

Email Tandem in Teaching German as a Foreign Language: First Experiences

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Abstract

The main aim of the teaching project described here was to provide a student-centred approach to improving German language skills by using email as a means of communication with German native speakers. This aim was to be achieved by using an email tandem approach – described in this article - which is a form of autonomous learning where the focus is on learning through authentic communication with a native speaker. The email tandem project was bilateral in that Macquarie students of German corresponded with German university students of English. The German email partners wrote in English whereas the Macquarie students wrote in German. The students corrected and commented on their partner's writing and a bulletin board, which was monitored by the project leader throughout the duration of the project, provided all participating students with a forum for discussion.

KEYWORDS

Computer-assisted language learning, learner autonomy, intercultural learning

INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, the Discipline of German Studies as well as the Department of European Languages as a whole have been developing and implementing strategies for offering language programs in more flexible modes of delivery. In 1999, the first three Introductory German courses in flexible delivery mode were offered. At the same time, the project presented here was implemented for students with a higher level of fluency than at introductory level. It aimed at extending flexible delivery strategies to include a student-centred approach to learning the German language by using email as a means of communication with German native speakers, thus providing a bridge between the classroom and the natural language setting (cf. Woodin 1997). The email-project was bilateral in that Macquarie students of German were corresponding with German university students of English. The German email partners were expected to write in English whereas the Macquarie German students were expected to write in German. The students were asked to correct and comment on their partner's writing, a process deemed beneficial to the development of their language skills (cf. Brammerts 1998).

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TANDEM

Language learning in tandem can be defined as a form of open learning where two learners with different languages form a partnership in order to practice and improve the language they are learning. It is a form of autonomous learning where the focus is on learning through authentic communication with a native speaker. Two people with different native languages work together in pairs in order to help one another improve their language skills but also to learn more about one another's culture and to exchange additional knowledge – for example, about their professional life, so that there is a strong potential for intercultural learning as part of the process (cf. Müller-Hartmann 2000).

For an understanding of tandem language learning, two main principles are of great importance - the principle of reciprocity and the principle of learner autonomy. Reciprocity in this context refers to the following factors:

- mutual support
- equal contribution
- same extent of benefit
- equal roles: learner-learner

Learners should be willing and able to do as much for their partners as they expect from them. The fact that they are both in the role of the learner is expected to decrease their inhibitions in using the foreign language, as both partners can be seen as non-specialists in one and specialists in the other language. The principle of learner autonomy refers to the proposition that learners are to determine what to learn and when to learn it and that they themselves define the level of support that is to be provided in the exchange, e.g. the amount and form of corrections provided to their tandem partner (cf. <http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/learning/idxeng11.html>).

In the more traditional form of tandem language learning, partners generally sit across from each other in a face-to-face tandem. The advent of the Internet, however, has enabled the establishment of tandem partnerships across a distance in asynchronous email exchanges. This mode of interaction, a so-called "Email-Tandem-Project" has been much discussed in the European and US literature on information technology in teaching (e.g. Rösler 2000, Little & Ushioda 1998, Donath 1996, Brammerts 1995) and has proven to be very effective. It is a truly student-centred approach because the students themselves choose the topics for discussion. The project described here enabled students to use German for communication in a real-life situation and provided authentic situations for communication in the target language.

IMPLEMENTING A GERMAN-ENGLISH EMAIL TANDEM AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

Phase 1

In a first step of the project, an online unit for the email tandem project was established. The unit's online facilities were developed in conjunction with the university's Centre for Flexible Learning which provides technical support in the development and running of online courses through WebCT, a world wide web course tool. Of the student tools available in WebCT, the students in this project had access to a bulletin board, an open forum which can be used for discussion between the students and their course convener as well as amongst the students, and to internal mail, a facility to send private mail amongst students or to the course convener. The online unit was linked

to the German website (<http://www.eurolang.mq.edu.au/german>) and students wanting to participate could submit their details to be manually added to the student list of the WebCT unit. In its inception phase, the email tandem was open to all interested students of German at Macquarie University and was to start with students of English from the University of Koblenz in Germany as partners. There was great interest on the part of Macquarie students in communicating with German university students and about 20 students sent emails to their chosen counterparts in Koblenz. The response rate of the German students, however, was rather disappointing, as only five students wrote back with exchanges lasting a maximum of three turns. An analysis of the factors leading to such an unsatisfactory start to the project led to the belief that the timing of the first contact was a contributing element. Study periods and leave periods in Australia and Germany do not fully coincide, a fact which may well have led to the disappointing response. It was therefore decided to start afresh with the onset of the German winter semester, which begins in October. In the meantime, further contacts were established with interested academics in Germany in order to provide a wider base of students to participate in the project.

Phase 2

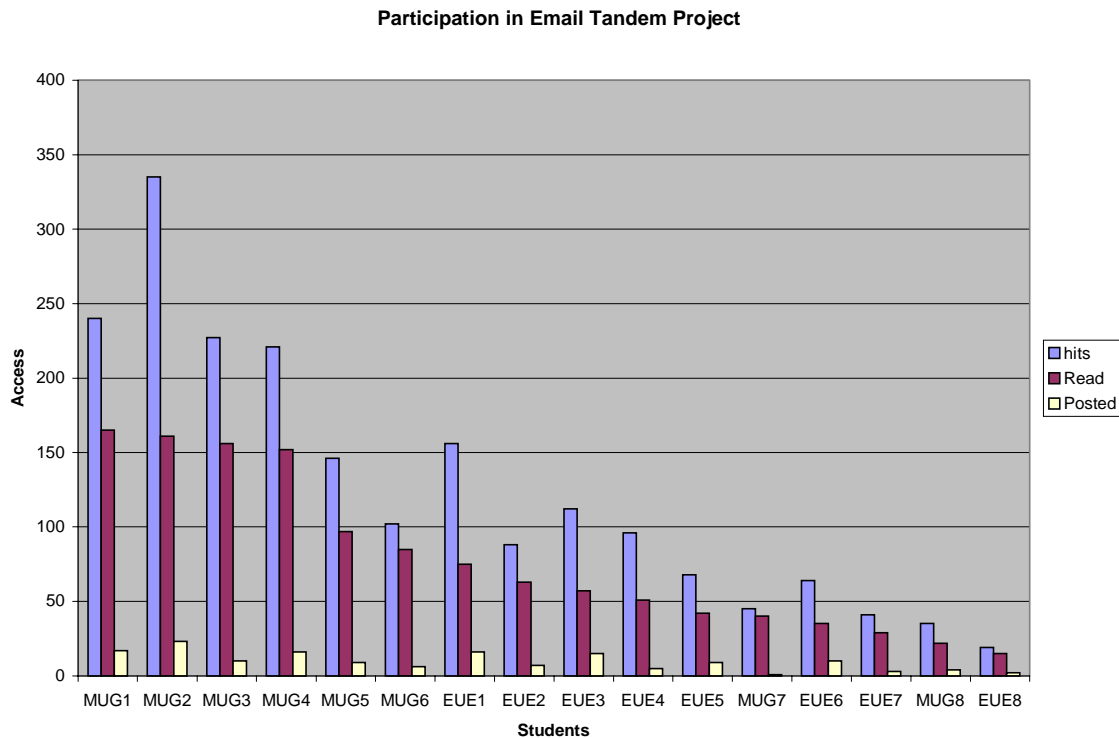
In this second implementation phase, the email tandem was linked to a third year language unit at Macquarie University, rather than being open to students enrolled in different language units. Ten students of German, enrolled in the advanced level German unit, were introduced to the facilities of the WebCT based unit, i.e. they were shown how to use the bulletin board and email facility, how to establish and follow a thread on the bulletin-board and how to type diacritics (German ä,ö,ü,ß). Their tandem partners were a group of students of English at the University of Essen, who participated in the project as part of the course work in a seminar on Teaching English as a Second Language. They were also introduced to the WebCT unit by their course coordinator who had access to the online unit and together with the Macquarie teaching staff monitored the project from then on. Close cooperation between teaching staff on both sides of the project was enhanced by the fact that the two universities involved are exchange partners. There are longstanding links between staff at both institutions and the project leader at Macquarie University had met the lecturer in charge of the email tandem at Essen University prior to the onset of the project to discuss general issues, such as the WebCT based technological facilities and their potential for group and pair discussions. During the course of the project they communicated via WebCT's private mail facility on a weekly basis in order to monitor the development of the project on both sides and to determine the evolvement of topics for discussion which the students proposed in their group sessions.

PROCEDURES AND PARTICIPATION

In this second phase of the project, the email tandem was conducted following a twofold approach. On the one hand, the students formed a group partnership with the German students, on the other hand they formed individual partnerships. In a first group session, students were asked to introduce themselves to all participants via the bulletin board. Students were then paired and given the instruction to write in the foreign language and to provide corrections for their partners' contributions. In addition to the communication in pairs, which took place exclusively on the bulletin board (students did not make use of the private mail facility), students met on a weekly, at later stages on a fortnightly basis, to work on discussion topics as a group.

In this more guided approach to the project, the fact that university semesters in Germany and Australia do not overlap did not jeopardise the project. Eight of the ten Macquarie students volunteered to participate in the project throughout the summer break until the end of the semester

at the University of Essen in Mid-February. Throughout the duration of the project from October 1999 until February 2000, about 170 messages were sent to the bulletin board. The participation of Macquarie German students (MUG) and students of English at the University of Essen (EUE) was as follows:



The quantitative information given in the chart reflects the pattern of participation in the project: a major part of the communication took place between the students in pairs. Whereas the students replied in writing only to their partner, they had access to contributions by all students, therefore the much higher number of messages “read” than “written”. In addition to the personal communication with their tandem partner, students contributed to topics set for discussion as a group. One of those topics was the Australian referendum on the republic issue. Following the instructions of teaching staff, the MU German students formed two groups – pro and contra – and collaboratively wrote a text per group for the bulletin-board. Encouraged and guided by their lecturer, who saw the development of technological skills as one teaching objective, the students of English in Essen responded by creating a website listing the German media response to the issue (<http://www.uni-essen.de/anglistik/echo.htm>). This in turn inspired the MU students to create their own website, completely independent of teacher input, which lists links to different cultural and political aspects of life in Australia (<http://www.geocities.com/collegepark/housing/4992>).

Throughout the group sessions, the MU students used German as the language of communication in speaking to one another and in their collaborative writing tasks, thus achieving the most important goal of the project: authentic use of the German language. In the final evaluation, which was undertaken as a group discussion, students remarked on the positive impact of those group sessions on their speaking as well as their writing skills. They also made suggestions on the structure of error feedback and the process of writing in pairs. Their main points were:

- *The project was not only about learning German but fun, too. This was important to us because we did not have to do it as part of a course.*

- *We learned quite a bit about our own language and country, especially how it is seen from the outside.*
- *For some of us it was the first attempt to use a bulletin board or create a webpage, so we learned some new skills.*
- *Perhaps everyone should have the opportunity to write to everybody else or to nominate a new topic. Then it would not be necessary to wait for an answer by the designated partner.*
- *It might help if everyone used the same method for corrections at the beginning. Which types of mistakes should be corrected? Sometimes, there were only stylistic errors; in other contributions there were two or three errors in every sentence; there was a lot of variation from week to week, even for the same person.*
- *It was good to be able to read every contribution, but when someone doesn't receive an answer from their designated partner, it would be good if someone else stepped in to provide some corrections.*

CONCLUSION: THE NEXT PHASE

The success of the approach taken in the second implementation phase of the project shows the importance of embedding an email tandem approach into a structured language learning environment. When students on both sides of the partnership participated in the tandem as part of their coursework with some guidance from their teachers, the communication was ongoing and effective. The same kind of finding is reported by Little & Ushioda, who worked with Irish and German students learning German and English respectively (1998, 98):

... that an institutional partnership of this kind is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of this mode of learning in a course of study. Evidence...strongly supports this conviction, pointing to the need for very close institutional co-operation through the planning and implementation stages.

In 2002, a third phase was implemented, where the email tandem was set as part of the marked course work for an advanced level German unit. The participation in the project was remarkably lively and data are currently being qualitatively evaluated. Data consist of the students' language productions in the form of individual as well as collaboratively written contributions to the bulletin board and a one hour long taped focus group discussion with Macquarie students at the end of the project. The focus of the qualitative data analysis will be on two areas: a) the students' language awareness as expressed in corrections of their tandem partners' contributions and as part of the collaborative writing process and b) the students' dialogue about *self* and *other* as a reflection of intercultural learning processes.

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