

## Promoting the development of autonomy in the context of teletandem in language teacher education

*Promovendo o desenvolvimento de autonomia no contexto teletandem na educação linguística de professores*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a study carried out in 2018 on the implementation of teletandem in a Bachelor of Arts in English Language Teaching (ELT) program in Mexico, as part of a learning autonomy course. The goals of the semi-structured teletandem exchange were to provide learners with the opportunity to 1) gain cultural and linguistic learning as a result of the interaction with native speakers and 2) develop and exercise their autonomy to learn English. Although all students enrolled in the course participated in the exchange, only 8 of them were selected to investigate the extent teletandem helped them develop and exercise their autonomy. Data come from the analysis of interviews with students. Findings revealed that the implementation of teletandem in the course made participants more aware of their autonomy and provided opportunities to exercise it. However, areas of improvement were identified to enhance the development of autonomy in teletandem. This study may be of interest to language teacher educators who seek to promote the development of autonomy in other learning scenarios apart from the language classroom. It could also be useful for language instructors and staff at language centers who are willing to improve the practice of telecollaboration in their own contexts.

**Keywords:** Teletandem, Tandem learning, Telecollaboration, Autonomy in language teacher education, Pedagogy for autonomy

### RESUMO

*Este artigo relata os resultados de um estudo realizado em 2018 sobre a implementação do teletandem em um programa de bacharelado em ensino de língua inglesa no México, como parte de um curso de autonomia de aprendizagem. Os objetivos do intercâmbio teletandem semiestruturado eram proporcionar aos alunos a oportunidade de 1) obter aprendizagem cultural e linguística como resultado da interação*

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*com falantes nativos e 2) desenvolver e exercer sua autonomia para aprender inglês. Embora todos os alunos matriculados no curso tenham participado do intercâmbio, apenas 8 deles foram selecionados para investigar em que medida o teletandem os ajudou a desenvolver e exercer sua autonomia. Os dados vêm da análise de entrevistas com alunos. Os achados revelaram que a implantação do teletandem no curso tornou os participantes mais conscientes de sua autonomia e proporcionou oportunidades para exercê-la. No entanto, áreas de melhoria foram identificadas para aumentar o desenvolvimento da autonomia no teletandem. Este estudo pode ser do interesse de formadores de professores de línguas que buscam promover o desenvolvimento da autonomia em outros cenários de aprendizagem além da sala de aula de línguas. Também pode ser útil para instrutores de idiomas e funcionários de centros de idiomas que desejam melhorar a prática da telecolaboração em seus próprios contextos.*

**Palavras-Chave:** *Teletandem, Aprendizagem em tandem, Telecolaboração, Autonomia na formação de professores, Pedagogia para autonomia*

## 1. Introduction

Although different terms have been used to refer to telecollaboration or virtual exchange depending on the educational context and the pedagogical focus of its practitioners (O'DOWD, 2018), many studies have investigated its effectiveness on language and intercultural learning. Some of these studies have demonstrated that telecollaboration has a positive impact on the development of students' language skills (KINGINGER; BELZ, 2005; O'ROURKE, 2005; WARE; O'DOWD, 2008). Other studies have suggested that it also contributes to students' intercultural awareness and learning (MÜLLER-HARTMANN, 2000; O'DOWD, 2006; WARE, 2005). However, few studies have addressed the role of autonomy in virtual exchanges (VINAGRE; LERA, 2005; TIRLONI; RAMMÉ, 2015). This paper aims to contribute to this field by exploring whether telecollaboration helps students develop their autonomy to learn languages with the support of their instructors and partners. For the study, we draw on Telles' (2015) conceptualization of teletandem as a mode of telecollaboration, which describes a virtual, collaborative, and autonomous context in which two students help each other learn their own language or language of proficiency based on autonomy, reciprocity, and separate use of both languages.

The development of autonomy is especially relevant in language teacher education programs as Little (1995) suggests, "language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous" (p. 180). Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2017) state that teacher education programs need to inspire and prepare teachers to become empowering educators. This empowerment presupposes the implementation of a critical and democratic pedagogy for personal and social change, which develops strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry and critical curiosity. For Vieira (2009), teacher empowerment towards autonomy should be a major goal of teacher education as autonomy should become a collective interest and a democratic ideal in education and society in general (JIMÉNEZ RAYA; LAMB; VIEIRA, 2007).

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study that aims to identify to what extent a semi-structured teletandem exchange helped Bachelor of Arts in English Language Teaching (ELT) students develop and exercise their autonomy to learn English. Previous research on teletandem in the B.A. program has provided evidence of its great potential for language and cultural learning (Author1, Author2 & Author3, 2018). However, findings also showed that the students' experience with teletandem could be enhanced by training them to manage their learning process more effectively. For this reason, the implementation of teletandem for this study took place as part of a learning autonomy class in which students were instructed to identify their personal learning goals more clearly, use learning strategies to plan, monitor, and reflect on their learning as well as give mutual support to their partners.

The teletandem exchange intended to provide students from Mexico and the U.S. the opportunity to gain cultural and linguistic knowledge through telecollaboration sessions designed to address complex social issues presented in films. In the B.A. in ELT program in Mexico, an additional goal was to support students in developing and exercising their autonomy to learn English in the context of teletandem.

This article is divided into four sections. Section 1 provides the theoretical framework for the implementation of teletandem and the development of autonomy in language teacher education programs. Section 2 describes the methods used to collect and analyze the data. Section 3 reports findings from the interpretation and analysis of the data. Section 4 presents outcomes from the study and provides recommendations for future research on the development of autonomy in the context of teletandem.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 The concept of teletandem**

Teletandem is a mode of telecollaboration characterized by the use of text, voice, and webcam image resources of VOIP technology, where two language learners help each other learn their respective native language or language of proficiency (TELLES, 2015). This learning partnership is based on the three principles of tandem learning: autonomy, reciprocity, and separate use of both languages (BRAMMERTS, 2003; VASSALLO; TELLES, 2006).

As Brammerts (2003) states, the principle of autonomy gives learners the responsibility for setting their own goals for their work in tandem, and thinking about how these goals can be achieved in collaboration with their partners. White (2012) argues that “the principle of autonomy underlies the host of decisions learners make throughout the tandem partnership, including the topic of the co-operative exchanges, and the nature, extent, and focus of feedback and correction” (p. 3263).

With regard to the principle of reciprocity, Brammerts (2003) points out that as both partners want to learn from each other, each of them should bring their own skills and abilities which the other wants to acquire and the willingness to support each other in their learning. Learners can provide this support by offering the assistance they have been asked for to the best of their ability. For instance, they can correct each other, suggest alternative formulations, help with the understanding of texts, translate, explain meanings, etc. However, as Brammerts (2003) explains, a tandem partnership will only last if both partners benefit from it, preferably to the same extent.

In a teletandem partnership, both partners play two roles, as 1) experts of their native language or language of proficiency, and as 2) learners of their target language. Thus, it is vital that they devote the same amount of time and interest to the practice of each language.

## **2.2 Designs and goals of teletandem exchanges**

Teletandem can be implemented in school contexts (institutional teletandem) or as independent language practice between individuals (independent teletandem). Institutional teletandem can take place as complementary practice or integrated into the foreign language curriculum. Aranha and Cavalari (2014) define institutionally integrated teletandem (iiTTD) as a series of teletandem sessions that are embedded in regular lessons in a way that lessons feed and are fed by teletandem practice. The most appropriate teletandem design will depend on the course and the students' learning goals and needs, as well as the educational contexts.

Tardieu and Horgues (2019) state that telecollaboration exchanges may include learners whose goals are to: 1) improve their accuracy and fluency in the target language (L2), 2) prioritize intercultural communication over language practice, 3) rely on their plurilingual competence and develop a form of telecollaboration that prompts "linguistic hybridity" among multicompetent speakers (BELZ, 2003, p. 92) or 4) develop linguistic and intercultural skills and professional competence.

## **2.3 Teletandem and learning autonomy**

Autonomy has been studied extensively and is central to teletandem because it is one of the three principles that frame it. For Little (2003), "the essence of tandem language learning is enshrined in the principles of learner autonomy and reciprocity" (p. 37). He explains that learners are autonomous because they are responsible for managing their learning; and their partnership is reciprocal as it is founded on mutual commitment. He points out that it is this mutual commitment that ensures partners devote the same time and interest to each of the two languages and that in their joint learning activity they alternate the roles of language learner and native speaker.

Holec (1981), one of the first to define autonomy, referred to it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). For Little (1997), human beings are autonomous in relation to a particular task when they are able to perform the task without assistance, beyond the immediate context in which they acquired the knowledge and skills on which successful task performance depends; and taking account of the special requirements of particular circumstances.

According to Sinclair (2000), autonomy is characterized by different features, among which the following are relevant for its study in the context of teletandem: 1) It is a construct of capacity<sup>4</sup>, 2) it involves a willingness on the part of the learners to take responsibility for their own learning, 3) this capacity and willingness to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate, 4) there are degrees of autonomy which are unstable and variable, 5) autonomy is not a matter of simply placing students in situations where they have to be independent, 6) developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, 7) promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies, 8) autonomy can take place inside and outside the classroom, and 9) autonomy has an individual and a social dimension.

#### **2.4 Pedagogy for autonomy in language teacher education**

Based on previous research, Little (2003) argues that it is generally accepted that language learners in formal education environments take their first steps towards autonomy when they understand and accept that they are responsible for their own learning. However, Manzano Vázquez (2018) claims that even though the development of autonomy is acknowledged as a prominent educational goal in discussions of language education, it is hardly a reality in many schools. He argues that one of the reasons for this is the lack of teacher education programs that address teacher and learner autonomy as valid educational concerns. Benson (2011), Jiménez Raya and Vieira (2008), and Manzano Vázquez (2016) have also identified the lack of teacher education programs which provide language teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to exercise their autonomy during their training and promote autonomous learning in their own classrooms.

The implementation of a pedagogy for autonomy in language teacher education programs is necessary to support students’ development of autonomy. Vieira (2003) states that,

A pedagogy for autonomy in the school context seeks to move the learner closer to the learning process and content, by enhancing conditions which increase motivation to learn, interdependence relationships, discourse power, ability to learn and to manage learning, and a critical attitude towards teaching and learning. (VIEIRA, 2003, p. 224)

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<sup>4</sup> Capacity is here understood as a synonym for ability.

For the implementation of such pedagogy, Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2017) propose ten principles which can be seen as interrelated conditions favoring a pedagogy for autonomy. These principles involve creating opportunities for and enhancing: 1) Responsibility, choice, and flexible control, 2) learning to learn and self-regulation, 3) integration and explicitness, 4) autonomy support, 5) engagement and intrinsic motivation, 6) learner differentiation, 7) action-orientedness, 8) conversational interaction, 9) reflective enquiry, and 10) Formative assessment, assessment for learning and assessment for autonomy.

Teletandem offers learners the opportunity to learn languages autonomously beyond the language classroom, with the support of their instructors and partners. Through the learning partnership established in teletandem, both partners can focus on their needs and take on a more proactive role in their learning process by determining what they want to learn and how they want to do so. However, it is necessary that learners become more aware of the learning process and get hands-on experience on learning strategies which can help them plan, self-regulate, and reflect on their learning experience. In this sense, the role of language instructors, course facilitators, or language advisors is essential. According to Mynard (2011) the functions that we can take on to support learners in their development of autonomy include: 1) Raising awareness of their learning process, 2) guiding learners, 3) helping learners identify goals, 4) suggesting suitable materials by offering choices, 5) suggesting suitable strategies by offering choices, 6) motivating, supporting and encouraging self-directed learners, 7) helping learners to self-evaluate and reflect, 8) assisting students in discovering how they learn best, 9) listening to learners, and 10) helping learners talk through their own problems.

As the students' level of autonomy increases from awareness to transcendence (NUNAN, 1997), students will become familiar with the process of identifying their learning goals, planning, monitoring and assessing their learning. Meanwhile, the guidance provided by language instructors, course facilitators, or language advisors is vital to promoting the development of autonomy within a framework that gives a certain structure but at the same time allows students some freedom to make decisions about their own learning.

## **2.5 Previous research on autonomy in the context of teletandem**

Some studies have explored autonomy in the context of teletandem. For example, Vinagre and Lera (2005) conducted a study “to promote autonomy in the language learning process in order to make the students aware of the importance of being responsible for their own learning and that of their partners” (p. 242). The email exchange took place between a Spanish university and an American university in 2004-2005. Students exchanged emails twice a week and developed a project together. Students also wrote

a composition about their experience working on the project and this information was analysed to identify semantic fields. Similar to other studies on teletandem, their results revealed the students improved their communicative skills as well as their writing skills and foreign culture awareness. However, they stressed that “what the students did not seem to realize is that tandem language learning by email provided them with an opportunity to become autonomous learners by taking responsibility for their own learning process as well as that of their partners” (p. 262).

Tirloni and Rammé’s (2015) study on the relevance of self-assessment in a tandem setting, on the other hand, revealed that students became aware of their active role in learning, which allowed them to participate more in their learning and assessment process. Tirloni and Rammé (2015) suggest that “the tandem tool, in addition to being a tool for the development of the oral ability, emerges as an awareness and promotion practice of autonomy since students are in a real situation of the use of the language” (p. 463)<sup>5</sup>. They further argue that,

being autonomous implies being critical, and consciously choosing their goals and the paths to follow in order to achieve them. Therefore, teletandem enhances learning autonomy that integrates linguistic, social and cultural knowledge acquired in classroom contexts as well as a result of authentic communication contexts. Students are the protagonists of their own learning and are capable of developing the ability to assess their own learning progress. (TIRLONI; RAMMÉ, 2015, p. 464)<sup>6</sup>

This discussion illustrates the need to conduct studies that actually address autonomy development and teletandem. They also show the importance of raising students’ awareness of what autonomy is and how to exercise it in this type of exchange.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Context

The study took place in a B.A. in ELT program at Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, Mexico. As part of the curriculum, all the students who are enrolled in the program, take a learning autonomy course in the fourth semester. The main objective of the course is to train students in the use of techniques and strategies for autonomous learning so that they are able to self-direct their learning with the support of their teachers and peers. The reason why the teletandem exchange was implemented as part

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<sup>5</sup> Our translation

<sup>6</sup> Our translation



of the learning autonomy class was to provide students with opportunities to exercise their autonomy to learn English in the context of teletandem with the support of their instructors and partners.

During the learning autonomy course, a pedagogy for autonomy was implemented by putting the ten principles discussed in the previous section, from Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2017), into practice. Students were guided to discover their predominant learning styles, multiple intelligences, and individual characteristics as language learners. They also carried out a needs analysis to identify their goals for learning English. Then, they were exposed to a repertoire of different learning strategies in order to plan, monitor, and assess their learning through the implementation of an English language learning portfolio.

The portfolio consisted of three forms: A learning plan, learning records, and learning reflections. In the learning plan, students wrote tasks and activities in advance to improve their proficiency in the language during the four-month course, focusing on their needs. The plan included tasks for teletandem as well as other learning activities of their choice to be done autonomously. For each task/activity, students were encouraged to document their experience in the learning records by putting different learning strategies into practice. At the end of each task/activity, in the learning reflection form, students were guided to reflect on their experience to make any further decisions regarding their learning process.

### **3.2 Participants**

All the students enrolled in the learning autonomy class took part in the teletandem exchange; however, only eight of them participated in the research. They were contacted by the researchers and were informed about the study and its aim. After the students were provided with the information sheet and signed a consent form, they were interviewed. The students were selected for the study based on their performance during the implementation of the teletandem exchange as they always showed interest and commitment towards their learning in teletandem.

The students had studied English for one year and a half by the time they took part in teletandem. Their level of English at the time was B1-B2, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards. However, the eight students were contacted for the study one year and a half later as the researchers collected data to feed into the redesign of teletandem and the learning autonomy course. Although gathering data after that time could have implications for the study, students were encouraged to give their objective opinion and perceptions from their teletandem experience.

As students are pre-service English teachers, they have knowledge about linguistics and language teaching methodology which may influence their beliefs and behaviors towards learning in teletandem.



On the other hand, the U.S. class consisted of undergraduate students from different majors and backgrounds who were taking a 300-level Spanish Film and Conversation course to fill part of the language requirement for their major of study. Their level of proficiency in Spanish was within the range of intermediate-mid and intermediate-high per the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines.

### **3.3 Description of the teletandem exchange**

As mentioned above, the teletandem exchange intended to 1) provide students from Mexico and the U.S. with the opportunity to gain cultural and linguistic knowledge through telecollaboration sessions, and 2) support Mexican students so that they could develop and exercise their autonomy to learn English in the context of teletandem. Participants took part in a semi-structured telecollaborative exchange with students from the U.S. to address complex social issues presented in films. We call this exchange semi-structured because the course instructors suggested the themes for discussion as well as the language tasks. Although students could focus on their personal needs for learning and practicing English after completing the tasks, their choices were somehow influenced by the design of the teletandem program. The exchange consisted of ten sessions. Six of the sessions took place in the language labs while the other four were conducted at home.

Before the students started the exchanges, they responded to a questionnaire so that the course facilitators (from Mexico and the U.S.) could find the best match for them based on their level of proficiency, interests, and preferences for a male or female partner. During the teletandem sessions, students discussed social themes relevant to both countries such as illegal immigration, discrimination and Indigenous peoples, abuse of power, gender inequality, etc. Even though the topics and tasks were suggested by the course facilitators to guide the discussion and provide a structure for the interaction, students were encouraged to focus on their learning needs and wants within the sessions. At the end of the exchange, partners collaborated on a final project, they prepared an oral/written critique on a movie that was to be presented in their respective courses. Students were free to decide the movie they would make their review on based on a list provided by the course facilitators. After the students made their review, they provided mutual feedback to their partners in order to improve their work.

During the implementation of the teletandem exchange, both course facilitators monitored the students' work and mediated their experience by promoting reflection, intervening when problems emerged, and suggesting strategies to improve the effectiveness of telecollaboration. While learners in the U.S. used VoiceThread to reflect orally on their learning, students in Mexico shared their experience in

teletandem as part of the learning autonomy course and also wrote reflection entries on their English language learning portfolio.

### 3.4 Research design

This is a qualitative study that aims to identify to what extent teletandem contributes to developing students' learning autonomy. This section describes the methodology undertaken to answer the following research question: *To what extent does a semi-structured teletandem exchange help students develop and exercise their autonomy to learn English?*

We adopt a qualitative approach because, according to Dörnyei (2019), “qualitative research is concerned with subjective opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals and thus the explicit goal of research is to explore the participants' views of the situation being studied” (p. 38). In this case, we were interested in learning about our participants' opinions on their experience as a result of a teletandem exchange.

### 3.5 Instruments

A semi-structured interview was used as the main instrument to carry out this study. The instrument was designed by the three researchers taking into account the aim, the research question set, as well as the literature review. The interview consisted of about 25 questions that addressed several issues in order to identify whether this teletandem experience helped students develop their autonomy. Topics addressed autonomy itself and how students conceptualize this term, the importance of setting goals, the use of portfolios to monitor their learning as well as their views on the strategies implemented.

The interviews were conducted in English via Google Meet. They lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. They were recorded and then transcribed verbatim with the help of a student. They were later analysed using a content analysis approach as described below.

### 3.6 Data analysis

To analyze the interviews, we drew on Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) who mention Saldaña's (2012) coding process for analyzing data. Thus, we conducted the **First cycle coding** process as we first read all the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with their content. We later highlighted salient words or phrases that contributed to answer our research question. We did this by adopting both an inductive and a deductive method since we had a list of key concepts identified in the literature review, but we also ‘let the data speak’.

We then conducted the **Second Cycle Coding** since with this list of terms, we coded all the transcripts in a shared Google Document. We later compared our codes and wrote them on a separate Word document to identify commonalities and differences and looked for patterns. We decided to add the extracts below the initial categories to facilitate this step. With this initial list, we again went through all the transcripts and a final list of categories emerged. We consider this process as ongoing because we deliberated as many times as necessary until we agreed on most of the categories identified. This process also contributed to the validation of our data analysis.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Results reveal that the implementation of the semi-structured teletandem exchange, as part of the learning autonomy course, was useful to raise students' awareness on learner autonomy. However, most of the participants agree that giving more freedom to learners would be more beneficial because they can decide the topics to discuss with their partners.

At the same time, they highlight that setting goals, making choices, reflecting on their own learning, and assessing their outcomes are some of the key roles learners take on in autonomous language learning. In this section, we will present and discuss some of the aspects or elements of autonomy that were identified by learners in the practice of teletandem.

##### 4.1 Defining autonomy

Our participants agree that autonomy is about being responsible for one's learning, taking control of their own learning because they will not always have the guidance provided by their instructor, as suggested by the students, Bianca and Fatima, respectively below,

*It is an essential part of our learning process because as we know, autonomy, refers back to the learn by ourselves. So in that way, we are, we have to be responsible about our learning (BIANCA).*

*I think it's a really helpful tool for us, because not always um. We will not always have a teacher to support us or maybe to guide us through the way we learn because we need to take into account that and everyone learns in a different way (FATIMA).*

Another student highlights the importance of learner autonomy as a useful tool to go beyond what is taught in the classroom, and she says that learners need to be autonomous to search for information about the contents they are learning on their own, as can be seen in the following extract,

*In fact, I think that if you want to learn something else that you are not being... it's not been taught in your classes. I think you have to take it... to look for it in general. So, it's going... ah... learning ah... by your own I think it is completely necessary (SUSAN).*

These students' perceptions of learner autonomy can be linked to the conception of taking control of their own learning. That is, students take responsibility for their own learning by understanding that learning can occur with or without their teachers. In the following extract, Paul, one of our participants, states clearly that it is the students' responsibility to focus on their own learning and improve the aspects of the language they want to work on,

*It's not only the teachers who are gonna make you pass classes or, or help you improve your skills or in any other subject. It is you who is the one who... it is you with the one who are, who is supposed to, to develop certain skills that you are supposed to do in the course, during the course of the BA (PAUL).*

Fatima also highlights that autonomy takes place when learners face a real communication situation and students have to make use of their communication skills to interact with their partner because the instructor is not "there" to provide the vocabulary or phrases students need, so they know they are on their own,

*Yes, because we are not, we don't have the teacher. In there in the conversation. guiding us and saying those a say this or say that or you're wrong on this, didn't say this. Well, so it's up to us. No, because it's our work conversation. We are by our own, with our partner. So, that gives us the opportunity to that, sorry that gives us opportunity to, to be more responsible on our own. Learning on our own performance. So, so yes, yes it's a really good way to, to learn a new language and in an autonomous way (FATIMA).*

It is evident from the excerpts that students have a clear understanding of what autonomy entails as they suggest it refers to an individual activity that demands responsibility and control over their own learning. This does not mean that autonomy occurs in isolation without a teacher; even though they are aware that their teacher is not by their side, they know they have been equipped with the necessary tools and techniques to develop their autonomy.

#### **4.2 Developing autonomy through teletandem**

Participants do not seem confident when asked if this telecollaboration helped them develop their autonomy or not. They seem not to be fully aware of the benefits of this collaboration in terms of autonomous learning. However, the students who are capable of stating the benefits explicitly acknowledge that this experience helped them put into practice some techniques learned in class as they started to take control of their own learning.

Students agree that even though it was a semi-structured teletandem exchange, they had the freedom to decide whether to watch the movie or not, to look for information about it or to investigate about the context of the movie, as suggested by Fatima,

*Yes, because you just gave us the context of that chat. For example, you gave us some movies, so it was up to me. To watch the movie to get information about the context of the movie. And obviously, we chose what to talk about during the conversations (FATIMA).*

This participant clearly states that it was her decision to watch the movie or not and to research about the context. It seems that, for her, autonomous learning means taking control and making decisions about her own learning. Similarly, Bianca argues that it was her choice to look for other sources of information about the topic,

*It was a tool that helped us to improve our autonomous learning because we have to watch movies. We couldn't see or we could see it. It was our decision that I think in that way autonomous learning was present. And for example, the teacher gave us a specific topic and, well, we tried to investigate or to look for more things about that topic. So I think autonomous learning was essentially (BIANCA).*

Another participant, Susan, also mentioned that she looked for information about the topic of the movie in order to be ready and have more conversation opportunities with her partner as shown below,

*I also, and I also looked for the movies, well the principal topic of the movie that I was talking and I find out more information about the topic so, I had more ah... more opportunities to follow with the conversation (SUSAN).*

Few students relate autonomous learning with the real use of the language since they realized that this type of learning occurred when they finished the task they were assigned to do, and the conversation turned into a casual conversation between two people as shown below,

*When we finished the activity, she started to talk about different things that she would like to know about Mexico. It's totally different about the topic. So, I, I, I, I, I feel or I noticed that it's the authentic thing, the authentic task, the true communication because they wanted to know certain things about each other. And for that thing, we am... that authentic task I'll mention yes, maybe promoted autonomy (PAULA).*

This free conversation can be a useful strategy to promote spontaneous oral practice. In a study conducted by Telles (2015), his results show that “students’ favorite activity during teletandem sessions was conversation about themes that emerged spontaneously” (p. 623). He further suggests that “the context has the potential of promoting autonomy due to its spontaneity and fun qualities” (p. 623).

Students make use of different sources like movies and audios messages to identify different accents or to increase their vocabulary repertoire. For instance, Bianca mentions that she listens to audios messages to identify accents,

*But I, I think it helped me. Yeah, because nowadays I, I try to listen to different audios, which is a form I don't know which has different accents that... And yeah, I try to do those kinds of things (BIANCA).*

It is important to stress the use of the word **nowadays** to refer to the present time because this student continued participating in teletandem exchanges in 2019. As suggested by Little (2001) “in the particular case of foreign languages, an autonomous learner is able to reflect critically both on the learning process and on the target language, and will continue to use this ability in contexts of target language use long after the end of formal learning” (p. 30).

### 4.3 Setting goals

Setting goals helps learners identify attainable outcomes because learners are aware of their needs and they can be used as a guide throughout their learning process. Our results reveal that learners set individual goals regarding two main issues: language skills and cultural aspects of their partner native language. For example, Fatima and Jack agree that they set their goals in terms of their speaking since they wanted to take advantage of the role of their partner and improve this skill,

*I set different goals, but obviously all the goals were focused on my speaking performance because as I told you before, I don't have the opportunity, here in Mexico, to practice talking with someone in English (FATIMA).*

*I set my goals based again in, sorry, on the skills I need or maybe my errors when I was doing speaking (JACK).*

Participants also agree that setting goals allows them to frame the objective of the teletandem sessions. That is, it is the guide that they need in order to go beyond this type of exchange. They are aware that this exchange is integral to the course they are taking, but setting goals is not just about carrying out the task, but rather their individual objectives as language learners, as suggested by Paula in the following extract,

*In autonomous learning, we had to work on that, to set your personal goals, what you want to practice with that partner, not only to develop the task or to complete the task (PAULA).*

Setting goals motivates students to develop their autonomy because they identify their needs and design the strategies to achieve them. Participants agree that this is one activity that allows them to decide on their own learning and what they need to do in order to achieve that goal, as stated below,

*If you set your goal maybe you can mmm... you can select what you are going to do in order to achieve that. And it's important to set them because maybe you are focused on, on yes on achieving them (JACK).*

This participant suggests that setting goals helps students choose their own path towards achieving them as an individual outcome during their language learning process. Setting goals is closely related to motivation because learners can use this activity as the driving force necessary for identifying their weaknesses and design strategies to overcome them.

#### 4.4 Reflection and outcome assessment

Reflection and outcome assessment allow students to analyze their performance, making them aware of their mistakes, difficulties and advances, with the intention of learning from this ongoing process. Learners identify their weaknesses and assess their progress. Learners are constantly reflecting on their learning process because they compare their level of English with that of their partner. They determine whether their level is good enough to follow the conversation. Some participants agree that reflecting on their performance was useful in taking action to improve their language learning as Susan, Fatima and Jack state below respectively,

*So, yeah it really helped me to discover my difficulties that I was having with my English, principally (SUSAN).*

*So, and obviously, I think with the reflections, um, I had the opportunity to review. What our conversation and then to analyze, my mistakes then for me to analyze how I said the things. So then after that, Teletandem, I was thinking I was, I don't know, doing reflection on my performance and sometimes I was like "oh, I could say this instead of that". So, it helped me a lot, okay? For me to, to make reflection on my own performance (FATIMA).*

*I could notice my mistakes, my, my, my errors when I was talking, I mean speaking. And when you notice that, maybe you can do some, yeah, some learning strategies to solve it (JACK).*

These extracts show that participants pay attention to their performance as a result of the interaction with their partner and, by doing this, they realize they could have said things differently. They notice that by reflecting on their performance and assessing it, they become conscious of their needs. This is an explicit benefit of this teletandem exchange because taking part in this real communication allows



them to become aware of their communicative competence. Participants decide whether they have the abilities to use the language appropriately in a real-life situation.

Paula, another participant, clearly expresses that after reflecting on her learning progress, she is capable of identifying her weaknesses and takes actions to improve them. She considers that reflecting on one's learning helps learners become autonomous as it creates this 'habit', as she calls it, and, consequently, the individual becomes a better student. By habit she means it becomes a routine that it is incorporated into their learning process. This is how she explains this reflection process and its benefits to becoming autonomous,

*In that way, your level of your autonomous learning is gonna raise because you're gonna have this habit to, to take this reflection into account and become better (PAULA).*

This statement suggests that by reflecting on one's learning, autonomy becomes a habit, in the sense that this constant reflection helps learners develop their autonomy to a higher level.

For some students, reflecting on their learning is a kind of assessment of their performance and progress, which gives a sense of achievement and hence motivates them to do it continuously. This finding is supported by Tirloni and Rammé (2015), who claim that students are capable of assessing their own learning progress as shown in the following excerpts,

*I mean of the all the sessions I tried to check my notes, my portfolio and I could consider if I, if I improved it or not (JACK).*

*After every E-Tandem session, I was always reflecting on my performance with him. I was always thinking of the ideas that I wanted to express during the conversation and I was evaluating the way in which I expressed them (FATIMA).*

Students use reflection to assess their learning outcomes in order to find out how much they have improved their performance. Little (as cited in BENSON, 2007) suggests that reflecting is an important component of autonomy in language learning.

#### **4.5 Freedom**

As argued in this paper, one form of autonomy in a teletandem exchange occurs when participants are given the opportunity to choose the topics they want to discuss. However, as stated above, the teletandem exchange reported in this study is semi-structured as it serves the specific purpose of discussing social themes presented in films.

Telles (2015) argues that the benefit of setting the topics in advance helps students whose level of English proficiency is low; however, he acknowledges these pre-established themes,

*affect a principle of tandem learning, which is students' autonomy (in their choice of topic for discussion, in this case). Student autonomy in the choice of topics for discussion is quite important, not only to the promotion of critical thinking, but to students' personal development and interest in their own learning processes, as well. (p. 629)*

We concur with this statement; however, our participants were given the topics to discuss because the purpose of this partnership was framed by the social themes presented in the films. Participants agree that they need more freedom to decide on the topics they want to discuss with their partners because the discussion would be more enjoyable. Martin, for example, reports that some of the movies he watched were not interesting for him,

*I remember that you sometimes ah... assigned us to watch some movies so we could talk about those movies but I wasn't really into those movies. I mean, some of them were really good but some others were like ah... I'm finding this boring (PAUL).*

Participants realize that this teletandem exchange is an institutional one because it takes place between two universities simultaneously in set times. Sue, another participant, also agrees that deciding on the tasks could have been more enjoyable,

*Because we did it because it was more of an academic purpose. I think it would have been I don't know if I see a program or something. I think it will be more of, I enjoyed it (SUE).*

Kayla thinks that this type of exchange (in which the discussion topics are dictated for them) is monitored, as she calls it. She suggests that the conversation turns into something artificial because it is built in around a topic not chosen by either of the partners,

*Maybe it's monitored all the time. When I say that it's because maybe the teacher mmm... said a specific topic that maybe the other person and I had to... had to... establish a conversation it's not like authentic communication (PAULA).*

These excerpts show that students want to have more freedom and decide on the topics they want to discuss with their partners. We are aware that this is a fundamental element of autonomy, but due to the characteristics of this teletandem exchange, students' freedom was somehow limited. As this was the first students' experience with teletandem, the course instructors also wanted to provide some kind of structure for the teletandem sessions as autonomy is a capacity which develops gradually over time as students become more aware of their learning process and their personal goals for learning the language.

#### 4.6 Teacher mediation

Even though students acknowledge that they need more autonomy to decide on the topics to discuss with their partners, they also recognize the important role that the instructor plays in this preparation process prior to the exchange. Telles (2015) draws on Vygotsky (1989)'s concept of mediation and uses the term to describe sessions,

*that are conducted by the teachers after each teletandem session. They focus on aspects of the target languages, the students' learning processes, and the cultural aspects and themes that emerge (implicitly or explicitly) during the interactions. Mediation sessions can be conducted in either the native or target language, depending on the students' level in the latter. (p. 607)*

In our case, mediation sessions were conducted in English at the end of the lessons. They were primarily intended to promote students' reflection on their learning, identify problems, and suggest strategies to overcome them.

Participants agree that their course instructor played an important role in training them to be equipped with strategies to put into practice, as stated by one of our participants below,

*The teacher gave us all the information, all the techniques, all the strategies. So we were prepared to use them. And it was up to us. If we apply them if we use them, or if we or if we, yeah, or if we may because you told us that we have, we have the opportunity to develop different ways to learn and to develop our English (FATIMA).*

Participants agree that being equipped with the strategies and techniques to become autonomous is helpful because they are provided with the resources they need to exercise their autonomy. Paula, another participant, supports this statement as she feels that having taken the class helped her know what to do when preparing for the exchange.

*So, eh when I took this ah autonomous learning course I'm conscious about what involves, what aspects we have to take into account when we are going to work by ourselves and those kind of things helped me to... to set my personal goals (PAULA).*

This statement supports the claim that students need some guidance or training to exercise their autonomy because they are aware of what they need to do for the exchange. This participant, for example, mentions that being trained helped her set her goals.

Another participant, Susan, remembers that their learning autonomy instructor suggested that setting a learning plan was useful when setting up the exchange with her partner. She followed her instructor's suggestion and she set up a schedule because it would help her develop her autonomy as stated below,

*Teacher X told us in the class that to learn autonomously we had to make our own schedule that's why I'm saying that schedule is very important in autonomous learning (SUSAN).*

This paper has revealed that students need some guidance in order to develop or exercise their autonomy, at least at the early stages. Once it becomes a 'habit' as one of our participants suggested, then the instructor can step aside and students will be ready to act on their own.

### **Conclusions**

The learning autonomy course made students more aware of the importance of autonomy in language learning and the effectiveness of learning strategies to facilitate learning. However, as can be interpreted from the data, students did not exercise their autonomy fully in the context of teletandem. They were aware of the roles learners play in autonomous language learning and also acknowledged their instructor role in the process, but most of them did not take advantage of the opportunity to plan, monitor, and assess their learning with the support of their partners. One of the reasons for this, as they suggest, is that they could not decide on topics for the interaction. The reason why the topics were set in advance was to provide a framework for the exchange, making them familiar with the characteristics of telecollaborative tasks, and giving learners the possibility to be prepared for the sessions in terms of the knowledge and language needed for the discussion of topics. However, students perceived this as a constraint in the development of their autonomy and preferred sessions where topics emerged freely.

The biggest challenge in the development of autonomy is encouraging learners to accept responsibility for their own learning. As stated by Sinclair (2000), autonomy requires willingness on the part of learners to take responsibility for their own learning and conscious awareness of the learning process. To enhance the development of autonomy in the context of teletandem, as supported in this study, it is necessary to provide more freedom for learners to decide on the topics and tasks for the exchange. This will allow learners to make decisions about their own learning and may contribute to increasing their motivation to learn languages through telecollaboration. By allowing students to make choices from a range of options, they will be more involved in their learning and will eventually be able to adapt or create their own learning tasks, going from the level of awareness to transcendence in their autonomy (NUNAN, 1997).

The promotion of autonomy in language teacher education programs should become a major goal considering the impact that teacher-learners will have on their future language learners. As Little (1995) suggests, teachers are more likely to promote autonomy in their learners if their own education has

encouraged them to become autonomous. Therefore, autonomy should be promoted as a universal right (VIEIRA, 2003, 2009) in different learning scenarios beyond the language classroom. In this sense, teletandem, due to the principles that frame it, is an ideal scenario for the development of learners' autonomy with the support of their instructors and partners.

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