Synchronous tandem language learning in a MOOC context: a study on task design and learner performance

Marta Fondo Garcia[1] and Christine Appel[2]

Abstract. In the context of a Language Massive Open Online Course (LMOOC), teacher interventions have to be designed into the course, since personalized teacher feedback actions are impossible due to the large number of participants. Learner autonomy, peer-feedback and task design are crucial in this course design. This paper presents a study on the task design effect on participants of a tandem MOOC (English-Spanish). The tandem MOOC takes advantage of the *massive* aspect of a MOOC to provide learners with ample opportunity for language use with native speakers of their target language, and access to peer-feedback. The tasks provide content and an objective for the conversations, turning them into episodes of meaningful language interaction. The study is conducted through observations of eight video recorded conversations by two learners of English carrying out four different tasks, eight tasks in total, with five different learners of Spanish, as it will be explained in more detail in the methodology section. The results show that task types had an effect on students' performance, but variables such as proficiency also played a role in learner interaction.

Keywords: e-tandem, MOOC, task design, student performance, student interaction.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the effect of task design in a new web 2.0 collaborative learning environment that contributes to Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) research. The tandem MOOC (Appel & Pujolà, 2015) is an LMOOC which offers online

1. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain; mfondo@uoc.edu
2. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain; mappel@uoc.edu

How to cite this article: Fondo Garcia, M., & Appel, C. (2016). Synchronous tandem language learning in a MOOC context: a study on task design and learner performance. In S. Papadima-Sophocleous, L. Bradley & S. Thouësny (Eds), *CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016* (pp. 144-149). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.eurocall2016.552

speaking practice for learners of Spanish and English. It is based on the synergy of e-tandem and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). In e-tandem settings, two learners of each other's language interact via videoconference in order to complete tasks together and help each other with the language learning process in their dual expert-novice roles.

This paper describes the initial findings of participants' performance and interaction analysis in relation to task design in an e-tandem setting. The aim is to explore how, and to what extent, different task designs influenced the performance of the participants in terms of communication strategies, length of conversation and immediate feedback provided during on-task time. The tasks are analysed using Robinson's (2001) Triadic Componential Framework (TCF). The data collected are the video recordings of the conversations by eight pairs of learners carrying out four different tasks in the tandem MOOC 2014.

2. Method

The setting is a six week course with a total of 36 available tasks. Learners could opt for the random tandem format in which they were paired up at random or the pre-arranged tandem format in which the interlocutor and the task were of their choice. Each week had a thematic category for all six activities: Negotiation, Quizzes, Free-talk, Problem-solving, Role-playing and Exam Preparation. All tasks had an even number of activities in English and Spanish. The tandem MOOC platform provided a videoconferencing tool which automatically records and archives the conversations, and the tandem tool which distributes the tasks to participants in real-time.

The participant sample is eight dyads, two Learners of English (LoE), B2-C1 CEFR[3] paired up with five Learners of Spanish (LoS), A2-B1 CEFR. The sample was chosen from the participants with the highest number of tasks done in the MOOC, in order to ensure a greater number of task samples available for analysis.

This study is conducted as an ex post facto observation. In order to more accurately measure the task effect on participant performance through observation, the same four tasks performed by the same two LoE were selected in order to reduce the individual differences variables. The task types used in this study, according to Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993), are information gap (Quizzes 1), problem-

3. Common European Framework of Reference

solving (Negotiation 1, spot the difference) and opinion exchange (Free-talk 1 and Negotiation 6.3).

The task categorisation was done under the criteria of 'open-closed' solution and 'convergent-divergent' goal. Such variables are part of Robinson's (2001) TCF as interactional task conditions and have been widely studied to determine which ones ensure the optimal opportunity for conversational interaction (e.g. Duff, 1986; Long, 1981; Pica et al., 1993; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987). Participants' performance and interaction are measured by feedback episodes such as 1) Explicit Corrective Feedback (ECF), 2) Negotiation of Meaning (NoM) and 3) Recast. Feedback episodes are classified into successful and unsuccessful. A successful feedback episode indicates that a participant noticed the feedback and modified their output or acknowledged the correction (Table 1, sample 1). However, if a participant ignored the feedback or failed to notice the modified output then the feedback is considered to be unsuccessful (Table 1, sample 2).

Table 1. Feedback excerpts

Successful feedback – sample 1	**Unsuccessful feedback – sample 2**
P: Can you see **fishes**? O: No I can't see any fish. P: I can see a lot of **fish**.	E:¿**Está una** pastel o una tarta? O:Umm creo que no, no E:Ehhh**..está**… O:En lugar de **estar es ser**, es; es dulce, no es estar, ¿es carne?, ¿es verdura?, ¿Vale?. E:¿**Está un** plato famoso en español?

3. Discussion

According to Pica et al. (1993), Long (1996) and Duff (1986), closed solution and convergent goal tasks result in a greater amount and quality of interaction. However, in this study, such tasks (Quizzes 1 and Negotiation 1) are the ones with a lower number of feedback episodes. In contrast, in this study, the 'divergent-open' tasks, such as Free-talk 1 and Negotiation 6.3 (opinion exchange) have a longer length (Table 2).

Table 2. Task types and length

Task	**Total minutes**	**Pairs**	**Overall time**
Quizzes 1	42:08	Pedro - June	17:44
		Olga - Ellen	24:24

Negotiation 1	32:10	Pedro - Oliver	18:53
		Olga - Garreth	13:17
Free-talk	78:02	Pedro - Ellen	51:47
		Olga - Christine	26:55
Negotiation 6.3	42:57	Pedro - Christine	18:49
		Olga - Christine	24:08

Divergent-open tasks have also a greater number of feedback episodes but with a high rate of unsuccessful feedback. Therefore, feedback is less effective in contrast to Negotiation 1 (closed-convergent) in which only one out of 13 feedback episodes was unsuccessful (Table 3).

Table 3. Feedback episodes per task

Task	Total	ECB	NoM	Recast	Successful	Unsuccessful
Quizzes 1	9	1	8	0	6	3
Negotiation 1	13	3	8	2	12	1
Free-talk 1	21	6	13	2	15	6
Negotiation 6.3	12	4	7	1	10	2

In this study, proficiency and feedback are apparently closely related (Table 4). As noted by Kawaguchi and Ma (2012), "[i]t is interesting to observe that the speaker of higher proficiency level in all combinations consistently show higher frequencies of initiating recasts than the speakers of lower level while this observation is reversed with [negotiation of meaning]" (p. 8). In this study, ECF is also notably higher among the most proficient learners.

Table 4. Feedback per participant

Participants	Proficiency	Tasks done	ECF given	NoM asked	Recast given
Pedro -NSS1	C1	4	8	1	2
Olga - NSS2	B2+	4	3	4	2
Christine-NSE1	B1	3	3	5	0
Ellen - NSE2	A2 -	2	0	12	0
Oliver - NSE3	A2+	1	1	1	1
Garreth - NSE4	A2 -	1	0	4	0
June - NSE5	B1	1	0	1	0

The most common communication strategies used during negotiation of meaning situations are language switch and ask for clarification (see Table 5). This result is analyzed in the following section.

Table 5. Communication strategies during feedback episodes

Task	Participants	Language switch	Ask for clarification
Quizzes 1	Pedro-June Olga-Ellen	1 2	0 0
Negotiation 1	Pedro-Oliver Olga-Gareth	2 8 (less proficient)	1 3
Free-talk 1	Pedro-Ellen Olga-Christine	9 (less proficient) 1	1 1
Negotiation 6.3	Pedro-Christine Olga-Christine	1 2	2 3
Total		26	11

4. Conclusion

Task design and its effect on interaction and negotiation have been studied in different contexts in order to provide the most beneficial speaking practice to language learners. Several studies have confirmed that learners can develop their language competence through negotiation of meaning, which promotes the elicitation of modified input and output, enhances learners' comprehension and draws their attention to L2 form as well as meaning (Gass & Varonis, 1985, 1994; Long, 1996; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987). The results in this study have to be interpreted tentatively due to the small size of the sample, the video recording selection criteria based solely on the most active participants and the variety of tasks. Having said that, the results suggest that we cannot assume that learner performance in a tandem setting will be the same as in the Non-Native Speaker (NNS)-NNS, or novice-expert dyad configurations found in most studies in the literature of TBLT. For instance, the presence of a very high number of language switching episodes in a Native Speaker (NS)-NNS interaction (presented in Table 4) reflects the peculiarity of interaction in tandem settings, as learners know each other's language. The possibility that differences may be due to the interaction setting of a tandem conversation means that studies need to be replicated in this particular design before transferring any results. We plan to extend this study further by collecting a larger sample of data and complementing this with participant interviews in the next edition of the tandem MOOC in the fall of 2016.

5. Acknowledgements

The tandem MOOC tools, Videochat and Tandem tool, were developed under the SpeakApps project (www.speakapps.eu) (Appel et al., 2014) within the European Lifelong Learning Program funding.

References

Appel, C., Nic Giolla Mihchil, M., Jager, S., & Prizel-Kania, A. (2014). Speakapps 2, speaking practice in foreign language through ICT tools. In S. Jager, L. Bradley, E. J. Meima & S. Thouësny (Eds), *CALL design: principles and practice. Proceedings of the 2014 Eurocall conference, Groningen, the Netherlands* (pp. 12-17). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2014.000187

Appel, C., & Pujolà, J. T. (2015). Pedagogical and technological issues in the instructional design of a tandem MOOC. In *Proceedings of E-Learn: World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, and Higher Education 2015* (pp. 1696-1705). Chesapeake, VA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).

Duff, P. A. (1986). *Another look at interlanguage talk: taking task to task*. Newbury.

Gass, S., & Varonis, E. (1985). Task variation and non-native/non-native negotiation of meaning. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 141-161). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Gass, S., & Varonis, E. (1994). Input, interaction, and second language production. *Studies in second language acquisition, 16*(3), 283-302. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100013097

Kawaguchi, S., & Ma, Y. (2012). Corrective feedback, negotiation of meaning and grammar development: learner-learner and learner-native speaker interaction in ESL. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics, 2*(2), 57-70. https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2012.22008

Long, M. H. (1981). Input, interaction, and second□language acquisition. *Annals of the New York academy of sciences, 379*(1), 259-278. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1981.tb42014.x

Long, M. H. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. *Handbook of second language acquisition, 2*(2), 413-468. https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-012589042-7/50015-3

Pica, T., Kanagy, R., & Falodun, J. (1993). Choosing and using communication tasks for second language instruction. In G. Crookes & S. Gass (Eds), *Tasks and language learning* (pp. 9-34). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586992

Pica, T., Young, R., & Doughty, C. (1987). The impact of interaction on comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly, 21*, 737-758.

Robinson, P. (2001). Task complexity, task difficulty, and task production: exploring interactions in a componential framework. *Applied Linguistics, 22*(1), 27-57. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/22.1.27

Research-publishing.net

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016
Edited by Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Easy Conferences, info@easyconferences.eu, www.easyconferences.eu
Cover layout by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Photo "bridge" on cover by © Andriy Markov/Shutterstock
Photo "frog" on cover by © Fany Savina (fany.savina@gmail.com)
Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-43-8 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-44-5 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-45-2 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2016.