should have the ability to strike up a real friendship with their partner, one based on a genuine interest in their partner's life and personal circumstances. This personal dimension facilitated respect and openness towards the other's opinions and, in the case of the two students mentioned above, encouraged their friendship to continue long after the e-mail exchange had concluded. Other crucial aspects required in order to ensure the success of the exchange had to do with the principles of learner autonomy and reciprocity upon which tandem learning is based. A sense of responsibility regarding their own and their partner's learning process, together with the provision of mutual support and help through error correction, proved to be essential factors in the success of the tandem partnership referred to in this study.

Finally, as Woodin (1997: 31) suggests, tandem learning can act as a bridge between the language classroom and the natural setting. Figure 2 presents a comparison between the features of some approaches to language learning and those specific to e-mail tandem learning:

natural setting	communicative approach (focus on message/ information carried in language)	"traditional" approach (focus on the language itself)	email learning (partners)
meaning all important	meaning emphasised over form	form often emphasised over meaning (accuracy)	depends on learners' wishes
errors rarely corrected	error correction limited	errors frequently corrected	errors corrected if requested (hopefully!)
variety of native speaker contact	limited or no native speaker contact	limited or no native speaker contact	one-to-one native speaker contact
modified input (one-to-one)	modified input	modified input	modified input

Figure 2. Some features of approaches to language learning. Adapted from Woodin (1997: 32)

Thus, integrating e-mail exchanges as part of our language courses may provide us with the essential means to achieve authentic communication among participants. Further research should focus on how to foster intercultural communicative competence through the integration of tandem learning in the language learning classroom.

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Appendix 1

Self-evaluation questionnaire

1. Why are you studying English? What are your goals in studying English?
2. How long have you been studying English?
3. How would you describe your language proficiency / level up until now?
4. How would you rate your interest in learning the English language and discovering English-speaking culture, especially American culture?
5. Do you have any English / American friends or family? Do you practice English with them?
6. How would you describe your experience of and contact with American people and culture before starting this class?
7. What do you think of American people? Describe any ideas or opinions that you have about them.
8. What do you think of American culture? Describe any ideas or opinions that you have about it.
9. What do you think of the English language? What ideas or social status do you associate with it?
10. What kind of benefits do you expect to obtain from an exchange such as this?
11. Do you like computers and the Internet?
12. Are you familiar with their use?
13. What do you think about the use of computer and Internet technology in language learning?
14. What are your expectations of this course?
15. How do you think the use of e-mail and the Internet can help to fulfil your expectations on this course?
16. What topics do you think would be interesting to discuss on a course such as this? Please suggest topics. What do you think will be required of the two parties involved in this project (students over here and in the other country) in order to make an Internet exchange such as this actually work?



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