11 How a multilingual project can foster and enhance international mobility

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Abstract

This case study refers to the eTandem pre-mobility project coordinated by the Padova University Language Centre running twice a year since 2015 for approximately eight weeks. The project matches up local university students with incoming international students, thus boosting integration between the two groups and increasing internationalisation at home. One-to-one and many-to-many interactions are organised, the latter with the support of trained facilitators, who launch asynchronous (in an online multilingual community) and synchronous, intercultural, theme-based learning activities to be discussed every week. Students' linguistic, intercultural, and digital competences, as well as autonomy, are enhanced throughout the project, making them better prepared for their mobility.

Keywords: virtual and physical exchange, pre-mobility exchange, international mobility, soft skills, multilingual, multicultural, etandem, online community.

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1.   Context

1.1.   Who is involved

The eTandem project was developed by the Language Centre of the University of Padova, in collaboration with the International Office (IO) in 2015 as a virtual exchange between incoming international students and domestic students interested in a language and intercultural exchange. It runs twice a year and with every iteration following a review of feedback received, slight adjustments are made. The number of participants has grown every year, and the most recent edition (ninth) involved 68 Italian and 75 international students.

Domestic students come from a range of degree courses. A substantial number are majoring in languages and literature and their participation in the project is recognised with three ECTS. Another substantial group (recruited through the IO) are future 'outgoing' students, who will be going on an Erasmus or other mobility project in the future and are interested in practising their language and/or learning more about the country and university system where they are going.

The very first edition saw Italian and English used as *linguae francae* in the exchange between peers. Additional languages such as Spanish, French, German, and Portuguese have been added in the following iterations thus contributing to the multilingualism called for in European language policy[3].

1.2.   Project rationale – why it takes place

The eTandem project was conceived to respond to several needs. First of all, it was pivotal for the University Language Centre to meet the requests of domestic students interested in the already existing face-to-face tandem learning (Formentin, Griggio, & Whigham, 2004) but who could not be paired up with

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3. With the adoption of the Barcelona objective (16 March 2002), which recommended the teaching to all of "at least two foreign languages from a very early age", multilingualism has become key in the European policy: "As part of its efforts to promote mobility and intercultural understanding, the EU has designated language learning as an important priority… Multilingualism, in the EU's view, is an important element in Europe's competitiveness. One of the objectives of the EU's language policy is therefore that every European citizen should master two other languages in addition to their mother tongue" (https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/71025.pdf).

international students because there were never enough international students to meet the demand.

Secondly, the initiative can contribute to deepening the participants' linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as their digital competence, thus enhancing soft skills. As universities prepare young people to become not only active global citizens but also effective members of the global workplace, increasing emphasis is being placed on soft skills in enabling them to operate effectively in work contexts which are both highly globalised and digitalised[4].

Thirdly, the project is also a way to boost 'internationalisation at home' and abroad. For those students who cannot or do not want to go abroad, eTandem provides an international dimension, i.e. experience in virtually communicating with people from different countries, gaining intercultural skills, creating networks, and improving their language competences and global competence (European Commission, 2009). However, the project also enhances mobility abroad as it triggers an emulation process among those students who have not applied for an international exchange programme yet.

2.   Nuts and bolts

2.1.   Communication modes and matching

The eTandem project foresees two communication modes, in a double line of interaction (see Figure 1):

- **many-to-many** through the e-community**,** where Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and English are used as *linguae francae*, with facilitated dialogue sessions in mixed groups of eight to 12 students; and

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4. The OECD (2018) suggests that "[e]ducating for global competence can boost employability" (p. 7). Global competence is "the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development" (OECD, 2018, p.7).

- **one-to-one**, where the time should be equally split between Italian and other target languages, for both students to benefit from the language exchange. To this end, the e-moderators match pairs of students prior to the project start and remind them to meet up regularly. Because the number of participants for each group is not always equal, not only dyads but also triads are formed in certain cases. Students are matched according to different criteria: their destination/country of origin, study area, and language chosen.

Figure 1. Outline of interactions in eTandem
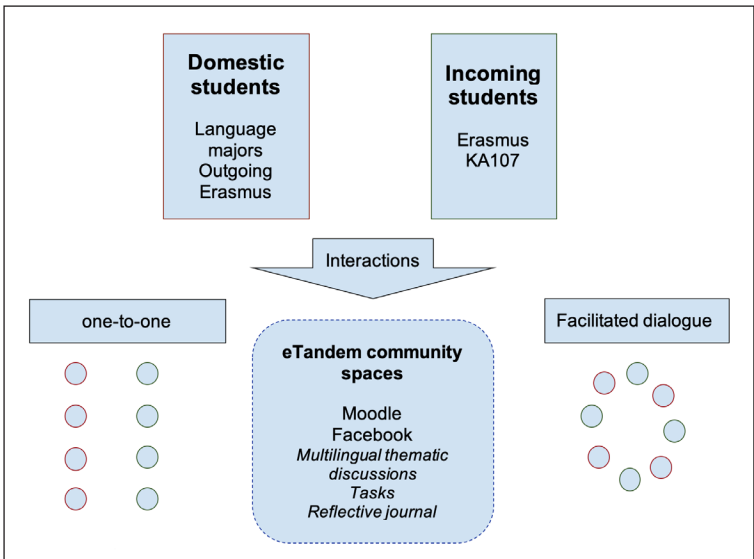
2.2. Tools

In the one-to-one interaction, students are free to choose the interaction language and tools (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Messenger, Skype, Zoom, etc.).

The online multilingual community has instead been hosted on two separate platforms simultaneously: an institutional one (Moodle) and an informal one

(Facebook). Although not all students enrol on both platforms, since neither is compulsory, they have been invited to join at least one in order to contribute to the e-community.

While Moodle was chosen by the eTandem team for its widespread use at Padova University and the opportunity to create a closed and safe environment, Facebook was instead chosen to make the informal language learning happen and create an enriching intercultural context. Although students are not obliged to become friends, through Facebook they can learn different attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of their Italian and international peers[5] (Griggio, 2018).

2.3.   Activities

The many-to-many interaction is favoured by a pattern of topics provided by the e-moderators. In the first week, students enter the online platform(s) and time is devoted to social and technological familiarisation. The project also includes theme-based asynchronous activities on a weekly basis, from the second to the tenth week, which guide learners through the topics discussed in the e-community. Prompts are launched every week, starting with a Motivation Monday activity, followed by further sub-themed activities throughout the rest of the week. Students, however, are left free to contribute even after the end of the week to whatever discussion they liked.

Students are encouraged to write weekly diaries of language and culture in Moodle, so as to keep a record of what they cover during one-to-one interactions and what they think about the intercultural issues addressed in the e-community. There is no specific format to be followed, as these diaries are mainly aimed at free writing and self-reflection. This type of activity serves as a tool to reflect on and evaluate thoughts, ideas, feelings, skills employed, and students' own learning process, closely following and recording their progress. The 'writing space' in Moodle contributes to enhancing students'

5. Moreover, Facebook being an open platform, its access can give students an everlasting possibility to belong to the closed e-community and they could carry on the exchange again, even beyond the end of the project, with different participants, simply by using the prompts, rules and resources provided. Despite the characteristic openness of social networks, a safe and protected virtual place has been ensured.

self-awareness, but also helps tutors to monitor the project development, in particular the constant interaction between students in the dyads/triads, while also enabling a continuous adjustment of the project to students' needs, competences, and suggestions. Moreover, a final reflection paper and feedback questionnaires are required at the end of the project.

In addition to the asynchronous activities, synchronous sessions, facilitated by Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+VE) trained facilitators, have also recently been offered on Zoom, dealing with various topics.

2.4.   Topics

Tutors propose and moderate debates on both safe and more controversial themes, like reading, traditions, stereotypes and superstitions, differences between cultures (body language, gestures, and tips), culture shock, cultural intelligence, food, and many others. More controversial topics include the role of media, climate change, veganism, social inequalities (job and gender, gender and pay gap), technology and education, humans *versus* robots, and social inclusion[6].

Any argument introduced in the social community area can be dealt with in the dyadic interactions as well as more personal themes such as families, hobbies, and interests.

3.   Aims of the project

From a linguistic perspective, the first aim is that students learn and/or practice the languages of study in the one-to-one exchange, and the various *linguae francae* in the online multilingual and multicultural community. Plurilingualism

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6. The topics discussed are pretty much in line with the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals: "[t]hese are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice"(https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/).

and inclusive multilingualism[7] are key for the project, first of all because a better knowledge of more than one foreign language is needed to compete worldwide, second because of the high level of intercomprehension among romance languages, which are widely used in the students' exchanges. The focus is on the content rather than on the linguistic form (fluency *versus* accuracy) thus favouring spontaneity in the exchanges (Griggio, 2018)[8].

Secondly, the eTandem project gradually fosters students' cultural and intercultural awareness, by enhancing their curiosity towards otherness and familiarising them with different cultures while at the same time also being asked to deepen their knowledge of their own culture. This all requires the development of active listening and interaction strategies with foreign e-partners, but also the ability to relativise one's own values.

As far as the social level is concerned, boosting the integration of international students with those of the host country is a key aim. International students have the opportunity to be introduced to students who know the Italian university system and culture and can benefit from some language practice before their departure (Griggio, 2018, p. 91).

With reference to the technological and digital aim, students are encouraged to learn '*savoir faire*' and '*savoir être*' online (Griggio, 2012), participating in an e-community and safeguarding their web reputation. Through specific activities and resources, participants learn not to overexpose themselves online and how digital tattooing[9] may spoil their digital identity and hinder some future employment opportunities. Thus, participating students not only experience

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7. Multilingualism is defined as the ability to use several languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers, either actively (speaking, writing) or passively (listening, reading). In other words, a mutual interaction of languages according to the user's mind, experience, and social experiences (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168). Plurilingualism, the concept promoted by the Council of Europe in its Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), is the attempt to use one's linguistic knowledge and skills to communicate with others in many different situations. It means the ability to use language effectively and being connected in a multinational and multicultural community (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168).

8. The ability to communicate in various languages is one of the fundamental requirements in the labour market, as confirmed by the European Council Recommendation of 2018 (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN).

9. A tattoo is permanent, much like the information posted online: photos shared, comments written, videos liked. Even if they are deleted, they may still be out there – saved and shared by others, or even kept by the site or app itself.

opportunities and potential risks linked to social networks, but also how to live and participate in an online community (Griggio, 2018, p. 91).

4.   Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

The project was awarded the European Language Label[10] in Italy in 2016. Following the e-tutor's participation in training and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, the project has also been recognised as an E+VE.

Three ECTS are awarded to the language and literature majors, provided that they successfully complete the project, as this has been formalised as optional activity within their curriculum. Other participants are not awarded credits as they take part on a voluntary basis. A certificate of attendance is nevertheless issued to all students when they successfully complete the activities required: (1) writing at least four (out of six) language and culture diaries, (2) contributing to at least six eTandem community discussions, (3) writing a short final essay in the language of study, (4) participating in at least one online session, and (5) completing a questionnaire at the end of the project.

Since 2019, students fulfilling the requirements described above have also been awarded E+VE open badges. Students are not fully confident with how to use and display them so potential ways of displaying them have been illustrated (e.g. using them to enrich the CV, or displaying them on their social media profiles) in a final synchronous session.

At the end of each edition, students are asked to fill in a feedback questionnaire aimed to explore students' participation, motivation, and perspectives related to different areas: technological and digital, content, linguistic and metalinguistic, cultural, psychological, and social. Data analysis indicates that the majority

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10. "The European Language Label is an award encouraging the development of new techniques and initiatives in the field of language teaching and learning, as well as the enhancement of intercultural awareness across Europe. The Label is awarded annually or biannually to the most innovative language learning initiatives in each Erasmus+ programme country participating in the scheme. The Label covers all sectors of education and training" (https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/multilingualism/european-language-initiatives_en).

of students found Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to be the most useful tools for interacting. From a cultural perspective, it emerges that all but few participants considered the project very or quite useful. Almost all respondents said they intended to stay in contact with their eTandem partner once in Padova and that they felt mentally and emotionally more prepared to study abroad, while other Italian students felt more encouraged to apply for an Erasmus scholarship after this experience. Linguistically, they developed informal lexicon and written and oral skills both in the languages used as *linguae francae* and their target language, and perceived the benefit of peer-to-peer correction as high (Griggio & Rózsavölgyi, forthcoming). English (33%) was used as much as Italian (31%) and other languages (36%), and learners appreciated the multilingual environment. Last but not least, most of them felt less inhibited when speaking a foreign language, and said they had cultivated curiosity towards 'diversity' and developed active listening[11].

5.   Lessons learnt and conclusion

Several lessons have been learnt through these nine editions. Crucial to the project success is the students' motivation, which has been encouraged by:

- letting them choose the topics they preferred to deal with first and proposing topical themes that are relevant both at a global and local level;

- the multilingual community space which allowed for communication beyond the dyads and enabled students to provide their contributions openly;

- avoiding to correct mistakes publicly; corrections were given directly by their peers in a private setting only;

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11. More recent detailed results will be published in Griggio and Rózsavölgyi (forthcoming): eTandem: analisi di un progetto di pre-mobilità presso il CLA dell'Università di Padova.

- issuing E+VE open badges: the number of students who completed their learning path has almost doubled compared to previous editions (18 participants in the eighth edition *versus* 31 in the ninth edition);

- providing task based activities (Appel & Gilabert, 2002) on a regular basis;

- setting up online synchronous sessions in addition to asynchronous communication, which students have highly appreciated, as demonstrated by feedback collected through final questionnaires and meetings;

- leaving students free to choose the tools for one-to-one interactions; and

- leaving learners free to choose the languages they prefer to interact in with their e-peers.

5.1.   Benefits

The project has proven to be highly beneficial at various levels. First of all, it is strategic at Higher Education Institution level as it promotes internationalisation at home as well as study abroad: both the initiative's timing (it is a pre-mobility project) and the composition of the Italian group (encompassing students of different disciplines and, notably, language students to further strengthen its multilingual aspect) were planned and chosen carefully. Not only does the project mentally and emotionally prepare students to study abroad, but it also makes those who have not won a scholarship yet, eager to emulate their fellows and thus willing to apply for an international exchange programme.

Second, it links virtual exchange to physical mobility, thus building a bridge in temporal and linguistic terms: "students can visit their virtual space before, during and after their physical exchange" (Griggio, 2018, p.108). Moreover, after their arrival in Padova, international students can finally meet in person with their Italian partner to continue a face-to-face relationship (face-to-face

tandem project). Students show real empathy by providing mutual help and solidarity as well: Italian students help the international ones around the city and take care of some matters such as finding a house, saying where to purchase sim cards, or introducing them to nice places to hang out. During the lockdown due to Covid-19, the eTandem was for many of the international participants the only opportunity they had for contact with domestic students. This was particularly valued by those who had remained in Padova as they could be supported in their understanding of local news and regulations.

5.2. Challenges

Implementing such a project also presents some drawbacks, such as being very demanding and time consuming for the eTandem team to pair students, manage high numbers of emails, look for alternative fellows whenever students are 'abandoned' by their partners as some dyads/pairs may not work properly due to different expectations, time zones, or commitment incompatibilities.

Secondly, for students to be able to speak freely, a community of trust must be created (Helm, 2013), where all actors can feel safe to address sensitive topics and let students come out of their comfort zone, which is not easy in the very beginning. There is a need for well trained, multilingual e-tutors, able to be flexible, creative, prompt to intervene, and be as neutral as possible.

Third, there is a strong need to involve counterparts from other institutions and countries to balance students' participation. Although both Italian and international students enrol on a voluntary basis, Italian students have proven to be more proactive if compared to their e-partners, partly due to the ECTS they receive and strong local coordination.

5.3. Future steps

The project team is constantly working on enhancing the project even further and adapting it to student's changed needs and expectations. The first enhancement would be to form a parallel network of international university e-tutors or

teachers willing to implement such an initiative in their own institutions, so as to increase the integration of Padova University outgoing students. By working on both sides (or on many sides, as would be the case if other universities were involved), foreign learners would also be encouraged to be more proactive and receptive in developing their multilingual and intercultural competences (Griggio, 2018).

Another future step would be to train potential future foreign e-tutors or teachers, in order to equip them with techniques, strategies, and a tool kit of activities, tricks, and tips to carry out intercultural discussions. Based on students' feedback, the eTandem team is also evaluating to increase the number of synchronous sessions, and structure them in a way that both internal and external tutors are envisaged.

To conclude, the high project potential in terms of development of transversal competences, internationalisation at home and critical thinking would inevitably be very beneficial for other university stakeholders. That is why extending the project implementation to administrative staff would be a desired outcome in the near future (Griggio & Pittarello, forthcoming).

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