Learning L2 English in Tandem Partnerships On-Line

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Tandem learning via email and computer-mediated communication activities flanked standard frontal English lessons for Italian adult learners in Italy. It is here suggested that the combination of tandem learning, various communication activities performed on-line, and standard courses help mature students to boost their self-esteem, give them more autonomy, and enhance their motivation. Tandem learning, which is based on the principles of reciprocity and autonomy, is ideally suited for adult students. It helps overcome the problems connected to the affective reactions of adults, and at the same time, being content driven, offers a more natural setting to learn an L2 (second language) on a mutual supportive basis.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, content and language integrated learning, L2 (second language) learning, tandem partnership

Introduction

This paper will deal with the learning of English as an L2 (second language) by adult people attending language courses in Italy. It will suggest that learning languages in multimedia settings can integrate with standard frontal lessons to better fulfill the needs of the adult learner and help create a motivating and relaxing environment.

The paper will focus on two main themes: On the one hand, it will deal with adult learners and the way some of their characteristics may negatively affect their participation in language courses and their engagement in lifelong learning projects. On the other hand, it will highlight how the practice of languages in tandem partnerships, integrated with CMC (computer mediated communication) and CLIL (content and language integrated learning) practice, helps to activate learning breaking down the emotive barriers erected by adults and enhancing their motivation.

Adult learners' attending language courses represents a challenge for the teacher. As known, one of the main obstacles to their success is that they do not like to run risks, and more often than not, to lose face by making errors (McKay & Abigail, 1999; Hilles & Sutton, 2001). Errors, in fact, are experienced as an embarrassing defeat and are somehow felt as evidence of the incapacity of the mature learner to speak a foreign language. These aspects endanger fluency and communication, and what is worse, they often lead adults to abandon language courses before their natural end.

The project *LITERALIA* (*Learning In Tandem to Encourage Reciprocal Autonomous Learning In Adults*) was planned to overcome the affective problems of adult learners, and in agreement with the tenets of the European Grundtvig projects, to foster lifelong learning, developing the proficiency in a European language and

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promoting, at the same time, cultural knowledge.

Four European institutions participated in the project: the Volkshochschule Ostkreis of Hannover and the Bildungszentrum of Wolfsburg in Germany, the Department of Languages at the Open University in the United Kingdom, the School of Bank and Finance of Bielsku-Bialej in Poland, and the Centre for Adult Education of Pontedera-Pisa in Italy.

The people who participated in the project were 25 teachers and 232 learners. Among the learners 137 were Germans, 48 Italians, 29 English people, and 18 Poles. The participants, whose age ranged from 24 to 70, were professionals, workers, housewives, retirees, and students, who were already attending standard language courses in the four institutions when the project started. The variety of their social and educational background demanded extreme care when the tandem partnerships were formed. Therefore, special attention was given to collect the personal data of the participants, and to combine couples of people similar in age, who shared the same L2 proficiency level, interests, and hobbies, in order to have homogeneous pairs and increase their chances of success and continuance in email exchange.

Once the couples were formed, each learner was asked to sign a contract to commit himself/herself to write at least four emails a month with the foreign tandem partner for a three-month period, a demand which was met by all the participants.

By signing the contract, the participants were admitted to the school laboratory and obtained a password to access the Literalia website and its facilities for synchronous (chats) and asynchronous (emails, forums, wikis) communication modalities. In addition, they received free tutorial assistance and could participate in the four international meetings, where they could meet their partners in person and engage face-to-face interactions.

The contract was a felicitous idea. Not only did it make the email exchange compulsory, but it also gave substance to the project and the necessary cohesion to the group.

Sometimes, in fact, a dehumanizing effect was recorded by those who had experienced communication activities on-line due to the long reaction time to emails and the lack of face-to-face contacts between partners (Woodin, 1997). For this reason, as an additional form of membership, the participants in the project were given the name of *Literalians*. Giving the group a name was one of the strategies adopted to create a well-identifiable community of language learners, which promoted the interpersonal dimension and cooperation between them and facilitated new friendships across borders (Pierini, 2004; Stickler & Lewis, 2008; Noccetti, 2009). The four transnational meetings, where the tandem partners met personally, also greatly contributed to emphasize the sense of affiliation to the group. During the meetings (one in Italy, two in Germany, and one in England), various activities, carefully planned in advance, were proposed, which ranged from playing the typical traditional games of a country to preparing traditional dishes and eating them together.

These social gatherings were very much appreciated by the *Literalians* and gave a great impulse to the project, so that the on-line contacts between the participants increased in their proximity, both before and after the meetings.

It is worth mentioning that despite all of the languages (English, German, Italian, and Polish) were allowed in the communication activities, the most used one was English, employed as a *lingua franca* among the groups of speakers. If Polish was never used, Italian and German were sometimes the native and the second language in the on-line interactions.

Adult Learner: Motivation and Autonomy

Adults are usually vulnerable language learners (Hilles & Sutton, 2001) and their attendance at courses is endangered by the lack of a strong motivation and by their attitude towards the teacher and the teaching methods.

The latter is influenced by various factors, the most affecting of which are the preceding educational experiences and the individual features that influence the way they agree to run risks, to lose face, and to trust the teacher (McKay & Abigail, 1999). Some adults, for example, show a preference for traditional formal lessons where grammar is taught explicitly and are skeptical about communicative approaches.

Moreover, if the task is felt difficult, effortful, stressful, and/or useless, the adult learners, especially those whose concern is the maintenance of their social value and public esteem, generally abandon language courses before compromising their reputation and public image.

For these reasons, the project was designed to overcome such eventuality and the activities were planned to enhance adults' motivation and to turn the learning setting into a stress-free environment. Namely, an effort was made to decrease the possibility of risk and stress, and at the same time, to provide the learners with a stronger motivation to learn the L2, increasing their control over the various activities.

Motivation

Motivation has been proved crucial to any learning process, because it is defined as an oriented behavior transforming an internal state into actions to attain a goal, either immediate and physiological, such as satisfying hunger, or long-term and abstract, such as being successful in one's job (Brown & Pluck, 2000). It is associated to the concept of environment, which has its own features and requests. For example, the need to speak an L2 can arise from the contextual necessity to communicate with other people. In this case, the knowledge of the L2 is the goal attained to fulfill the requests of the environment. Goal attainment is associated to a positive response, which maintains the causal link between the internal state and the actions used to attain the goal. Namely, it is very likely that the same behavior will be chosen again for the same purpose. On the contrary, if the goal is not attained, the negative response leads to the adoption of alternative action plans.

The lack of motivation, instead, arises from the absence of environmental requests, or rather from requests which are not believed capable of providing benefits to one's life. Although it is undeniable that there are numerous advantages in speaking more idioms (Gardner, 2007), it is obvious that there is no immediate need of learning an L2, when/where everybody speaks the same L1 (native language). Therefore motivation happens to be even more urgent in L2 learning formal environments, where it needs to be "built" and increased.

In order to understand what kind of motivation leads to successful L2 learning, motivated learners have been observed, who reveal features that can be grouped into the affective and the functional domain. The latter shows a predominance of an intrinsic motivation type, which satisfies the natural needs for competence and self-determination (Gardner, 1985, 2007) and seems even more influencing than the instrumental motivation type (Woodin, 1997; Noels, Pelletier, & Vallerand, 2000). The former highlights an attentive and self-determined behavior, ambitions, and disposition to expend efforts. Moreover, a fundamental role seems to be played by the attitude towards the L2 speaking group and the open-mindedness to other cultures, namely, a positive attitude is associated to beneficial effects on L2 learning. The attitude, however, is not only an individual feature, but it is also conditioned by the social environment, which associates positive or negative values to the different

languages (Ciliberti, 1994; Coulmas, 2005; Gardner, 2007). Therefore, a language is better learned when the learners have the social approval of the L2 speaking community, when they see strong values in being able to communicate with it, when there are no other methods for communicating, and when they are encouraged by L2 speakers to speak the L2. Multicultural groups and the *many speakers* condition, i.e., when lots of speakers are fluent and native, foster L2 use and provide the learners with a motivation to learn (Spolsky, 1989).

The project *LITERALIA* was planned to make the L2 a need emerging from environmental requests. The learners needed the L2 as an actual means of communication within an intercultural and multilingual group. Such a context reproduced the setting of the *many speakers* condition, where using the L2 is unavoidable and natural. Actually, in such contexts, speaking is *communicating*. From the interaction with the tandem partners, the learners gained self-esteem and self-determination, because they could achieve their communicative goals through the negotiation of meaning and the solution of tangible and interesting problems. Working in a friendly environment and in a relaxed atmosphere, the learners could engage new friendships, orienting positively the attitude towards the L2 and its community and associating strong values with the ability to speak it.

Autonomy

Autonomy, defined as the ability to make critical reflections and independent actions, is underpinned by intrinsic motivation (Ushioda, 2000). Personal needs and interests, in fact, foster lifelong learning and supply the students with the necessary determination and self-esteem to attain the goal.

In *LITERALIA*, the autonomy of the learners was encouraged and facilitated by the Internet communication modalities in two different ways. On the one side, the participants were let free to decide their pace and the amount of time to devote to each task. On the other side, they could choose the topic of the interaction, which was dictated by the partners' interests and developed on a mutual supportive basis, applying the tenets of the CLIL methods (Marsh & Hartiala, 2001; Marsh, 2002). The CLIL is a teaching practice where a non-language content is taught in a non-native language. Its principal aim is to develop both the content and the L2 simultaneously. In *LITERALIA*, as opposed to the standard CLIL practice, the contents differed greatly for each pair, as they depended on the tandem partners' choice and could vary at each email exchange. In addition, the non-language topic was not taught by the teacher, but it was the learner who had the responsibility to collect the necessary information and lexicon to deal with the selected subjects. This made the learning environment more active and motivating, because the language satisfied the learners' interests and increased their autonomy, by giving them the sense of self-esteem derived from having successfully solved a communicative problem.

Freedom and personal relevance were thus enhanced by the activities which were completely ruled by the students. The teachers only helped on request and never evaluated the learners, who could thus concentrate on the tasks without any worry for their performance. The errors were corrected mutually by the tandem partners, who alternated between the role of teachers and learners, minimizing the feeling of losing face and respect. Such a practice, limiting the intervention of the teacher, gave the learners a sense of personal control over the activity, increasing their motivation (Kane-Uturrioz, 1997; Woodin, 1997; Ushioda, 2000). In fact, it has been shown that the imposition of external controlling influences reduces people's intrinsic motivation and may endanger the success of language courses (Lepper & Greene, 1978, as cited in Ushioda, 2000).

Learning Languages in Tandem

Computers have become important didactic tools to experience interactive learning and to speak authentic language (Levy, 1997; Pierini, 2004), and recently, with the advent of the Internet and its ever increasing use, the learning environment has become even more authentic by virtue of a combination of possibilities, ranging from speaking to seeing images and people in real time. Communication technologies have developed to support interaction and collaboration between groups of remote learners and have also been employed to develop tandem language learning, which has always been considered an active way of developing language skills. Based on the twin principles of autonomy and reciprocity (Little, 1991; Little & Brammaerts, 1996; Lewis & Walker, 2003), the reports of tandem-learning activities, either face-to-face or on-line, have generally recorded feelings of happiness and enjoyment (Gieve & Clark, 2005). In spite of a few drawbacks related to the long reaction time to emails and to the dehumanizing effect of CMC, tandem-learning on-line is generally preferred over traditional teaching methods (Kane-Uturrioz, 1997; Woodin, 1997). Some variables depending on specific learners' features have also been observed that influence the achievement of good results. For example, if the tandem partners have lived abroad, they appear more skilled in applying paralinguistic communication strategies, and show more genuine interest in the partner. In general, the supporters of tandem activities focus on four main aspects that are believed to enhance language learning. First, tandem partnership is a form of active learning which emphasizes freedom and personal relevance. Second, language exchanges with the tandem partner promote the negotiation of meaning and the autonomous selection of the forms of the language to be used. Third, the learners have the responsibility of their own and their tandem partner's linguistic and cultural development. Fourth, the language is authentic and employed in a natural context. For such reasons, the learners have the possibility to re-use the language offered by their partner, strengthening learning (Woodin, 1997; Ushioda, 2000). In addition, it is noteworthy that errors are corrected by the partners, who are, in turn, language experts. This offers various positive effects, such as the control over the entire learning process, the attenuation of embarrassment, and sense of failure caused by the teacher's corrections. All the above advantages give the learners the necessary awareness to acquire the most useful strategies to support independent learning and foster their autonomy (Kane-Uturrioz, 1997) which, as already stated, are thought to enhance motivation and grant success.

The *Literalians* were therefore encouraged to cooperate with native speakers of the target language, and apart from the obvious advantages in terms of improvement of their language skills, they could experience a friendly and supportive atmosphere without the stress of formal frontal lessons. The system of tools of the workspace was purposefully created to foster L2 use. Actually, all the activities aimed at maintaining the equilibrium between content and language learning, according to the CLIL principle that L2 learning takes place indirectly while communicating content. Being a task-based approach, the language was more natural and better fulfilled the immediate learners' need (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Seikkula-Leino, 2007).

The resulting learning environment was a very complex one, characterized by the interaction of various cognitive activities which promoted conscious learning through the communication of contents and the development of cultural knowledge (Coyle, 2007).

Summarizing, the *LITERALIA* project, integrating tandem-learning with CMC and CLIL, encouraged a communicative approach to language learning by focusing on content rather than on form. In agreement with the

CLIL principles, promoting the interaction among the tandem partners, *LITERALIA* developed both their intercultural knowledge and language skills (Noccetti, 2009). The combination of these activities found its best application in the possibilities of interaction engaged by the tandem partners during the three-month period, either through the Internet or during the four planned meetings, where face-to-face exchanges were possible.

Final Evaluation Questionnaire

At the end of the project, the participants in the tandem partnerships were asked to answer a questionnaire. That was meant to detect the learners' feelings towards the activities proposed and posed various questions concerning the learners' opinion about their proficiency level.

Unfortunately, being anonymous, it was not possible to compare the *Literalians*' self-evaluation and the teacher's end-course judgment, but the answers were nevertheless indicative of the learners' general opinions about the project.

As expected and hoped, the learners evaluated the activities positively. In general, the entire set of project activities was considered useful and very useful by the majority of learners, and from the questionnaire, it clearly emerged that the exchange of mails with the tandem partner, more than anything else, was believed to be a very useful practice. This was also confirmed by the result of the tandem partnerships activated, which were all successful.

The most important data concerned the self-evaluation of the reached competence in L2, which showed that the *Literalians* believed the activities to improve their proficiency level greatly.

Finally, the satisfaction of the participants and the most encouraging data came from the answers relative to motivation and self-esteem. With the exception of two learners, the other participants declared that they felt motivated and increased their self-esteem, maintaining that learning an L2 was possible and not too difficult. Such answers, together with the learners' participation in the standard frontal lessons until the natural end of the course, witnessed the appreciation of the proposed activities and their success in promoting L2 learning through a multitask environment.

Conclusions

Combining the advantages of communicative methods and CLIL practice with computer facilities, *LITERALIA* represented an alternative method for teaching languages to adult learners, and was proved a valid integration of standard frontal lessons. Therefore, *LITERALIA* resulted in a multitask environment where foreign languages were learned and practiced with on-line tandem partners. The activities performed during the project aimed at developing communicative, grammatical, and socio-linguistic competence. All the proposed tasks were planned to enhance the learners' capacity to transmit information effectively and to use communicative strategies to solve problems. The content themes dealt with during lab activities varied according to the learner's proficiency level, but the general principle behind the choice of each topic was that it should meet the learner's interests. In such a context, the learners experienced a goal-directed behavior and positive environmental responses which encouraged independent learning and fostered autonomy, finding the necessary motivation and increasing the possibility of achieving the learning objectives. The learners' answers to the end-project questionnaire confirmed the good results obtained by the project. The participants declared their satisfaction and reported a general feeling of improvement in their linguistic and intercultural competence.

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