



Academic e-tandems as a strategy for English language learning in a Mexican university

Dan Isai Serrato  & Brenda Cecilia Padilla Rodriguez 
Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon (Mexico)
dan.serratosz@uanl.edu.mx & brenda.padillardr@uanl.edu.mx

Abstract

E-tandems, or virtual synchronous exchanges, offer opportunities for language learners to practice their skills with native speakers. While they are regularly conducted informally, some institutions are exploring their academic use. This paper reports on the experience of eight students who were learning English at a public university in Mexico. They connected via Skype with a group of peers who were taking a Spanish course in the United Kingdom. Data sources included field notes taken during the e-tandem session, a follow-up survey and a focus group. Participants reported feeling motivated and excited about meeting students from another country. They practiced their oral language skills and received feedback directly from native speakers. Their learning included nonverbal communication, such as hand gestures. Participants discovered cultural differences but also common ground with their peers. The e-tandem experience was an effective strategy for foreign language learning.

Key Words: e-tandem, motivation, oral communication skills, cultural learning, foreign language learning

Introduction

English is one of the most widely spoken languages, with 1.5 billion speakers. It is also the most commonly studied foreign language in the world, with approximately one billion students (Lyons, 2017; Secretaria de Educacion Publica [SEP], 2015). Communicating in English is an important skill for personal development and employability. Even more, English represents a means for international collaboration, and its usage correlates with innovation and technology adoption (Education First, 2019; Eurostat, 2019). In regions such as Latin America interest in learning this language has grown, as evidenced by the emergence of national policies and related educational programs. However, English proficiency is still very low (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017).

Different initiatives have arisen to address this challenge. Digital resources, such as podcasts, videos and blogs, have been paired up with regular face-to-face teaching strategies (e.g., Rojas, 2013). The use of mobile devices has been studied as a flexible, timely, personalized, active and social learning strategy (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018). Online language-learning programs have offered ways of engaging students and improving their performance (e.g., Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2017).

This paper reports on the implementation of an academic e-tandem, focusing on the experience of eight Mexican university students who were learning English. This strategy is relatively common in some countries, as evidenced by international projects such as SEAGULL (Smart Educational Autonomy through Guided Language Learning) in Europe. However, this type of experience is out of reach for most language learners in Mexico. English teachers are usually non-native speakers who focus their lessons on grammar skills. There is limited access to English outside the classroom (Borjian, 2015). Strategies to practice language skills are usually based on interactions with other Mexican classmates or teachers. Only a few students are able to travel to English-speaking countries. While learners generally recognise the value

of technologies, some also report not fully understanding how to incorporate them into their language learning process (Carranza Alcántar, Islas Torres & Gómez Maciel, 2018).

E-tandems for Language Learning

E-tandems, or virtual synchronous exchanges, offer opportunities for language learners to practice their skills. They can take place via online video conferencing tools, such as Skype or Zoom, and can sometimes extend to social networks (Griggio, 2018). During the e-tandem sessions, each participant is a native speaker of the language that the other person wants to learn. They take turns supporting each other, making the cooperation reciprocal (Escribano Ortega & González Casares, 2014; Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Tian & Wang, 2010). E-tandems are regularly conducted informally, with participants deciding their own learning aims or not having any specific ones. In formal education contexts, a language teacher guides the process (Karjalainen, Pörn, Rusk & Bjorkskog, 2013; Litzler, Huguet-Jérez & Bakieva, 2018).

During academic e-tandems, teachers usually define the objectives, based on the curriculum, and require an evaluation. They plan the activity with a focus on students' learning. They usually take the role of guides and facilitators. They generate a space where students can collaborate with others in authentic situations, and encourage them to engage in a reciprocal collaboration. They offer support, or scaffolding, throughout the experience (Karjalainen et al., 2013; Pörn & Hansell, 2020).

Synchronous online interactions enable students to improve their communicative competence. E-tandems can complement traditional courses (Litzler et al., 2018). Participants benefit from one-on-one feedback and practice their language skills. They can learn the accurate way to pronounce and use vocabulary (Wu & Maret, 2008). They can also develop different social skills such as active listening (Griggio, 2018; Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Resnik & Schallmoser, 2019; Wang-Szilas, Berger & Zhang, 2013).

Moreover, students participating in e-tandems can enrich their cultural knowledge, understand diversity and increase their intercultural awareness (Griggio, 2018; Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Wang-Szilas et al., 2013). They gain first-hand insight into the target culture by having authentic conversations with native speakers (Escribano & Gonzales, 2014; Resnik & Schallmoser, 2019). They particularly appreciate this exposure to a different culture (Wu & Marek, 2008).

Finally, perhaps the most valuable outcome of e-tandems is that they encourage students to keep on learning. Practicing the target language with native speakers increases motivation and confidence. It makes them engaged participants of their own active learning (Wu & Marek, 2008). They might even feel comfortable exchanging not only academic information but also personal data (e.g., Pomino & Hill-Salom, 2016). They report mostly feeling satisfied with this type of experience and find it an enjoyable encounter (Arnold & Fonseca-Mora, 2015; Litzler et al., 2018).

Recommendations to further the study of e-tandems have emerged in the literature. They encompass difficulties encountered by students with limited experience with the target language (Litzler et al., 2018), strategic ways to foster autonomy for future language learning, and methods to evaluate the oral production that happens during e-tandems (Wang-Szilas et al., 2013). This paper reports on the implementation of an e-tandem for language learning at the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL), a public university in the north of Mexico. This was a new experience for the participating faculty, the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts. Spanish learners from the University of Essex (UK) and their teachers were also part of the session. In order to obtain some contextualised general information, this study takes a broad approach and assesses the effectiveness of e-tandems as a strategy for learning English as a foreign language in a Mexican higher education setting.

Methodology

Participants

Fifteen people participated in a group e-tandem session: eight students and their teacher in Mexico, and four students and two teachers in the UK. All students were taking a level B1 language course (see Council of Europe, 2018). This paper focuses on the experience of the eight undergraduate students who were enrolled in a semester-long English course at UANL. Their ages ranged between 17 and 23 years. All of them considered that their skill to communicate online in their own language was very good or excellent. Two of them had participated in e-tandems in the past. For the rest, this was their first experience. Students in the UK were invited to answer a follow-up survey as well. However, none of them agreed to participate in the evaluation of the e-tandem.

Instruments

Three sources provided data:

1. **Field notes (FN).** These covered three main areas, technology, participants' behaviors (e.g., tone of discourse and interactions) and general observations.
2. **Surveys (S).** Using Google Forms, the authors created online surveys. These began with informed consent. Nine items with a five-point Likert scale assessed Skype as a communication tool and the e-tandem experience. Three open questions enabled participants to share more detailed information:
 - a. What was the most valuable thing you learned from this tandem experience?
 - b. Describe your recent tandem experience using three words.
 - c. How can we improve this academic language tandem activity?

A space for optional comments was available at the end.

3. **Focus group (FG).** The authors developed a semi-structured guide to address four areas: previous e-tandem experiences, reactions to the group e-tandem session, technology usage and lessons learned. A predetermined set of open questions was established for each topic. The moderator of the focus group was free to follow up on any interesting answers.

Procedure

Participants were invited to join an e-tandem, in which they would connect with a group of peers in the UK via Skype. For them, this was an optional activity that required them to attend university earlier than usual (at 8:00 am instead of at 12:00 pm) in order to make up for the six-hour time difference between Mexico and the UK. One of the researchers, who was also their teacher, explained the objective of the study, answered their concerns and helped them prepare questions relevant to the topics they were learning in class. A day before the session, the teachers in both countries tested the Internet connection, audio and video in the rooms where the e-tandem would take place.

The e-tandem session lasted half an hour. Three participants took field notes throughout. The exchange was first in English (15 minutes) and then in Spanish (15 minutes). The teachers made the initial introductions, described the logistics of the activity, offered scaffolding throughout the session and guided a wrap-up at the end. Students engaged in conversation with their peers. Afterwards they answered the online survey. Three months later, after the holiday season, they participated in a one-hour focus group, which was video recorded with their authorization. Their comments were transcribed. Figure 1 summarizes the steps followed.

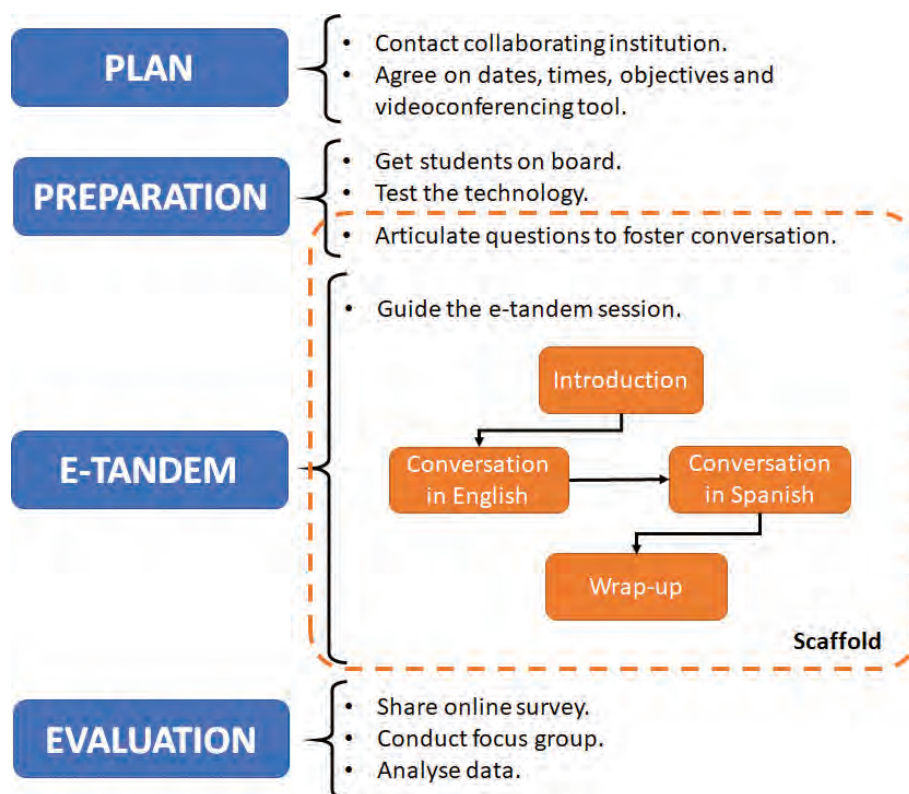


Figure 1: Steps to conduct and study an academic e-tandem.

Frequencies were obtained for the corresponding survey items. All qualitative data were analyzed inductively to identify patterns and salient themes. To maintain students' anonymity, generic identification codes were created based on the initials of the data source and a number corresponding to each participant (for example: FN1, S2, FG3). To exemplify findings, sample phrases were translated from Spanish to English, focusing on substance over form. A word-by-word translation was only used when doing so would convey the same or nearly the same meaning as the original message.

Results & Discussion

As in previous studies (Arnold & Fonseca-Mora, 2015; Litzler et al., 2018), the e-tandem was generally successful and a valuable complement to the face-to-face course. Participants found the experience fun, interesting and motivating. They all agreed that interacting with native English speakers encouraged them to look for other interaction opportunities and to keep on learning the language. One of them summarised it as follows:

"We are here [in Mexico]. We study English, and we think that we know enough. [...] But talking to native speakers and realizing that they are actually understanding what we are saying... That makes you think: I am on the right track. It is motivating [...]. I think this was a great way to learn the language." [FG8].

Participants considered the e-tandem a useful way of improving their oral communication competence, as in other reports (Griggio, 2018; Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Resnik & Schallmoser, 2019). They appreciated obtaining feedback from native speakers: "...Someone who knows the language very well can correct you and teach you new things" [FG5]. They considered the end of

the course the best time to have an e-tandem, as it would enable them to “practice what they had learned” [FN2]. All but one student wanted more time to interact with their peers. Opinions were varied when asked if interacting individually (as opposed to in a group session) would have been a better option; five agreed or strongly agreed, two were undecided and one disagreed. One of the downsides of having a group session was that participants did not have the opportunity to engage equally; “some students spoke longer than others” [FN1].

All but one participant agreed or strongly agreed that Skype was an effective tool for conducting an academic e-tandem (Griggio, 2018). However, “the internet connection in England was not stable; communication was occasionally interrupted and incomprehensible for seconds” [FN3]. Fixing this issue was a recurrent recommendation from participants. Half of them reported finding it difficult to communicate with their English peers. Two students thought they did not have the previous knowledge required to interact in the e-tandem. This highlights the need to offer, both technical and pedagogical, support. It also matches previous reports of students lacking the required digital literacy (e.g., Carranza Alcántar et al., 2018).

In line with the idea that e-tandems foster an enhanced understanding of diversity (Griggio, 2018; Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Wang-Szilas et al., 2013), participants expressed that one of the most valuable things they obtained from the e-tandem experience was an increased cultural awareness. They discovered that native English speakers could have different accents. They heard about their peers’ lives at university. Their learning extended beyond oral language skills to include nonverbal communication, such as the meaning of specific hand gestures. For example, during the session there were some technical glitches. Students in the UK asked if they were being heard. In Mexico, participants replied by moving their index fingers up and down, a gesture that means “yes” in their culture. They were surprised when they found out that this was not an international sign! This emphasises the value of the e-tandem as an opportunity to move beyond textbook learning.

Participants engaged in an authentic conversation (Escribano & Gonzales, 2014; Resnik & Schallmoser, 2019). One of them expressed it as follows:

“I liked that we started having a normal conversation. [...] I appreciated seeing how [students in the UK] reacted to our pronunciation, our questions, our answers... It was very natural. It felt like a chat between friends, even if we didn’t know each other” [P4].

Moreover, students found not only cultural differences but also common ground with their peers in England. Several comments exemplified this:

- “Talking to a first world citizen was kind of overwhelming... However, the students from the UK proved to be just normal people with normal lives.” [S3].
- “Everyone learning a new language struggles!” [S6].
- “I found it interesting that they [students in the UK] like listening to reggaeton and Latin music. Also, they watch series based on Mexico [...]. I really had no idea that they would hear about this [the same music and TV shows] over there!” [FG3].

Students discovered differences but at the same time realized that they were not so different after all.

The teachers were present during the whole experience, taking the roles of coordinators, facilitators and guides (Pörn & Hansell, 2020). They thus played a key role in the implementation of the e-tandem (see Figure 1). This enabled participants to interact with unknown peers from another country in a safe environment. It also addressed concerns reported by students who had previously participated in informal virtual exchanges with native English speakers: “When I interact with others online I don’t really know if the other person has bad intentions” [FG4].

Even though these findings are encouraging, they should be viewed with caution, as they focus on a small group of Mexican students. While learners in the UK agreed to participate in the e-tandem, they did not answer the follow-up survey. Thus, their voices have been left out of this report. Future research could identify ways to encourage responses, and consider the perspectives of both groups of learners. Additionally, in this study the e-tandem was an optional complement to the traditional, face-to-face English course. Participants had to arrive at university four hours earlier than usual. They received no payment or extra credits for this. It is likely that those who volunteered were highly motivated individuals. Their responses might be biased and reflect their general enthusiasm for learning and not for the e-tandem. It is unclear whether less engaged students would find e-tandems as valuable.

Conclusions

The e-tandem session was effective as a strategy to learn English as a foreign language in an academic setting. Despite some minor technical difficulties, Skype served as a useful videoconferencing technology and enabled online interactions between students from Mexico and the UK. The experience offered several advantages, such as connecting native speakers, developing oral communication skills and enhancing cultural knowledge. Learners reported feeling an increased motivation to practice the target language. For the participating institution, this initiative represents the beginning of a new strategy to foster language learning, while creating an international community.

Academic e-tandems are particularly relevant in current times, now that many language courses have transitioned to online delivery due to the coronavirus pandemic. They offer a useful strategy for educators looking for ways to help their students develop communicative competence. They foster collaboration, cultural awareness and authentic learning. They motivate learners to engage and to have an international experience. While this study focused on English as a foreign language, it is likely that the lessons learned from this experience are applicable to teachers and students of other languages.

Lingering questions remain. Educators interested in using e-tandems should seek partners who share a common curriculum, so participants can practice exactly what they are reviewing in class. This is a challenge, as the academic calendar and the course syllabus from different institutions do not necessarily match. Extending professional networks worldwide could facilitate this type of collaboration and lead to future research. Studies with larger samples, in different settings, and perhaps a focus on individual sessions, can offer a more comprehensive insight into academic e-tandems. We also invite other researchers to consider additional variables, such as learning self-regulation and self-efficacy, as well as the perspective of foreign language teachers.

References

- Arnold, J., & Fonseca-Mora, M.C. (2015). Language and cultural encounters: Opportunities for interaction with native speakers. In D. Nunan & J. C. Richards (Eds.). *Language Learning Beyond the Classroom* (pp. 225–234). Taylor & Francis, Routledge.
- Borjian, A. (2015). Learning English in Mexico: Perspectives from Mexican teachers of English. *The CATESOL Journal*, 27(1), 163–173. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1111752.pdf>
- Carranza Alcántar, M. del R., Islas Torres, C., & Gómez Maciel, M. L. (2018). Percepción de los estudiantes respecto del uso de las TIC y el aprendizaje del idioma inglés [Students' perception on the use of ICT and English language learning]. *Apertura*, 10(2), 50–63. <https://dx.doi.org/10.32870/ap.v10n2.1391>

- Council of Europe (2018). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>
- Cronquist, K. & Fiszbein, A. (2017). *English Language Learning in Latin America*. The Dialogue Leaderships for Americans. Retrieved from <http://repositorio.minedu.gob.pe/bitstream/handle/MINEDU/5911/English%20Language%20Learning%20in%20Latin%20America.pdf?sequence=1>
- Education First (2019). *EF EPI. EF English Domain Index*. Retrieved from <https://www.ef.com/~/media/centralescom/epi/downloads/full-reports/v9/ef-epi-2019-english.pdf>
- Escribano Ortega, M. L. & González Casares, C. (2014). Tandem online en el aprendizaje autónomo de lenguas extranjeras [Online tandem in the autonomous learning of foreign languages] (pp. 287–297). In N. M. Contreras Izquierdo (Ed.), *La enseñanza del español como LE/L2 en el siglo XXI*. Spain: Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera.
- Eurostat (2019). *Foreign language skills statistics*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Foreign_language_skills_statistics
- Griggio, L. (2018). Linking Virtual and Physical Mobility: A Success Story of a Multilingual and Multicultural Exchange. *Sciedo*, 12(1), 88–112. <https://doi.org/10.2478/sm-2018-0004>
- Gyamfi, G., & Sukseemuang, P. (2017). Effect of “Tell Me More” on EFL Undergraduate Students’ English Language Achievement. *Open Praxis*, 9(4), 449–461. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.9.4.724>
- Karjalainen, K., Pörn, M., Rusk, F., & Björkskog, L. (2013). Classroom tandem – Outlining a Model for Language Learning and Instruction. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 6(1), 165–184. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1053607.pdf>
- Kukulka-Hulme, A. & Viberg, O. (2018). Mobile collaborative language learning: State of the art. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 49(2), 207–218. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjjet.12580>
- Litzler, M. F., Huguet-Jérez, M., & Bakieva, M. (2018). Prior Experience and Student Satisfaction with E-Tandem Language Learning of Spanish and English. *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies*, 12(4), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v12i4.9196>
- Lyons, D. (2017). How Many People Speak English, And Where Is It Spoken? *Babbel Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-english-and-where-is-it-spoken/>
- Pomino, J., & Gil-Salom, D. (2016). Integrating e-tandem in Higher Education. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 228, 668–673. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.07.102>
- Pörn, M. & Hansell, K. (2020) The teacher’s role in supporting two way language learning in classroom tandem. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(5), 534–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1379946>
- Resnik, P., & Schallmoser, C. (2019). Enjoyment as a key to success? Links between e-tandem language learning and tertiary students’ foreign language enjoyment. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(3), 541–564. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssl.2019.9.3.6>
- Rojas, P. (2013). *Reforzando el aprendizaje del idioma inglés en el aula con el apoyo y uso de las TIC* [Strengthening English language learning in the classroom with support and use of ICT]. (Master’s degree thesis). Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo. Hidalgo, Mexico. Retrieved from <http://dgsa.uaeh.edu.mx:8080/bibliotecadigital/handle/231104/1856>
- Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) (2015). *Diagnóstico Ampliado. S270. Programa Nacional de Inglés para Alumnos en Educación Básica* [Extended Diagnosis. S270. National English Program for Students in Basic Education]. Mexico. Retrieved from https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/64151/Diagnostico_del_programa.pdf
- Tian, J., & Wang, Y. (2010). Taking language learning outside the classroom: learners’ perspectives of eTandem learning via Skype. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(3), 181–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2010.513443>

- Wang-Szilas, J., Berger, C., & Zhang, F. (2013). eTandem Language Learning Integrated in the Curriculum: Reflection from Students' Perspectives. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 18(2). Retrieved from <https://www.eurodl.org/index.php?p=special&sp=articles&inum=7&article=696>
- Wu, V. & Marek, M. (2008). Enhancing learner motivation to study English via videoconferencing with a native speaker. In J. Luca & E. Weippl (Eds.), *Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 2008--World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications* (pp. 4481–4489). Vienna, Austria: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). Retrieved from <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/29010/>