

9 A discussion on how teachers assess what foreign language students learn in telecollaboration

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Abstract

Institutional integrated TeleTanDem (iiTTD) is a model of telecollaboration characterised as a series of tasks that are integrated into the syllabus of a foreign language course. This paper aims at presenting and discussing the assessment practice of a Brazilian teacher who integrated teletandem into her regular English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons within a teacher education programme. Among the different tasks that learners carry out within iiTTD, this study focusses on what is assessed by the teacher when offering formative feedback on learning diaries written by Brazilian participants. The study, of a qualitative interpretative nature, uses data collected by means of the tasks that 13 Brazilian learners carried out within iiTTD in 2017. Results show that the teacher was able to assess (1) students' self-assessment skills, (2) language accuracy (when diaries are written in English), (3) the learning of content presented in class, and (4) intercultural issues that may emerge during teletandem oral sessions.

Keywords: foreign language learning, teacher's assessment, telecollaboration.

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1. Introduction: telecollaboration and assessment

Teletandem (Telles, 2006) is a model of telecollaboration which is based on the tandem principles (autonomy, reciprocity, bilingualism) and has been carried out at Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP), in Brazil. iiTTD is a specific model of teletandem that is characterised by Cavalari and Aranha (2016) as a series of tasks that are embedded in language courses so that teletandem practice can both feed and be fed by regular foreign language lessons. The tasks learners are expected to carry out in iiTTD are: (1) participating in teletandem oral sessions, (2) writing learning diaries, (3) answering initial and post-questionnaires, and (4) writing collaboratively. In accordance with studies on telecollaborative practice (Lewis & Walker, 2003; Little & Brammerts, 1996; O'Rourke, 2007), Cavalari and Aranha (2016) point out that there are three key pedagogical procedures to meaningful integration: (1) preparing learners for autonomous collaborative learning, (2) blending virtual exchanges into classroom activities by means of integrating tasks, and (3) considering different assessment perspectives (the teacher's, the learner's, the peer's).

Despite a considerable body of research on peer feedback and self-assessment, which demonstrated that they can be driving forces in telecollaborative learning, there seems to be a dearth of investigations on assessment practices. O'Dowd (2010) carried out a comprehensive study on assessment of online activities (including virtual exchanges). The study showed that teachers tended to focus their assessment on (1) participation (the number of times students send emails or post messages in forums, for example), (2) ability to interact with others and develop positive relationships, and (3) intercultural communicative competence. The author also discussed some assessment practices (use of grading rubrics and portfolios) which involved both a formative (process-based) approach, which is particularly suited to assessing telecollaborative learning, and a summative (product-based) perspective, which reflects institutional demands. He remarked that it is crucial to develop comprehensive models for assessing online language activity which include the skills, attitudes and literacies that educators claim are involved in telecollaborative projects.

In this paper, we focus on the formative aspect of assessment and investigate the feedback offered by a teacher on learners' diaries in iiTTD. Considering that diaries are written with the purpose of developing autonomous learning, this study aims at discussing what teachers may assess by means of this task.

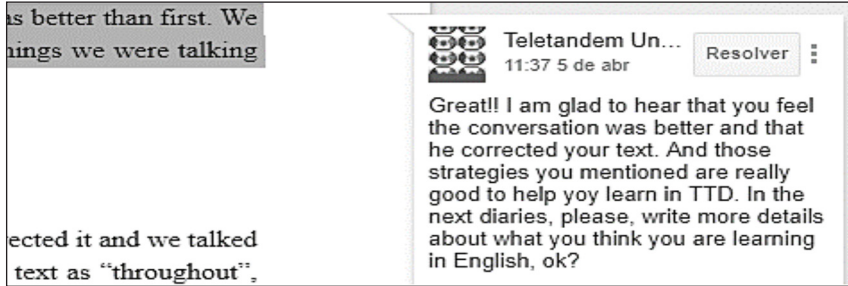
2. Methodology

This is a case study that focusses on a Brazilian teacher's assessment practice as she gave feedback on her students' learning diaries within iiTTD. Telecollaboration was integrated into the second year of an English as a foreign language course taught within a four-year teacher education major. The tasks which students carried out during the eight week telecollaborative project were: (1) participating in six synchronous oral sessions (via Skype), (2) writing six learning diary entries, (3) writing two texts in English and sharing them with the teletandem partner, (4) revising two of their partner's texts in Portuguese, and (5) answering two questionnaires (initial and final). Analysis is based on data collected by means of the diaries written by 13 Brazilian students between March and April, 2017. Students could choose whether to write their diaries in English or in Portuguese: eight decided to write in English and five, in Portuguese. Diaries were written in Google Docs and shared with the teacher by means of Google Drive. The focus of the analysis is on the aspects attended to by the teacher as she offered feedback to each student's diary entry on a weekly basis. The analysis of the teacher's feedback was based on the categories proposed by O'Dowd (2010), but it also took into consideration the emergence of new categories.

3. Results and discussion

Data analysis revealed that most feedback offered by the teacher focussed on aspects of autonomous learning and self-assessment. When learners vaguely mentioned what they had learned, the teacher asked them to be more specific, encouraging reflection and monitoring.

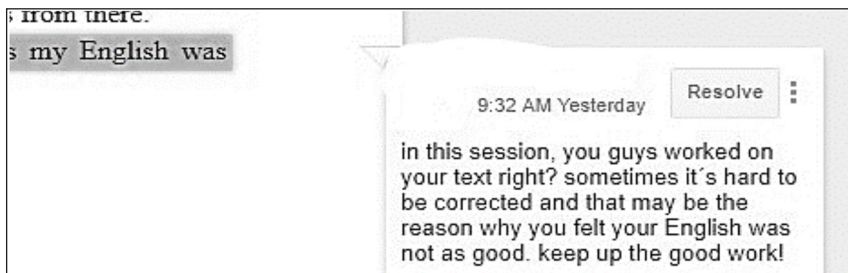
Figure 1. Fragment 1 (teacher's comment, Diary 2, Participant 11)



The fragment in [Figure 1](#) shows that the feedback also focussed on the use of learning strategies, prompting the student to realise that the strategies he used were appropriate for learning in telecollaboration and assisting him in using other strategies. This is evidence that diaries are serving their purpose of promoting reflection on learning and developing autonomy, but, more importantly, it is evidence that, from a formative perspective, diaries are a powerful assessment instrument for teachers.

There was also strong evidence that the teacher's feedback had a focus on students' motivation and feelings towards learning in iiTTD. The fragment [Figure 2](#) shows a comment the teacher made as a student mentioned how disappointed he was about his English performance during the oral session.

Figure 2. Fragment 2 (teacher's comment, Diary 4, Participant 2)



The teacher's comment is reassuring and may help the learner save face and maintain a positive attitude towards telecollaborative practice. This seems to be crucial in assisting students in coping with the role that social relationships and affective factors play in any learning context, but particularly in online intercultural exchanges.

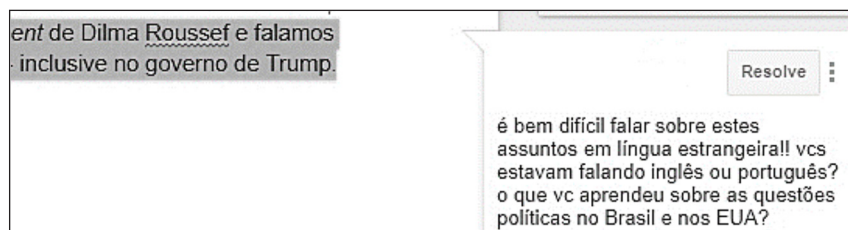
Another focus of this teacher's feedback was on language accuracy. When the diaries were written in English, the teacher changed the colour of some words (or stretches of text) and added comments to give further information about inappropriate words or expressions. In Fragment 3, instead of using the comment feature of Google docs, the teacher left a comment highlighted with a different colour in the end of the diary entry:

Fragment 3. “the words marked in blue are my ‘tips’ about how you can improve your text. Let’s talk about the problems you had with the ‘application letter’ in class, ok? 😊” (teacher’s comment, Diary 1, Participant 6).

Considering the diary is a private text intended to foster reflection on the learning process, it seems crucial that the teacher does not correct the linguistic items she finds inappropriate, leaving space for learners’ decisions on what, if anything, they want to change in their texts. As to the ‘application letter’, which was one of the texts Brazilian learners wrote and shared with their partners, this student mentioned in her diary that she found her partner’s revision contradictory in relation to what she had learned in class. The teacher’s comment indicates that telecollaboration can furnish meaningful content for discussion in the classroom.

Finally, data suggested that this teacher’s assessment focussed on intercultural issues (see [Figure 3](#)). In this fragment, the student wrote, in Portuguese, that he and his partner discussed the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (the former Brazilian president) as well as the policies of Donald Trump (the current American president). The teacher’s feedback highlighted the fact that those are complex topics to be discussed in the foreign language and asked the student what he had learned about political issues both in Brazil and in the USA.

Figure 3. Fragment 4 (teacher's comment, Diary 4, Participant 7)



4. Conclusion

Data analysis revealed that the teacher's feedback focussed on aspects of autonomous learning (students' self-assessment of their language learning), attitudes and affective factors (social aspects of language learning), language accuracy (when diaries are written in English), and (inter)cultural issues. These results suggest that teachers' assessments of learner diaries may embrace individual and social aspects of telecollaborative learning as well as its linguistic and cultural contents. The results corroborate some of O'Dowd's (2010) findings if we acknowledge that when teachers assess ability to communicate with others and intercultural communicative competence, they are dealing with social, affective, and cultural issues. However, this study also offers evidence that, from a formative perspective, teacher assessment involves aspects of autonomous learning that are intertwined with classroom teaching.

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