Combining formal and non-formal foreign language learning: first insights into a German-Spanish experiment at university level

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ABSTRACT:

In this article we will present the first results of a pilot study that aims at creating, evaluating and optimizing opportunities for language learning at university level. Learners of Spanish in Austria and learners of German in Spain face quite similar problems: large groups, a short period of time available and an important progress to be made. This project results from the co-operation between the University of Alicante and the University of Vienna and brings together learners of Spanish in Austria and learners of German in Spain via online tandems. In a first step, the role of Spanish and German as L3 will be described in the background of European language policy, then online tandem learning will be methodologically contextualised and positioned. The third part provides a description of the project, the obstacles and problems when setting up online tandems, and finally a first evaluation of the project with respect to its aims.

KEY WORDS:

eTandem, European Language Policy, Spanish/German as L3

THE L3 IN EUROPEAN LANGUAGE POLICY

The eTandem project presented in this paper focuses upon German and Spanish, two languages that are commonly taught as so-called L3 in Europe. We use the term L3 for designing languages that are not learned as first foreign language in formal education. It is well known and confirmed by data on European language policy that English has been strengthening its role as first foreign language all over Europe. In order to put it quite simple and to ignore the problematic issues of understanding language/s as discrete, countable and clearly separable entities that are learned in formal education (for this criticism see Vetter, 2013), we conceive of L3 here as all languages learned beyond mother tongue plus English (in non-English speaking countries), be it as L3, L4 or Lx. Within European language policy these languages have a key function: since agreeing upon the Barcelona European Council Conclusions (2002), Europe has established its 'Mother Tongue + 2' policy as a minimum requirement for all citizens (Rindler-Schjerve — Vetter, 2012, pp. 27–40) and is only very slowly approaching its goals, particularly with respect to L3.

The success of European language education policy is measured with the help of a monitoring system consisting of tools such as the *Key Data on Teaching Languages at*

School in Europe (Key Data, 2005; 2008; 2012), the Special Surveys of the Eurobarometer (Europeans and Their Languages, 2006; 2012) and particularly the most recent European Survey on Language Competences (First European Survey on Language Competences, 2012). These devices indicate how far Europe is still away from reaching its goals: Just over half of the Europeans believe that they are able to hold a conversation in at least one additional language, whereas less than half of them (44%) claim that they can understand at least one foreign language well enough to be able to follow the news on the radio or television (Europeans and Their Languages, 2012, p. 28). As to language education, the hierarchical order of languages seems to be increasingly stable, whereas linguistic diversity remains low: in 2009/2010, the percentage of pupils learning languages other than English, French, Spanish, German or Russian was below 5% in most countries (Key Data, 2012). A very high percentage of students learns English, whether or not it is mandatory, German and Spanish are among the most widely learned foreign languages in Europe, with the position of German in Spain slightly lower than that of Spanish in Austria (Key Data, 2012, pp. 76f).

Among the languages perceived as useful for children's future, English comes first (79%), followed by French and German (20%), Spanish (16%) and Chinese (14%) (Europeans and Their Languages, 2012, p. 75). Both, German and Spanish, are perceived as less useful in 2012 than they were 6 years ago (Europeans and Their Languages, 2012, p. 75; Europeans and Their Languages, 2006, p. QA2b). To sum up, Spanish and German are rather well positioned as a widely spread L3 in Europe. For the linguistic goals of European language education policy they can play a key role as second foreign language.

The current project is not about learning languages at school, but in tertiary education. Language learning at university links up to language learning at school as well as to the overall policy context, since it continues and/or complements learning in both qualitative as well as quantitative terms. In our particular context of the University of Vienna and of the University of Alicante, many young people start to learn a new language. The situation for these beginners is quite similar: both universities are confronted with stagnating resources for language courses, i.e. many learners and few teachers, and an important progress to be made within few months. The combination of formal learning offered at university and non-formal learning via online tandems was meant to support learners in this context. Moreover it should particularly create opportunities for L3-learning.

NON-FORMAL, SELF-DIRECTED AND SCMC — THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAME

In order to position the tandem project with respect to learning in the classroom, we first draw upon the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning (for an overview on terminology see Overwien, 2005) and follow the definition given by the European Commission (COM(2001) 678 Final, 2001). Hence, we understand formal learning as typically organised, structured and institutionalised in formal education system, i.e. schools, universities. Within formal learning, objectives are set. From the

learner's perspective formal learning is always intentional, although not always voluntary, and takes place in an environment specifically designed for learning. Informal learning results from daily life activities and is not organised or structured. In most cases informal learning is "incidental", although it may be intentional. It typically does not lead to certification and can be understood as lifelong process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes, values from daily experience. Learning organised within our tandem project is neither typically formal nor informal, but in-between and will hence be defined as "non-formal". In the European Commission's approach non-formal learning is considered as purposive, but voluntary; it may have learning objectives and although it is rather organised, it does not necessarily follow a set structure. Non-formal learning takes place outside the formal education system, but involves some kind of learning support and planned activities. It may take place in a diverse range of environments and situations where learning is not necessarily the sole or main activity, e.g. learning programmes, conversation clubs, learning in tandems.

Research on informal and non-formal learning addresses the question of learner autonomy and self-directedness since the learners at least partly take control over the learning process, the contents of learning, the learning resources and the organisation of their learning (Schmelter, 2004). In our tandem project we follow Godwin-Jones' (2011, p. 6) and Dam's (1999, p. 127) understanding of autonomous learning as situated in a kind of peer-network, where guidance and advice is helpful and usually needed and learners determine their learning strategies and useful materials accompanied by reflection tools such as guidelines, handbooks, questionnaires, worksheets, check-lists, etc. This means that in designing the work of the online tandems the balance between guidance and self-directedness has to be considered. In the third part of this paper, the challenges that go along with this task will be discussed, as well as what can be learned from the pilot project.

A third characteristics of our tandems is that they are based on a specific type of computer mediated communication, so called CMC, since students communicate with each other per online chat. CMC has been widely used since the 1980s (Rösler, 2010; Trinder, 2006) and interpersonal interaction between learners is "hypothesized to promote negotiation of meaning, co-construction of meaning, and prompting their attention to form" (Jamieson — Chapelle — Preiss, 2004, p. 404). Research into language learning has particularly focused upon intercultural issues in this relationship and introduced the concept of Internet mediated intercultural foreign language education (ICFLE; see Thorne, 2003; 2006) with its four models telecollaboration, eTandem, partnerships between local expert speakers and foreign language students and learners' participation in online communities (Tian — Wang, 2010; following Thorne, 2006). In the following we will summarize the main characteristics of eTandems.

eTANDEM FOR LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Tandem language learning is generally described as a multi-dimensional process based on mutuality and autonomy. The intercultural aspects are focused along the linguistic dimension (Grau, 2010, p. 315; Bechtel, 2010) and tandem learning part-

nerships are conceived of as communication situations, where learners are able to apply and refine their linguistic as well as cross-cultural abilities such as defined by Hu (2010) who highlights the importance of change of perspective, empathy, relativisation of ethnocentric perspectives, openness and curiosity and who follows Byram (1997, pp. 34, 50–53) in distinguishing between savoir, savoir comprendre, savoir apprendre/faire, savoir être, savoir s'engager as dimensions of intercultural competence. In the evaluation of our current "experiment" the linguistic component has been foregrounded.

Within research on language tandems several types of tandems are distinguished: among these, our project can be characterised as a kind of eTandem including distance communication (in contrast to face-to-face tandems), since the contact between the learners in Alicante and the learners in Vienna is made through video chat via "ooVoo". Our project can be more precisely described as being based on synchronous communication (in contrast to asynchronous communication such as emails or formerly letters). The advantages of distance tandems with respect to face-to-face tandems are evident: more potential partners and more flexibility with respect to time and space. However, depending on the way of realisation, eTandems — except for video chats — do not include all modes of communication at the same time, whereby valuable metalinguistic information might be lost.

At different universities, e.g. Sheffield University, Universität Bochum, Universidad de Oviedo, and institutions of adult education[1] Tandem language learning has been integrated into "traditional", institutional language learning contexts, which is quite similar to the current pilot project. Some universities have even established tandem learning modules as integral parts of their curricula. Hence, the potential consequences of this integration into formal language learning can be estimated: learning becomes less self-determined and less authentic since tasks are set that the students may prepare in advance. Moreover the increase of learning motivation normally observed in tandem relationships may also lead to the opposite due to the mandatory character of these courses. Hence, a range of suggestions for setting up institutionally embedded language tandems can be derived from these experiences (Schmelter, 2010, pp. 242f). First, task setting is a key issue in designing a tandem project — on the one hand, tasks restrict the learners' self-determination, while on the other hand they may provide useful support and ideas for personal exchange. Open tasks in terms of worksheets, where learners decide themselves how to make use of, may be recommended (Bechtel, 2010, p. 292). Second, reflection tools shall be provided. These include tools for personal reflection such as learning journals, log files, tools for mutual reflection together with learning partner as well as guided reflection in groups with the teacher or monitor. And finally, guidance and mentoring shall be provided for the participants. These suggestions were not entirely followed in our project, due to the lack of resources and the experimental character of the project. The evaluation will show in how far our 'naïve' approach was nevertheless problematic in some respect.

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1   See project literalia: <http://creet.open.ac.uk/projects/literalia/index.html>.

THE PILOT PROJECT VIENNA–ALICANTE

We considered our project an experiment since we started without any supplementary resources but two motivated language teachers, Claudia Gruempel at University of Alicante and Javier Bru-Peral at University of Vienna. They started with two groups of learners who participated in the beginners' course for Spanish (at University of Vienna) and for German (at University of Alicante). The tandem partners were randomly assigned and given five tasks to fulfil in both languages over a period of two months. As a means of communication, "ooVoo" — a freely available video chat tool — was used. Each pair of learners was supposed to record their tandem-sessions (two recordings per task), and upload the respective audio files (at least three out of five) via Dropbox. The participation in the tandem project was voluntary for the 80 Austrian students in the beginners' course, but a mandatory part of the German course for learners from Alicante.

The following graph illustrates the relationships established for the tandems: The language teachers at University of Vienna and at University of Alicante developed tasks and guided their students during the tandem process. They were supported by a team that drew on previous experience with tandem learning and digital tools.
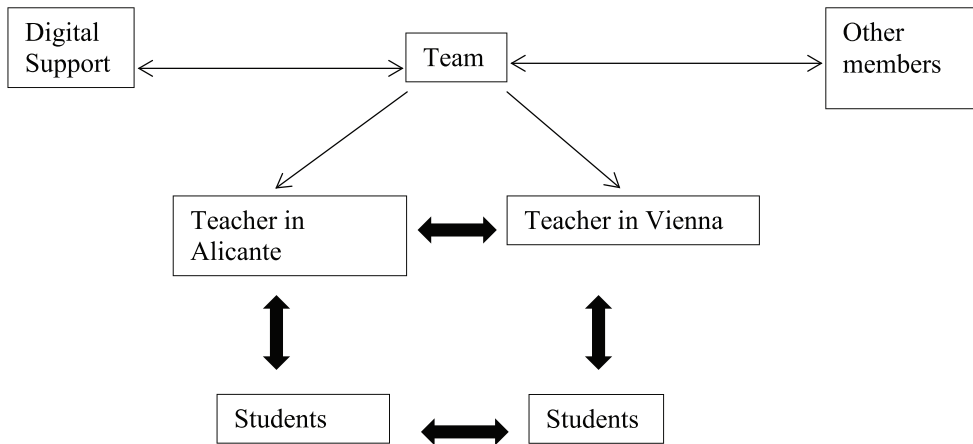
The tasks, all typical tasks drawing on the communicative approach, were only slightly different for Austrian and Spanish participants. They were quite strictly set, especially Viennese students were provided with rather extensive lists of questions to ask and information to retrieve from their partners. Tasks for students in Alicante were considerably less closely defined. The tasks are summarized in the following:

Tasks for Alicante students (A)
Task 1A: Presentation (name, place of residence, age, studies, languages).
Task 2A: Conversation in a coffee shop (to order, to pay a bill).
Task 3A: Description, talk about your house (too small, too expensive; on the right, on the left, …).

Task 4A: Weekly plan / activities and routines (what time you get up, eat, work/study, go to bed).
Task 5A: Agree / set appointments (the hours; analogic, digital).

Tasks for Vienna students (V)
Task 1V: Get your partner's personal data.
Task 2V: Get the tastes and interests of your partner.
Task 3V: Ask your partner about a typical day in their life.
Task 4V: Plan a party with your partner.
Task 5V: Ask your partner what he/she has done today.

FIRST RESULTS

In order to evaluate the project against the background of its aim, i.e. to create, evaluate and optimize opportunities for L3-learning, three different aspects shall be looked at more closely: 1. Participation: How many students participated/continued? 2. Attitudes: How did they evaluate the project with respect to the concept of tandem learning? 3. How did they correct their partners' errors?

As far as participation is concerned, during the pilot period 32 (out of 39) tandems continued until the end of the project and fulfilled all tasks. For Vienna this means that less than half of the students had opted for participating into the project and some of them, not many, had abandoned. The overall feedback was very positive, even enthusiastic for some students. From the feedback and the participation one could conclude that the project was quite successful.

In order to answer the second question a questionnaire was designed (see Appendix). The aim of the questionnaire was to particularly evaluate interaction and cooperation of the partners, trained skills (self-assessment) and the tasks. 11 students answered the questionnaire.

In the following the results will be briefly summarized. The questionnaire results indicate a certain asymmetry between the languages. In only 4 out of 11 cases, i.e. less than 50%, the tandems invested equal time for Spanish and German, in two cases Spanish was dominant and in the majority of the respondents' cases German was dominant. Learners also report on using English in order to enhance organisation, ensure understanding, and talk about problems related to the languages.

Regarding the skills, the learners felt strong support for pronunciation (45%) and global listening comprehension (54%), whereas the competence of spoken production seems to be rather subordinate. The tasks themselves are considered to make sense.

Difficulties while learning in tandems were mostly related to the ooVoo-application. 81.82% mentioned to have had problems with the video-chat tool. A bit more than one third of the respondents (36.36%) specified that they had difficulties with Dropbox. Problems with their partners were stated by 18.18%.

During the project 150 recordings of about 1–2 minutes each were uploaded, whereof 13 were randomly selected and transcribed. These transcriptions constitute

the data corpus for the third question. The available data indicate that most of the participants had elaborated and written down the demanded dialogs before recording, which eventually led to much less authentic situations than we would have desired. As a consequence, the learners' utterances were found to be mostly correct in terms of grammar. In the following we will therefore mainly focus on the aspect of pronunciation.

There is a range of typical pronunciation mistakes that Spanish-speaking learners of German repeatedly make. The following table gives an overview, using data from the corpus (tandems A008 and A35):

Type of mistake	Examples
[s] instead of [ʃ]	studira [: studiere] slafen [: schlafen] beskraiben [: beschreiben] steche [: stehe] tipise [: typische]
[z]/[s] instead of [ts]	wohn/simmer [: wohn/zimmer] swei [: zwei] kurs [: kurz] im esweiten [: zweiten] stock simmer [: zimmer] sahle [: zahle] seit [: zeit] eswei [: zwei] gansen [: ganzen] eswarsen [: schwarzen] sen [: zehn]
[v] instead of [f] ([w] statt [v])	so wiel [: viel] sowiere [: so viel] so wier [: viel] wergeht [: vergeht] won non [: von neun] bis wuensen [: fuenf-zehn] wor [: vor] worstellung [: vorstellung]
Confusion between [v] and [b]	bier [: vier] wad [: bad] glauwen [: glauben] arweiten [: arbeiten] haw [: habe] awend [: abend] wis [: bis]
Umlauts	schon [: schoen] tipische [: typischen] tipise [: typische] zwolf [: zwoelf] ain [: ein]

Type of mistake	Examples
Additional [e] at the beginning of consonant clusters [st] and [sp]	Espanien [: spanien] estudiere [: studiere] eslagsahn [: shlagsahne] esweiten [: zweiten]/zwei die sonne estrahlt [: strahlt] estunden [: stunden] esnach [: schnell] esteche [: stehe] eswarsen [: schwarzen] eslafen [: schlafen]
[x] instead of [h]	gechen [: gehen] sechen [: sehen] estechen [: stehen]
Diphthongs	Euro (eu statt oi) heyst [: heisst] heyst [:heist] deyn [: dein] ain [:ein] nachste [: naechste]

The corpus data give evidence of a wide range of pronunciation errors. From that it can be concluded that the Austrian students widely did not correct their partners' pronunciation and that they tended to be relatively tolerant to mistakes that don not have an impact on understanding. It can be hypothesized that correction might rather address issues of lexical and/or grammatical errors (see also Blex, 2001). This observation is crucial, since the majority of those most typical errors of Spanish-speaking learners of German could have been easily repaired or at least reduced by means of appropriate feedback and correction.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

There are several lessons to be drawn from the experience made in the pilot study. First of all, it is highly recommendable that already existing experiences with tandem language learning and research into eTandems is more explicitly integrated into the overall project design and particularly into task development. In this way, it will be more likely that the project benefits from the strengths of non-formal learning and that non-formal learning can become a real complement to formal learning at university. From the corpus study, it can be learned that the current tasks have given relatively little space to self-directed processes and learner autonomy although these are main characteristics of non-formal learning in contrast to formal learning. Moreover, as can be also followed from research in tandem language learning, appropriate reflection tools shall be developed in order to accompany the whole process. The questionnaire at the end of the project could only highlight some strengths and weaknesses but was rather inappropriate as an overall reflection tool for the tandems.

A second point is the technical support. Despite the guidance by their teachers and despite the technical support provided by a team of experts, many students had to face difficulties with the tools used (ooVoo, Dropbox). This is an unnecessary problem hindering the whole process and this experience teaches us that a simple and efficient tool is an important prerequisite for eTandems.

A third experience reported here relates to language symmetry (or asymmetry) and this links up to issues of mutuality and co-operation in tandems. The results of the questionnaire reveal a certain asymmetry with respect to the time invested for each language. From this we can only derive the hypothesis that asymmetry should be an issue when designing a tandem project. There is no doubt that this aspect needs further investigation, particularly with respect to language proficiency of the learners involved.

A last point concerns feedback. From the corpus we learn that easily identifiable pronunciation errors have not been corrected by the tandem partners. This has an impact on the quality of the exchange and one conclusion could be that tandem partners could benefit from an introduction into language learning and acquisition and giving feedback.

In terms of experience and what we can learn from that, our experiment was quite successful. To sum up the lessons to be learned, there are some aspects to be respected in order to enhance the efficiency of the eTandem. As follow from our experience, these guidelines relate to task development, technical issues, mutuality, and feedback.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

I. Please indicate the languages that you speak and mark for each language the utterance that fits the most.

1st language: _____

— I can communicate in simple situations that have to do with familiar topics and activities.
— I can participate in conversations about familiar topics or areas that are interesting for me without any preparation.
— I can effortlessly engage in all kinds of conversations and discussions.

2nd language: _____

— I can communicate in simple situations that have to do with familiar topics and activities.
— I can participate in conversations about familiar topics or areas that are interesting for me without any preparation.
— I can effortlessly engage in all kinds of conversations and discussions.

3rd language: _____

— I can communicate in simple situations that have to do with familiar topics and activities.
— I can participate in conversations about familiar topics or areas that are interesting for me without any preparation.
— I can effortlessly engage in all kinds of conversations and discussions.

4th language: _____

— I can communicate in simple situations that have to do with familiar topics and activities.
— I can participate in conversations about familiar topics or areas that are interesting for me without any preparation.
— I can effortlessly engage in all kinds of conversations and discussions.

II. Have you ever gained experiences in tandem learning with electronic support BEFORE this course?

YES / NO

1. Which languages have you used in addition to the two target languages?
_____
_____

2. Which functions did these languages have? (You can choose more than one function.)
— to fill vocabulary gaps
— to secure comprehension
— to use nuances of meaning
— for conversation structuring
— for organization
— to respond to linguistic problems
— further functions: _____

3. The length of the Spanish learning phase has been...
— shorter than the German learning phase.
— as long as the German learning phase.
— longer than the German learning phase.

4. I show in the tandem work...
— less dedication than my partner.
— as much dedication as my partner.
— more dedication than my partner.
(All answers will be treated anonymously!)

5. To which extent have your language skills been improved through the tandem
work?

	strongly	moderately	slightly	not at all
fluent speaking				
correct speaking				
pronunciation				
selective comprehension of details				
content-aimed listening comprehension				
grammar				
vocabulary				

6. In case your language skills have not been improved through the tandem work,
what do you think might be reasons for that?
_____
_____

7. Is there anything you would like to share with the research team of the tandem
project? (All comments will be treated anonymously!)
_____
_____

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