Learning experiences in a virtual exchange project: the University of California, Davis' and the Federal University of Acre's first partnership

Experiências de aprendizagem em um projeto de intercâmbio virtual: primeira parceria com a Universidade da Califórnia, Davis e a Universidade Federal do Acre

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RESUMO

Este relato de experiência apresenta um panorama da primeira experiência de intercâmbio virtual (O'DOWD, 2018, 2021) entre alunos da Universidade Federal do Acre e da Universidade da Califórnia, Davis, ocorrida durante o primeiro semestre de 2021, quando os participantes viviam o ensino emergencial remoto e tiveram de usar seus dispositivos eletrônicos para interagir com seus interagentes. A troca virtual foi uma parceria Teletandem (TELLES, 2006, 2015; COSTA; SALOMÃO; ZAKIR, 2018; FERNANDES; TELLES, 2015). Descrevemos como a parceria foi firmada, desafios e recompensas para os interagentes, os mediadores e os professores envolvidos no projeto. O teletandem na UFAC é a primeira ação do Laboratório de Intercâmbio Intercultural On-line (LIIO). As interações, de sete a oito por grupo, aconteceram de janeiro a maio, dependendo do cenário pedagógico (FOUCHER, 2010). Os dados coletados no período seguiram um protocolo semelhante ao estabelecido no Multec - Multimodal Teletandem Corpus (LOPES, 2019; ARANHA; LOPES, 2019). Considerando a necessidade do distanciamento social, os interagentes superaram as limitações da falta de um laboratório de línguas institucionalizado, utilizando seus dispositivos e conexão de internet para participar durante os encontros via webconferência para desenvolver a competência interacional em inglês e português.

Palavras-Chave: Teletandem, Pandemia COVID-19, Ensino Remoto Emergencial, Região Amazônica, Intercâmbio Virtual.

ABSTRACT

This experience report presents an overview of the first experience of virtual exchange (O'DOWD, 2018, 2021) between students from the Federal University of Acre and the University of California, Davis, which occurred during the first semester of 2021. The project's participants were experiencing emergency remote instruction and had to use their electronic devices to interact with their partners. The virtual exchange was a Teletandem partnership (TELLES, 2006, 2015; COSTA; SALOMÃO; ZAKIR, 2018; FERNANDES; TELLES, 2015). We describe how the partnership was established, the challenges, and the

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rewards for the interactants, the mediators and the professors involved in the project. Teletandem at UFAC is the first initiative of the project Intercultural Interchange Online Laboratory. The interactions took place from January to May, during which seven to eight interactions occurred, depending on the pedagogical scenario (FOUCHER, 2010). The data collected during the period followed a similar protocol established in Multec - Multimodal Teletandem Corpus (LOPES, 2019; ARANHA; LOPES, 2019). Considering the need for social distancing, interactants overcame their limitations with the lack of an institutional language laboratory by using their devices and internet connection to participate during the web conference meetings in order to develop interactional competence in English and Portuguese.

Keywords: *Teletandem, COVID-19 Pandemic, Emergency Remote Instruction, Amazon Region, Virtual Exchange.*

1. Introduction

Learning a language is an endeavor that requires dedication and time. In formal teaching contexts, the learning "is often focused on grammatical accuracy" (O'DOWD, 2021, p. 9). The search for the perfect pronunciation, which we consider must be discussed in all language teachers' undergraduate courses to help future teachers reflect on the implications of being too concerned with a "perfection" that puts all identity and decolonizing issues to the side.

Promoting telecollaboration activities has been an option in bringing opportunities to interact in the language to the formal language learning environment in which the students are learning. The benefits of this practice have been published in many papers and research reports. In Brazil, the most prominent telecollaboration project is teletandem. We could quote research studies that embrace this setting, for instance, in Cavalari (2009); Bedran, (2008); Garcia (2010); Luz (2009); Lopes (2019); Messias; Telles (2020); Vassallo (2010) among others. These investigations comprise a wide range of themes related to language development in settings of teacher education, identity, cultural practices, gender issues and Portuguese as an additional language teaching (SOUZA; ZAKIR; GARCIA, 2021). Also, a wide quantity of literature about academic research studies on telecollaborative activities are available at the Teletandem Brazil Project's[4] website.

Idealized by Telles (2006), a researcher at State University of São Paulo (UNESP), teletandem was "created as a research project" and "concentrated its activities, in the Brazilian context, initially at UNESP. Nowadays, this telecollaboration practice has been developed by universities of different states,

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[4] For more information, please follow this hyperlink: www.teletandembrasil.org

such as the Regional University of Cariri, State University of Paraíba, UENP, among others[5]" (SOUZA, 2020, p. 45).

During a teletandem partnership, a student learning Portuguese, for example, interacts with an English learner through synchronous video conferencing tools following the principles of reciprocity, separation of languages, and autonomy to help each other learn the target languages. The interactions occur once a week, and the professors/mediators[6], who do not participate in the exchange, are essential in helping learners develop their linguistic and soft skills (such as emotional and mutual respect amongst the interactants), promoting an environment in which intercultural awareness and competence can also be created through what is called a "mediation session," as discussed by Lopes and Freschi (2016).

This paper aims to report how the implementation of teletandem at the Federal University of Acre (UFAC) and the University of California, Davis (UCD), occurred and the challenges and benefits of developing such a virtual exchange (VE) project in the southern region of the Amazon. We organized this experience report as follows: i) theoretical perspectives; ii) methodological journey; iii) some registers about the data collected throughout the two cycles of teletandem partnerships; iv) remarks that evoke further successful VE initiatives.

2. Teletandem: a virtual exchange for learning languages

According to O'Dowd (2021), the term VE has been widely used in a variety of contexts where interactants of different cultural backgrounds look forward to practicing foreign languages. Also, as pointed out by O'Dowd (2021), VE is an umbrella term that comprises plenty of different initiatives for learning foreign languages together in higher education settings. The coverage terms for VE are the following: (a) telecollaboration; (b) online intercultural exchange; (c) E-tandem/Teletandem; (d) Global virtual teams; (e) Collaborative Online International Learning and (e) Globally-Networked Learning Environments (O'DOWD, 2021, p. 4).

We believe that the interchange of ideas, experiences, and cultural attitudes provide a real engagement (O'DOWD, 2021) between the interactants immersed throughout the collaboration sessions. In fact, according to O'Dowd (2021, p. 3), adopting a VE terminology is our choice because "[...] we believed that adopting a moniker which was more widely known would contribute to promoting more

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[5] Our translation of "projeto de pesquisa, concentrou suas atividades, no contexto brasileiro, inicialmente na UNESP. Atualmente, o programa passa por uma expansão no território nacional para universidades de diferentes estados, como a Universidade Regional do Cariri, Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, UENP, entre outras, como ilustrado a seguir." (SOUZA, 2020, p. 45)

[6] Mediators are volunteers prepared throughout a mediation course as also participating in meetings with the professors, members of the teletandem's staff at LIIO, in order to help the interactants with technical or cultural issues. They do not participate in the pair interactions, but read their learning journals and mediate sessions when interactants share their experience.

cross-community collaboration and greater synergies in our research." Then, all VE is applied in the project as 'technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs' (O'DOWD, 2021, p. 3), including teletandem, which has enabled many interactants to improve communicative and intercultural competencies. Some research studies as in Messias and Ferreira (2018), Godwin-Jones (2019), Schaefer (2021), amongst others, are examples of the theme related to communicative and intercultural competencies development.

Besides improving these competencies, the project also promotes the development of users' communities from different foreign languages with expressive cultural experiences and backgrounds. These interactants constitute the identity of this telecollaborative initiative. Also, the practice of languages in this project provided the chance to develop friendship bonds followed by a sense of inclusion and the recognition of sociocultural values of the whole community evolved in the process. Despite the severe impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this telecollaborative initiative characterized the possibility of opening a wide window to deconstructing stereotypes and to unite the interactants in a community that share not only a development of linguistic and communicative competences, but provide moments to an ongoing learning about life experiences. Then, those social actors (coordinators, mediators and interactants) sought to turn the teletandem sessions into a powerful mechanism for developing their reflective and critical thinking skills, and similarly to helping each other increase a sense of respect related to cultural identities.

Considering this scenario in the flow of exchanges, the project in partnership with UFAC and UCD is based on the teletandem principles of reciprocity, autonomy, and separation of languages (VASSALLO, 2006; TELLES, 2006; TELLES, 2015). The reciprocity principle assures that both interactants have the chance to develop their learning process together. The interactant roles are constituted simultaneously, in which support and cooperation represent the foundation of commitment to teaching and learning. The autonomy principle is paramount in teletandem sessions. The interactants co-construct their learning aims to support the establishment of tasks and strategies. In the separation of languages, the interactions follow the principle of equity, where both interactants respect the opportunity to engage the practice of interactions in the target-language. Autonomy is vital so that, from the first moment of participation, learners know that they can decide how they want to learn the language and which themes are motivating. Following the principle of reciprocity, both learners realize they need to be reciprocal to their partner and be aware of their decisions on how and what to learn about the language. The separation of languages is a principle that helps them dedicate equal time to both languages. For instance, if the teletandem oral session (TOS) lasts 50 minutes, interactants should talk in English for 25

minutes and in Portuguese for 25 minutes. The mediator/professor is the one who is responsible for telling the interactants when it is time to switch languages.

The project followed an ecological system of ongoing collaboration amongst coordinators, mediators, and interactants. The coordinators share the principles of teletandem as an opportunity to mobilize the spirit of cooperation. The collaborative attitudes also followed a system of tasks that arranged the opportunity to share beliefs, intercultural practices, ideas, identities, and learning styles. To represent the organic interrelationships that emerged, we present Figure 1:

Figure 1. Ongoing Collaboration
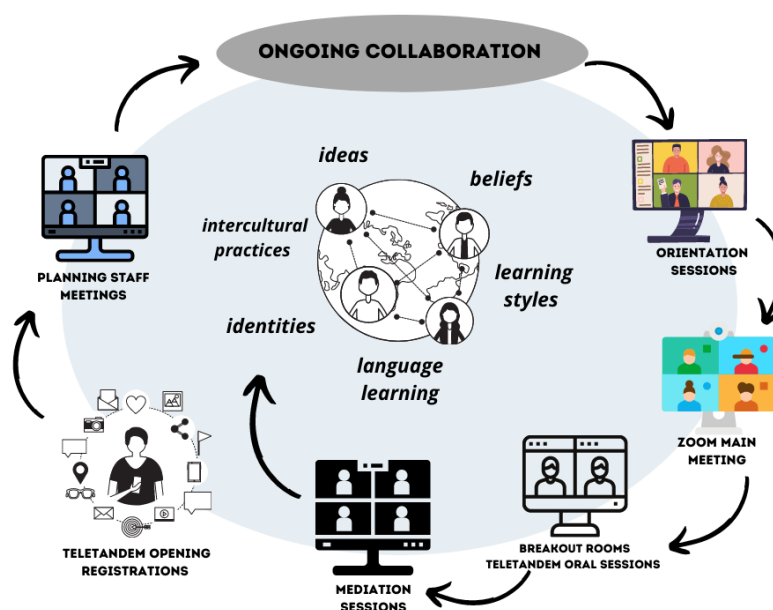
Source: The authors

In accordance with the figure, the tasks implemented during this project were based on ongoing collaboration. The coordinators, mediators and interactants supported each other's practice to a common aim - sharing experiences through a foreign language exchange process. The steps of the project were (a) opening registration for volunteers of the community and staff from UFAC; (b) meetings with staff to establish objectives and plans; (c) orientation sessions with the interactants from both institutions; (d) initial sessions in the main room of the Zoom session with the coordinators (professors from UFAC and UCD), mediators and interactants; (e) teletandem oral sessions (TOS) in Zoom Breakout Rooms, following the principle of separation of languages, and (f) mediation sessions where mediators and Brazilian interactants shared their experiences. These interrelationships demonstrate that VE in a telecollaboration mode constituted an opportunity to unite these communities, in which learning experiences represented an intrapersonal development during critical times of the pandemic.

Although teletandem projects and VE initiatives were widely debated in language studies and applied linguistics, the foundations of this project also sought to constitute a community of educational agents concerned with the global implications caused by an unexpected change in socio-cultural practices. This type of teletandem project at both UFAC and UCD is innovative because experiences of interchange mediated by digital tools would provide moments, in times of crises caused by a pandemic, to build up settings for learning languages throughout the discovery of singular cultural practices. Also, these practices conducted to unveil identities that grounded the increasing friendship bonds.

The representative aspects of this project supported social actors from different cultural backgrounds and contextual realities. In other words, these teletandem sessions were a "way of learning to live a life" amidst the chaos of the pandemic.

3.   A collaborative learning journey

3.1 It all began because of a "live streaming"

In times of COVID-19, lots of language teaching live streamings were available to anyone who could access the internet. Regardless of the field of interest, educators could find many learning opportunities and even spend days attending them. They were a viable option "[...] to keep the link between the university and its peers and internal and external community alive [...][7]" (ALMEIDA; ALVES, 2020, p. 150). We think that more than keeping this link alive, live streamings could widen it as happened in the experience we report in this paper with teletandem at UFAC and UCD.

On November 30, 2020, during the webinar promoted by the Language Courses Open to the Community (CLAC) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), the Portuguese Continuing Lecturer at the University of California, Davis (UCD), Eugênia Fernandes, participated with the talk: "Developing Portuguese as additional language to promote social change". In her talk, she made clear the impact remote teaching had had and her willingness to help students learn Portuguese to communicate and as a means to social change, which we consider related to intercultural competence (BELZ, 2003).

After an introduction by Professor Queila Lopes, as a coordinator of the LIIO Project, and some work from both sides upon preparing interactants, organizing data, and conciliating dates and times, the first teletandem sessions between UFAC's and UC Davis' students took place on January 14, 2021. The professors opted for semi-integrated institutional teletandem modality[8], considering what was possible for

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[7] Our translation of: "[...] espaços de encontros para manter vivo o vínculo da universidade com os seus pares e comunidade interna e externa [...]" (ALMEIDA; ALVES, 2020, p. 150).

[8]The modalities of teletandem developed until now are: institutional, noninstitutional and semi-institutional. Institutional TTD can also be: integrated, semi-integrated, non-integrated, optional and complementary (ZAKIR, 2015; ARANHA; CAVALARI, 2014). Semi-integrated institutional teletandem is a modality in which teletandem is part of a discipline syllabus in one of the institutions and in the other teletandem is supported by the institution, but is not part of a syllabus.

both institutions. At first, considering the previous teletandem experiences at UNESP with other higher education institutions in the United States, conducting teletandem without a language laboratory with appropriate devices in both institutions seemed impossible, considering "[...] the use of a fully equipped lab daily with it altogether will probably affect students' performance especially in the listening and speaking skills." (MOHAMMED, 2017, p. 91).

The project staff adapted to the contextual and educational realities, considering the resources both UFAC and UCD offered to host interactions online, fulfilling the emergency remote learning context needs and the teletandem principles. Taking advantage of the subsidized online platforms from each institution, UCD shared a Zoom account to host the sessions. Additionally, the pre-assigned Zoom Breakout Room feature was a distinguishing aspect of the initiative. While the UCD instructors were planning Winter 2021 classes in Brazil, the coordination of the project at UFAC prepared a course to train mediators.

3.2 The mediators

Considering the relevance of mediation, the coordinator of the project at UFAC planned a course to prepare students for becoming teletandem mediators. The objective was to promote discussion and bring up issues that they could face during the teletandem class meditations. As the sessions were remote, the Online Intercultural Interchange Laboratory (LIIO) opened the registration not only for UFAC's students and/or workers, but also to the outside community.

There were four meetings, once per week. They lasted two hours each and the topics covered were:

- What is TTD? History, modalities and partnerships, tasks and mediation;
- Geopolitics of the English Language;
- Interculturality and language teaching;
- Negotiation and reciprocity.

LIIO received ten applications for teletandem mediatorships, and all ten of them received certificates. As it was the first experience for all of them in a virtual exchange project like teletandem, they were also invited to participate as interactants. Still, in the teletandem classes they were not attending, they would act as mediators. In this way they could have the opportunity of knowing what it was like to be an interactant and not only a mediator, which we believe is essential to becoming a good mediator. The mediators' training sessions happened one month before the first session of two teletandem classes on January 7, 2021.

At the UCD, the scenario was quite different from that of UFAC. The lead professor of the Portuguese language courses could not count on mediators, relying on UFAC's trained staff over the

quarter and preparing UCD's students based on LIIO's guidance. As the Portuguese language faces a critical and less-commonly taught language context in the United States (LOONEY; LUSIN, 2019) most language departments do not offer a Major in Luso-Brazilian Studies, only a Minor, as UCD does. For this reason, without a major focused on teaching the Portuguese language, it has been challenging to find peers to support the project without funding.

3.3 The context of teletandem classes

We are naming 'teletandem class' a group formed by students from UCD and UFAC who were paired and interacted once a week through Zoom Breakout Rooms. According to the pairing, the UCD professor pre-assigned the Breakout Rooms[9], so each pair constituted one UFAC student and one UCD student, who was in a different room upon entering the session.

From January 14, 2021, to May 30, 2021, 89 pairs of interactants had the experience of improving their language skills and helping a partner achieve their linguistic goals. Also, the project had five TTD classes with different numbers of pairs, according to the UCD Portuguese classes offered in the Winter and Spring academic quarters, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Teletandem classes - UCD and UFAC in 2021

Class	Months	Interactions #	Pairs
TTDsi1	January - March	9	25
TTDsi2	January - March	9	15
TTDsi3	April - May	4	13
TTDsi4	April - May	7	20
TTDsi5	April - May	5	14
Totals			
5	5	32	89

Source: The authors

Interactants from Brazil had different socio-cultural contexts, according to their academic or community affiliation. The first group was formed by UFAC students of undergraduate and graduate courses. Most of them were pre-service teachers majoring in English Language and Literature. The second

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[9] Pairing had been done beforehand.

one was grouped by volunteers outside UFAC. These interactants came from the university's administrative staff and from Brazilian states such as Amazonas, Paraíba, Piauí, and São Paulo. The interactants' heterogeneity is related to the teletandem registration being open to the general community in Brazil. Independently of the identities of interactants, the project staff implemented a sense of equity related to the sessions and tasks.

Furthermore, Brazilian interactants had mediation sessions just after the TOS through Zoom and had two mediators to help them discuss and reflect on their learning process. The mediation sessions were recorded. Data used in this article were anonymized following a protocol similar to the one used in MulTeC[10].

UCD interactants were taking Portuguese language courses. Most of these interactants had Latin American heritage. They also demonstrated a genuine interest in the intercultural practices of Brazil and their counterparts.

The tasks applied to UCD interactants observed the guidelines and didactic methodology of Portuguese language courses. The teletandem project was a pedagogical component of the course where these interactants had the opportunity to share intercultural knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts, according to their learning strategies.

These contexts, characterized by a diversity of identities, were essential for constituting a community of interactants focused on similar collaborative aims, learning to respect ideologies, improving their target-language, and knowing about each other's intercultural practices. The experiences from the exchanges in the teletandem classes generated consistent data concerning the impacts of the initiatives implemented by the project. The coordinators and mediators organized a sequence of tasks to make the experience of teletandem a sphere of thoughts not only dedicated to learning a language but as a mechanism of mediating the elicitation of concepts and values of their counterparts (BYRAM, 1997 apud SCHAEFER, 2021).

3.4 Anonymizing the data

The project staff systematized the data to preserve the identities of the interactants and even to value their experience. Table 2, as follows, presents the project's comprehensive scenario, its tasks, specifically how the documents and diverse textual genres played their roles in the data collection:

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[10] Multimodal Teletandem Corpus (ARANHA; LOPES, 2019).

Table 2. Data scenario

Strategies and documents	Aims
Pedagogical scenarios	To detail the TTD classes, for instance, names of the teachers/professors, mediators, day of the week of the TOS, day of the text exchange, time and length of the TOS, modality of teletandem, pairing (if previous or not), and the Zoom link to access the virtual room for the TTD class. This is considered a planning document. It is created while planning the session, and any changes about the class have been recorded in another document to keep a record of each class.
Pairing	To name and organize the pairs of interactants with their email address and phone number if they agree to share this information.
Attendance	To systematize interactants data in an Excel spreadsheet with three pages: i) attendance - to register the presence or absence of the interactants in each TOS; ii) occurrences - to register any relevant occurrences to understand the data produced, and iii) tasks - a sheet to register, per interactants, which task was done or not.
Initial and final questionnaires	To help the interactants establish their goals (initially) and evaluate if they achieved them (finally). The interactants also shared their concerns about the experience and suggestions for the staff.
Texts	To provide the opportunity for the interactants to exchange texts written in Brazilian Portuguese and English. Both interactants were advised to present suggestions on the texts and also had the chance to share ideas during a specific time of the TOS.
Journals	To mobilize the critical and reflective practice concerning the experiences of TTD classes. Journals were implemented in different dimensions for interactants in Brazil and the United States. Each coordination staff member provided guidelines according to the context of the institutions.
Padlets	To help interactants connect after the assessment interaction upon opening a channel for messages to inform their peers of the impact of the experience in their language development and personal lives.

Source: The authors using the data produced during the partnership

Another aspect that supported the anonymization of the data was a sequence of alpha code. The data were named with a series of numbers and letters. Figure 2 represents this anonymization as follows:

Figure 2. Naming to anonymize
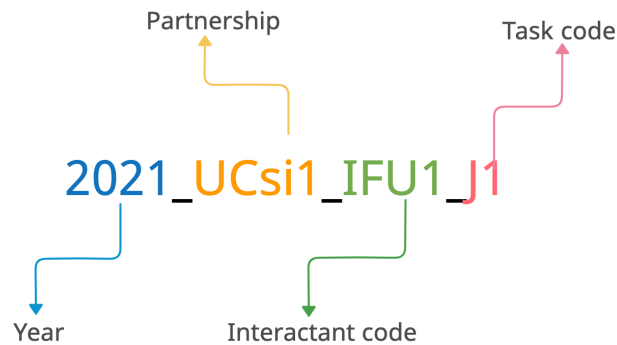
As shown in figure 2, the order begins with: (i) the year of the class implemented on the project (2021); (ii) the university where the partnership was established (UCD), followed by the teletandem mode which is semi-integrated and the number of the class (si1[11]), since the project is implemented on the Portuguese course of UCD and with interactants from different Brazilian and UFAC contexts; (iii) interactant of a federal university related to a Brazilian context (IFU), constituted of the initials letters of the institution and the number of the pair (IFU1), the representation for UCD is the following interactant of the University of California (ICU), also following the number of the pair; and (iv) the last part refers to the task assigned to the interactants, in this example of Figure 2, the letter "J" means the journal and the number 1 corresponds to the sequence of the task. About the UCD interactants, the tasks assigned were according to the methodology of the Portuguese course.

We analyzed 544 journals written by the interactants in order to discuss their reflections about the partnership goals to learn language through virtual meetings. We focus on language learning, beliefs, and intercultural practices. We looked at the interactants' data to find out linguistic clues about their language learning process through teletandem and which views were changed during the partnership due to intercultural practices.

4.   The data: a discussion

The success of a learning experience in a virtual exchange project, like the one we are reporting here, is measured by the voices of the learners who participated. As we said above, the excerpts we are

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[11] The number indicates the order of the occurrence of the teletandem class. So, UCsi1, names the first semi-integrated TTD class of UFAC and UCD partnership.

discussing are from their journals, a task they are invited to do to help them reflect on their learning process during their interactions with partners. Considering the wide range of data, we needed to choose only two categories to focus on the analysis.

For the discussion, we prioritized the classes TTDsi1 and TTDsi2, as at the moment we wrote this publication, TTDsi3, TTDsi4, and TTDsi5 were still taking place in the academic year. The percentage we discuss in this report is calculated on 197 journals written by 39 interactants enrolled at LIIO, and 40 interactants from UCD, who wrote 347 journals. Although advised in the teletandem training sessions offered by LIIO and the orientation at UCD, unfortunately, not all the interactants completed their journals.

4.1 Language learning

Most of the interactants reported in their journals that linguistics skills were improving. They chose words such as "I believe," "We made it," "I have already acquired" to describe their self-assessment of the learning process through teletandem.

Most of the improvements they addressed were noticed by them before the fifth interaction, in a total of eight. As IFU3, teletandem class UCsi1 wrote in the fourth journal: "I've noticed that comprehension and speaking come with every meeting, being practiced and I already can feel such changes" (2021_UCsi2_IFU3_J4). IFU3 realizes during the interaction that the learning process was happening even with few TOS. The more they got to know each other, the better the communication and their language skills developed.

A similar evaluation of the process was done by IFU13, "Despite the fact that I had participated in only two meetings till now I already managed to acquire better personal performance in speaking the language" (2021_UCsi2_IFU13_J2). We can see in this excerpt that the interactant recognizes it is early to begin seeing results, so she chose the word **despite** when she talks about the second TOS, as she had already had some positive change in her English performance.

From the Portuguese language learner's perspective, similar experiences were reported, as stated UCI16: "Considering Portuguese is a brand new language to me, and to many people in my class, I felt proud of our progress and my ability to talk to my partner" (2021_UCsi1_UCI16_J2). UCI16 noticed progress throughout the entire cohort besides the language being new to them, elementary learners.

In the second journal, UCI13 shared: "I think my Portuguese has improved with my partner's help, and I would like to be able to continue" (2021_UCsi2_UCI13_J2). As intimidating as the initiative may appear at first, UCI13's thoughts on continuous teletandem interactions show some interest in authentic conversations as a way to improve their language skills.

In the broad range of the journals, from interactions two to eight, the interactants also reported their partner's language development, which can be identified bellow:

> "She improved a lot since the beginning" (2021_UCsi2_IFU7_J8)
>
> "Both my partner and I have really improved on our speaking from the first session until now and I am really happy about that" (2021_UCsi1_UCI23_J8)
>
> "[...] she is getting better in Portuguese" (2021_UCsi1_IFU24_J3)
>
> "She is managing to overcome her difficulties [...] better performance related to pronunciation" (2021_UCsi1_IFU23_J4)
>
> "'[...] her English is now really good, so I can just say it in English, and she translates the word for me" (2021_UCsi1_UCI14_J5)
>
> "Her pronunciation got much better, and also there was an expansion of her vocabulary" (2021_UCsi2_IFU2_J5)

In addition to these examples related to language development, the TOS scenarios ensure atmospheres where identities of EFL pre-service teachers, graduate students, and Portuguese as Additional Language (PLA) learners would foster relationships of a community aiming to achieve mutual respect concerning cultural attitudes converged to a representation of each other. Also, the difficulties related to language learning drew a "bridge" between the UFAC and UCD interactants as a pathway to increase the intrapersonal attitude concerning the time of involvement supported by the TOS. Some pieces of evidence about these issues are given in the following extracts:

> "[...] My partner came up with the idea of making letters to each other in portugues and in spanish to help us communicate with each other better which was such a great idea because it's way more comfortable and it's like a diary where you can talk about anything and then get feedback on it. [...]" (2021_UCsi1_UCI2_J3)
>
> "[...] There were moments that I couldn't remember some specific words in English, though my partner had gotten to help me in a satisfactory way[12]. [...]" (2021_UCsi1_UFAC1_J4)

As shown in these testimonials, both interactants constitute an atmosphere that not only provides an opportunity for learning a language focused on their own goals, but is also visible from the discourse marks chosen to signify this attitude such as "to help us," "each other," "more comfortable," "help me" and "satisfactory way". This continuous meaning construction between the interactants demonstrates that

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[12] Our translation for: "[...] Houve momentos em que eu não conseguia lembrar de algumas palavras específicas em inglês, contudo, minha parceira conseguiu me ajudar de forma satisfatória. [...]" (2021_UCsi1_UFAC1_J4)

moments of scaffolding are valuable mechanisms to stratify intrapersonal experiences that constitute identities and representations about 'Self" and "The other" (DERVIN, 2014).

Some examples demonstrate episodes during the TOS about bilingualism were related to the separation of languages, one of teletandem principles. This is evidence of the development of these interactants' language learning process. The voices of interactants from both institutions unveil cultural identities as construction of meanings depicted in the testimonials:

> "[...] I felt proud of our progress and my ability to talk to my partner (although my Portuguese was very broken, and I relied a lot on Spanish in hopes for any possible connections). [...]"
> (2021_UCsi1_UCI16_J2)
>
> "[...] it has been a good practice to speak and think in other language. Throughout the conversation I have realized that I am just beginning to repeat the accent of my partner.[13] [...]"
> (2021_UCsi1_UFAC6_J5)

As presented in these extracts, the mixture of languages scaffolds opportunities for curious episodes of comprehending specific aspects of the interactants' mother tongue. The cultural heritage for Latin American countries and a close relationship with the Spanish language constitute an atmosphere of language development. This practice of language relation also helped the interactants monitor the progress of understanding the modes of thinking and speaking.

4.2 Beliefs and intercultural practices

As Lopes and Freschi (2016) assert, teletandem "is a space for the negotiation of meanings, modes of correction, of ideas, and shared reflections[14]" (LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016, p. 53). Also, citing Vassallo and Telles (2009), Zakir (2017) affirms that "although the first researches of the TTB Project did not deal with the cultural dimension of interactions, teletandem was already recognized as a direct and personal context of intercultural and interpersonal language learning exchange[15]" (ZAKIR, 2017, p. 2980). This intrinsic intercultural aspect of virtual exchange can be noticed by most of the interactants.

Kramsch (2013) observes how culture is discursively constructed in the language classroom when students have agency to choose the subjects of conversation: "[...] in online or face-to-face interactions,

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[13] Our translation for: "[...] tem sido um exercício muito bom para falar e pensar no outro idioma. Ao longo da conversação, tenho percebido que começo a reproduzir o sotaque da minha colega. [...]" (2021_UCsi1_UFAC6_J5)

[14] Our translation for: "[...] é espaço de negociação de sentidos, de modos de correção, de ideias e reflexão compartilhada, [...]" (LOPES; FRESCHI, 2017, p. 53)

[15] Our translation for: "Embora as primeiras pesquisas do projeto TTB não tratassem, em sua maioria, da dimensão cultural das interações, o teletandem já era reconhecido como um contexto direto e pessoal de intercâmbio intercultural e interpessoal de aprendizagem" (ZAKIR, 2017, p. 2980)

students are seen as constructing their own and others' subject positions through the questions they ask and the topics they choose to talk about or to avoid. These subject positions constitute over time a discursive practice that we call 'culture'" (KRAMSCH, 2013, p. 68). In organic interactions, teletandem participants are agents in re-signifying their cultures, debating stereotypes, and revisiting cultural beliefs.

IFU4, teletandem class UCsi2, reports "[...] the exchanges I had were very important for me to understand more about my partner's country and learn some things about their culture, which can, in some cases, be similar to ours". According to this interactant, participating on the VE helped her open her mind about other countries. In her opinion, it is a process that contributes to building attitudes of more respect for differences, all occurring during interactions in which reciprocity and autonomy are principles.

Another critical aspect of the VE through teletandem is overcoming stereotypes, as can be seen in the sentence: "[...] we discussed stereotypes and how they less than often display the truth" (2021_UCsi2_IFU7_J6). The partners reasonably concluded that most of the beliefs they had about a country or people group, most of the time, do not portray reality.

Intentionally debating stereotypes in the interaction, UCI1 wrote in a journal about both countries' social organization and how it depicts power relations: "This week in Teletandem we did a lot of comparisons between Brazil and the USA. We talked about the minimum wage, jobs such as police, the requirements for the army, military, and air force, and discussed the stereotypes each of our countries have for one another which was very interesting" (2021_UCsi1_UCI1_J6).

Considering the interactants' multiple proficiency levels in the target-language, the excerpt below shows us how interactants approached complex social subjects to encourage each other to think differently: "I realized I can help more with English if we talk about more complicated things, such as feminism" (2021_UCsi1_UCI8_J2). Yet on complex social subjects, adding the gender violence manifestation in both societies, UCI23 writes: UFI23 "[..] shared that she was happy that we were learning about Maria da Penha in our course and I thought of course we are fortunate my professor is letting us learn about such important topics like domestic violence in our countries" (2021_UCsi1_UCI23_J8).

Lastly, as the emergency remote learning context did not allow us to record the interactions, positive learning outcomes grew in the privacy of the Breakout Rooms. UCI14 shares in a journal how comprehensive the interaction went, from social injustices to a list of curse words: "Today's conversation was very interesting and funny. We started talking about injustices in our countries, her vacations, and slangs. In the end, we shared some curse words from our languages. I have a list now (2021_UCsi2_UCI14_J5)".

Testimonials related to beliefs and intercultural practices validated the initiatives implemented in this project, as stated in the discussion and from the extracts analyzed. The movements of a continuous

overflow of thoughts and experiences encompass a multilingual community of interactants in a diverse world. Hence, intercultural practices on TOS promote moments of intimacy as scaffolding for a solid relationship that might last for the lifetimes of the interactants. This extract evidences the discussion as in the testimonial of UFAC7, "[...] We said bye like a family, me, my baby and my boyfriend and my partner and her boyfriend. And now, we follow each other on Instagram [...]" (2021_UCsi1_UFAC7_J7). The relationships established were not only between the interactants from Brazil and the United States. As is shared in the passage, the experiences about cultural beliefs constituted a pathway for uniting other social actors surrounding this interactive setting. Also, it demonstrates the beneficial impact on the socio-cultural relations of the interactants and amplifies opportunities to genuinely recognize efforts achieved in the LIIO project partnership.

Remarks

Considering the challenges of a pioneer[16] teletandem experience in two higher education institutions, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, VE proved to be successful in language development for interactants in Brazil and in the United States as an intercultural practice that helps them rethink stereotypes and beliefs. We consider it very important, especially in this particular moment of the learners' lives. As the one we report here, we believe VE democratizes an intercultural meeting that can be a unique opportunity to reflect upon their own culture and lifestyle.

The limitations of this study are tied to barriers faced by the staff and the interactants in the experience, for instance (1) the COVID-19 losses suffered by many, (2) the hardship on maintaining mental health stable enough to participate in the teletandem tasks thoroughly (3) the lack of funding to subside equipment for interactants in need, and (4) the instability of internet connectivity in both countries. The institutions also faced privacy constraints. At UCD, students may opt for privacy-protective alternatives, according to University's Policy and Procedure Manual 310-23. Unable to record the interactions among the interactants from both countries, the researchers only collected data from written documents. However, it is fundamental to highlight that the mediation sessions among Brazilian interactants and their mediators were fully recorded and considered for future research.

Besides formal data collection, participants were invited to share their thoughts on a Padlet in a less-structured way at the end of the assessment interaction. UCsi1, an interactant from TTD class UCsi1, shared on the platform: "At first, it might look a little bit intimidating, but I would say just go for it. It truly is an amazing way to connect without having to be physically present and fully enjoy the wonders

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[16] As we stated before, this VE was the first to be promoted in both higher educational institutions. We acknowledge teletandem practice has been developed during the last fifteen years in Brazil and the work of the professors, and mediators throughout this period indicated to us that similar learning benefits could be achieved by our learners.

technology can do for you. Besides the second language, I learned a lot about my own native language as well and how used to it we are to speaking without actually stopping to think what we are saying. Being able to share my culture and learn about someone else's culture while making a friend was really awesome. I'm really happy to have attended Teletandem [...]" (2021_UCsi1_UFAC8_P1).

Contrasting the data, the journal's analysis made clear how the EFL pre-service teachers put into practice their knowledge of language learning methodology and approaches, reflecting on communication metalinguistic features and how their peers evolved over the interactions.

The connections established a mixture of thoughts from social and intrapersonal dimensions, in which the real and virtual became a thin line in (re)constituting identities. The data presented from interactants in Brazil and in the United States provide evidence for the successful initiative of the LIIO project.

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