5 TANGO, an international collaborative bilingual e-learning project

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Abstract

TANGO (Álvarez-Mayo, 2013) uses the cultural aspects of foreign languages to promote oral interaction, enabling students to become self-regulated learners. Through TANGO, foreign language students learn about the cultural intricacies of the Target Language (TL) and use the TL to practise and further develop their oral skills with a partner who is a native speaker. Students openly discuss their views and reflect on their learning progress and any issues they may encounter while practising all language skills: listening, reading, writing and oral interaction. TANGO is an e-learning programme that promotes self-regulated learning as well as critical thinking and as such it will play a key role in making foreign language students better equipped learners, enabling them to develop invaluable continual development skills for their academic and professional careers.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, e-learning, collaborative work, autonomous learning, critical thinking.

1.   Introduction: topics and tasks

As already discussed in Álvarez-Mayo (2015b), TANGO consists of two bilingual websites. One site hosts the Spanish and English tasks, and the other is the e-portfolio (see also Álvarez-Mayo, 2015a) where the pilot students

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published their work. Tasks in both languages are akin, as they have been planned around the same grammatical and cultural topics relevant to the course outline. They have been purposely developed to help students reflect on similarities and differences between both languages and cultures in order to promote intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2004). Tasks have been designed following a communicative approach and are influenced by Critical Pedagogy (Breunig, 2011), encouraging critical thinking to develop socially active individuals.

When I devised TANGO I wanted to create authentic tasks: real, varied and motivating tasks which would be different every time and for every learner; that could be approached as a whole or broken into individual parts, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.   D. English regions
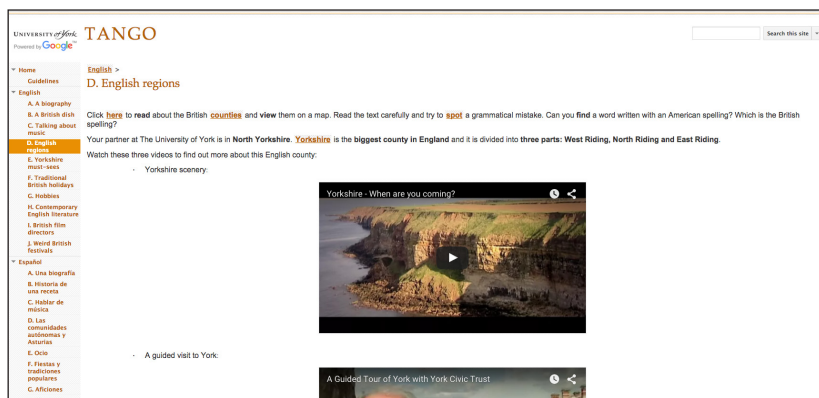
Being a collaborative project (Center for Teaching and Learning, 1999), I wanted to ensure that all students would play a key role. Therefore, all activities were designed with the students at the core, revolving around the students' experience and interests, i.e. culture, food, traditions, geography, hobbies, music, film, and literature. Sharing their own knowledge and experiences, real and meaningful discussions would develop, and genuine communication and reflection would

be generated and would increase the students' understanding of one another and the TL they are studying:

"A DMC [Directed Motivational Current] is recognisable when the journey toward a goal does not merely consist of conscientious, concentrated hard work, but instead exhibits signs of something more—a serendipitous coming-together of circumstances and conditions—leading the project to take on a life of its own and stream past initial expectations to a point way out in the distance" (Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, in press, p. xii).

2.   Aims of the project

The University of York Languages For All (LFA) Programme provides a formal basis in the development of the four key language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. However due to time constraints, few extension activities to develop cultural awareness can be provided, see Figure 2.

TANGO was devised to enhance the students' learning experience, bringing foreign language learners the opportunity to practise the TL with a native speaker in order to help them cultivate oral interaction skills.

Figure 2.   D. Las comunidades autónomas y Asturias ('The autonomous counties and Asturias')

This new language program was piloted with post-beginner students from the University of York (UoY) and English intermediate students from the University of Oviedo (UoO). At the start of the 2013/14 academic year, the UoY Spanish students had a CEFR A1 level of proficiency (Council of Europe, 2001), similar to a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the British education system. By the end of the academic year the UoY Spanish learners who had actively participated in the pilot achieved an A2/B1 in the CEFR, similar to an A-Level in the United Kingdom.

The feedback received from the participants in the pilot of TANGO reflected that the students found the project very beneficial as they had experienced a remarkable improvement in their language skills. Students became acquainted and familiar with cultural concepts and their confidence using the TL improved substantially. They developed a deeper language awareness not yet achieved by many upper-intermediate foreign language students, and consequently they became intermediate level students.

As noted in their feedback, students became more confident learners while they practised and developed valuable skills needed to complete the project's tasks, such as reading and researching topics to be able to discuss their findings with their partners and share their views and experiences. They also wrote and published the fortnightly essays in their individual online portfolios (Veenman, Van Hout-Wolters, & Afflerbach, 2006) and reflecting on their learning provided feedback and help to one another.

Students worked in a professional manner and acquired transferable skills to help them become autonomous learners: they worked independently and in small teams, were fully in charge of their work, research and practice; organised and agreed their work schedules; used a variety of documents; researched topics individually and in collaboration with their partners; discussed their ideas and experiences in both languages and were creative presenting their findings and writing their essays. While doing all that, students used and developed IT skills to publish and share their work; behaved professionally, exercising respect and understanding with one another and became more aware of diversity, see

Figure 3. The students who participated in TANGO practised 'self-regulated learning': "learning that occurs largely from the influence of students' self-generated thoughts, feelings, strategies, and behaviors, which are oriented toward the attainment of goals" (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998, p. viii).

Figure 3.   C. Talking about music: sample of an English student portfolio (1)

During the project, students reflected on their learning through "new eyes" (Proust, 1923, p. 237), and developed what Michael Byram (1997) refers to as 'intercultural communicative competence'. They practised 'critical cultural awareness': the ability "to question, to analyse, to evaluate and, potentially, to take action" (Byram, 2008, p. 146). Furthermore, based in Kolb's (1984) Experimental Learning Cycle, TANGO has provided a safe environment to practise and develop Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, "a continuous process of working on attitudes, knowledge, internal outcomes and external outcomes related to intercultural competence" (Moeller & Nugent, 2014, p. 4).

Students had the opportunity to learn new vocabulary and idiomatic expressions (Figure 4), while practising and further developing their command of the TL in the four main language skills as well as exercising real communication and genuine oral interaction, utilising and acquiring the relevant skills to successfully communicate and interact in the TL.

Figure 4.   C. Talking about music: sample of an English student portfolio (2)

TANGO (Week 6)

C. TALKING ABOUT MUSIC

GLOSSARY

Word	Spanish translation	Definition	Example
Anoint (Verb)	Ungir	To put oil or water on somebody's head as part of a religious ceremony.	The priest anointed her with oil.
Cradle (Noun)	Cuna	A small bed for a baby which can be pushed gently from side to side.	The baby was sleeping in its cradle.
Despise (Verb)	Despreciar / Menospreciar	To dislike and have no respect for somebody/something.	You shouldn't despise her for what she did.
Glen (Noun)	Cañada / Valle	A deep narrow valley, especially in Scotland or Ireland.	It was located near a Scottish glen.
Nickel (Noun)	Moneda de cinco centavos	A coin of the US and Canada worth 5 cents.	I need another nickel for the parking meter.
Ore (Noun)	Mineral	Rock, earth, etc. from which metal can be obtained.	That mine has a reserve of ore.
Pall (Noun)	Nube	A thick dark cloud of something.	The pall covered all they could see.
Reedy (Adjective)	Lleno de juncos.	Full of reeds.	We walked near a reedy river.
Shepherd (Noun)	Pastor	A person whose job is to take care of sheep.	A shepherd must take care of his sheep.
To turn the tide (Idiom)	Cambiar el curso	Reverse the trend of events.	This is the last chance for us to turn the tide of our future.
Wayward (Adjective)	Caprichoso / Obstinado	Difficult to control.	His wayward behaviour is going to bring him problems.
Window ledge (Noun)	Alféizar	A narrow shelf below a window, either inside or outside.	He put a plant on the window ledge of his office.

3.   Collaboration and human e-motion

In the 21st century, technology is fundamental in communication to foster relationships, both personal and professional, and to share knowledge, experiences and opinions. Depending on our personality, our history and personal experience, some of us find it easier than others to establish relationships; perceptions, attitudes and beliefs play an important role in this

too. Consequently, establishing a good relationship amongst peers is crucial to develop highly effective teams (Balsom, Barrass, Michela, & Zdaniuk, 2009) and achieve success in a collaborative endeavour (Figure 5).

Figure 5.   TANGO homepage
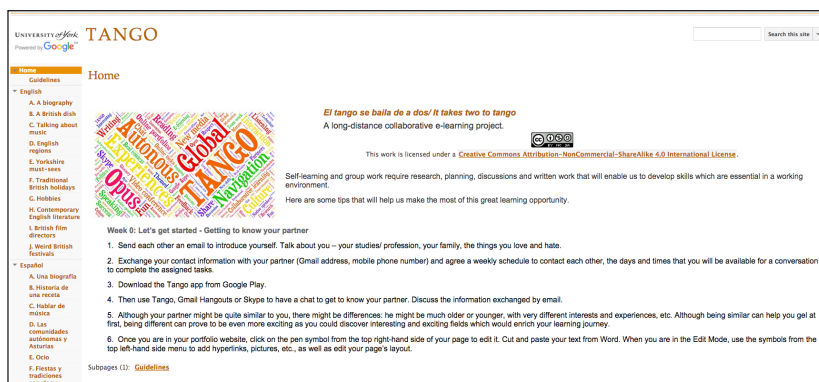
Setting firm foundations and sharing general safe guarding information to ensure that students were respectful with one another was essential for the success of the project. After some initial research (Jones, 2008; Neville, 2009; Working Group on QA for Distance Learning, 2013) and reflection, guidelines were devised for students to create a safe environment where experiences and views could be shared in a respectful and professional manner. These guidelines were published on both TANGO websites, see Figure 6.

Throughout the pilot of TANGO, students used technology to a more extensive level than it is normally incorporated into the teaching and learning process. They relied on Skype and Google Hangouts to communicate synchronously, to discuss each task, the notes they took, their experiences, ideas and opinions. They openly discussed tasks and received feedback from one another before and after publishing work in the e-portfolios.

The Internet has given us the opportunity to discover and share ideas and knowledge. Using the online space each student was allocated, they became

authors and publishers, and were creative and original in developing their own styles. They appreciated and valued their own effort and acquired a better understanding of the TL and culture as well as their own. Our cultures are varied, complex and multifaceted; it is important that learners become more aware of diversity: culturally, regionally, locally, so that they can increasingly become more understanding and respectful with one another, not only internationally but at every level.

Figure 6.   TANGO guidelines
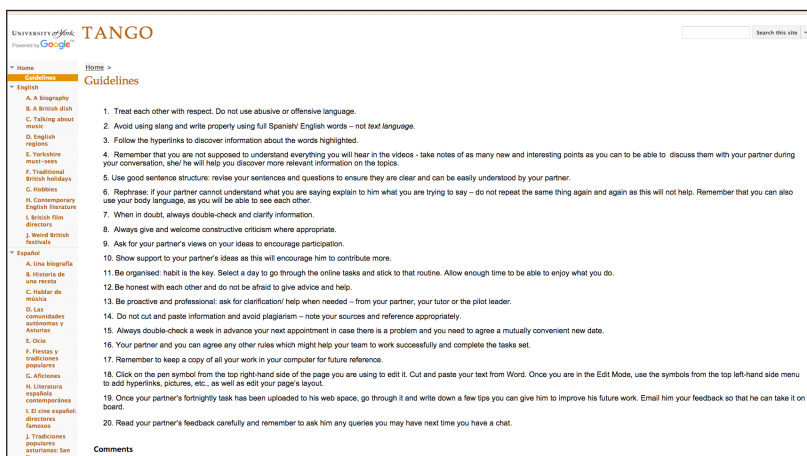
Openly discussing and sharing our experiences enable us to reflect and learn from them and with each other. TANGO and the e-portfolios use the Internet, communication tools and apps currently available to bring together students not only from different countries, but from a variety of cultures, backgrounds and ages.

4.   Conclusion

Tutors and students in Oviedo and York provided very positive feedback on materials, methodology and impact.

The students' learning experience was enriched by a deepening of cultural knowledge about aspects which they had previously not encountered. They noted improvement in a range of key skills such as writing, speaking and vocabulary acquisition and mentioned in their feedback that they found the pilot very useful and would like to participate in TANGO again.

Essential workplace skills were practised and developed: time-management, working with others, document use, reading, oral communication, critical thinking and discussion, grammar, translation, writing, digital technology, and continual development skills.

There was a clear appreciation of individual contact with a native speaker and an in-depth sharing of experiences in pairs. Students shared their life experiences, real experiences within a real context and learnt about the cultural intricacies embedded in language learning.

Students reflected on their learning process, discussed issues they have experienced while doing their work and developed a better understanding of the target language due to the nature of the peer-mentoring partnership they fostered.

Independent learning was promoted and practised by students. Self-regulated learning was embedded in the project and participants were encouraged to work with flexibility and to organise their work and contact time, thus developing lifelong learning skills. Learners were guided and supported to take control of their own learning.

Students were led towards planning their own work, they were provided with forms to monitor their own progress after each completed task and they were requested to provide feedback reflecting on their work and learning experience. Ongoing discussion and reflection on the students' work and learning progress were promoted and practised throughout the project.

Each learner is an individual, and although we share many characteristics we have our very own distinctive traits which make us all unique. Some of us

can remember facts and events particularly well, some can recall vividly what they see, others have a sensory memory and can remember experiences very clearly, including smells, tastes, temperature, etc., yet unconsciously, we all can remember what we regularly do and practise again and again in order to become better at something: playing an instrument, a sport, or, in this case, learning and using a foreign language. The more often we practise something, the better our understanding of the subject, the higher the standard we can achieve and deliver, and the more developed our implicit memory (Schacter, 1987) becomes (commonly referred to as 'muscle memory') – in the same way that our muscles improve with exercise when they are utilised.

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