

Teletandem as a Way of Enhancing Language Learning Between Brazilian and German Students

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This paper aims at investigating the teletandem learning interactions between a group of Brazilian students from Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Estado de Goiás, Brazil, and a group of foreign students from two German universities. In this study, the Brazilian students helped their foreign partners with Portuguese learning and were helped by them in the English learning. The participants used a synchronous computer software called *Openmeetings* and also an electronic dictionary as a complementary tool. Adopting a qualitative perspective in the data collection and analysis, this case study was conducted in the second semester of 2010. The data were collected by means of conversation sessions through *Openmeetings* and were analyzed in the light of studies on sociocultural theory as well as on tandem/teletandem language learning researches. The data analyses showed that the participants used English as an anchoring language to work with Portuguese and English itself, and German was introduced in the teletandem sessions. The data also showed that the whiteboard and the electronic dictionary were used as complementary resources to the use of audio and video for the language learning process the participants engaged in.

Keywords: language learning, *Openmeetings*, teletandem

Introduction

For many years, people have used instrumental mediation by creating tools that enable them to act upon nature and to transform it for their own benefit (Rego, 1995; Wertsch, 1998; Wertsch, Del Río, & Alvarez, 1998). This applies both in relation to how people get information about the world and how they act on it. For Cole (1990), mediation already carries the basic idea that humans live in environments transformed by artifacts created by previous generations.

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It is in this sense that we share with many scholars (Lantolf, 2006; Van Lier, 2000, among others) the transposition of the concept of instrumental mediation to the context of the language classroom. For these authors, technical tools enrich the teaching and learning process by providing learners and teachers with more resources to support students' learning.

Donato and McCormick (1994), Figueiredo (2006), and Lantolf (2006) stated that the educational context incorporates physical and symbolic artifacts (books, paper, computer, languages, diagrams, etc.) to help learners develop a coherent knowledge of the world. We add that, in the context of virtual learning, these features also include, in addition to computer itself, communication software and tools that provide teachers and students with opportunities to communicate with people all over the world through the Internet.

The use of the Internet in education triggered new perspectives on the teaching of foreign languages (Paiva, 2001a, 2001b; Telles, 2009; Telles & Vassallo, 2009; Vassallo & Telles, 2006, 2009; Warschauer, 1996) due to the fact that the Internet is, in essence, an environment conducive to interactivity and, therefore, may foster communication in other languages.

In this regard, Warschauer and Healey (1998) argued that

[w]ith the advent of the Internet, the computer—both in society and in the classroom—has been transformed from a tool for information processing and display to a tool for information processing and communication. For the first time, learners of a language can now communicate inexpensively and quickly with other learners or speakers of the target language all over the world. This communication can be either synchronous (with all users logged on and chatting at the same time) or asynchronous (with a delayed message system such as electronic mail). Finally, with the World Wide Web, learners of many languages have access to an unprecedented amount of authentic target-language information, as well as possibilities to publish and distribute their own multimedia information for an international audience. (p. 63)

Technological tools enrich the language teaching and learning process not only by the capabilities inherent in digital media, but also by allowing students to share knowledge and, therefore, to learn languages with each other, that is, in a collaborative way.

In the virtual environment, computer-mediated interaction is seen as an opportunity for socializing, for language production and learning (Vassallo & Telles, 2009). Some advantages of electronic media are, for example, the disruption of spatial and temporal constraints of lessons which are held in classrooms and access to a large number of participants to interact, which means that learning is favored by interactional exchanges and collaboration among participants.

Tandem Learning

Tandem learning is a collaborative, autonomous, and reciprocal method of foreign language learning which consists of regular sessions of collaborative bilingual work for didactic purposes (Vassallo & Telles, 2006). These sessions are voluntarily established by two speakers of different languages who are interested in studying the language in which the other is more proficient.

According to Brammerts (1996),

[l]earning in tandem can be defined as a form of open learning, whereby two people with different native languages work together in pairs in order to learn more about one another's character and culture, to help one another improve their language skills, and often also to exchange additional knowledge—for example, about their professional life. (p. 10)

Teletandem is the tandem activity conducted in a virtual context, via synchronous communication through the utilization of writing, reading, video conferencing and communication softwares (Skype, Windows Live Messenger, Oovoo, Talk and Write, *Openmeetings*, Adobe Connect, etc.).

According to Vassallo and Telles (2006), teletandem is an approach “that has its own unique characteristics, that emerge from (and range within) the association of its principles of autonomy and of reciprocity” (p. 91). The authors add that this approach is described as a learning context that:

- (a) offers opportunities for both sociability and individualization;
- (b) is based on autonomy, that is understood here as a responsibility for one’s own decision-making, not in isolation, but “with” or “in relation to” the other (one’s Tandem partner);
- (c) implies sharing and relaying the roles of who retains the power of knowledge. (Vassallo & Telles, 2006, p. 91)

Therefore, in tandem learning, it is the participants that define how they will participate in the interaction sessions, managing, for example, the day and time the virtual meetings will take place, as well as the way they conduct the interactions.

The Study

The Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Estado de Goiás (IFG), in Brazil, and the University of Trier and the University of Worms, in Germany, were the institutions that participated in this telecollaborative language learning project. As one teletandem medium, we used a synchronous and free web conferencing software known as *Openmeetings*. This communication software allows, among other features, for teleconference with the following components and functions: microphone and webcam, chat, whiteboard, screen sharing, file download and audio and video recording.

The *Openmeetings* conference room is illustrated by Figure 1.

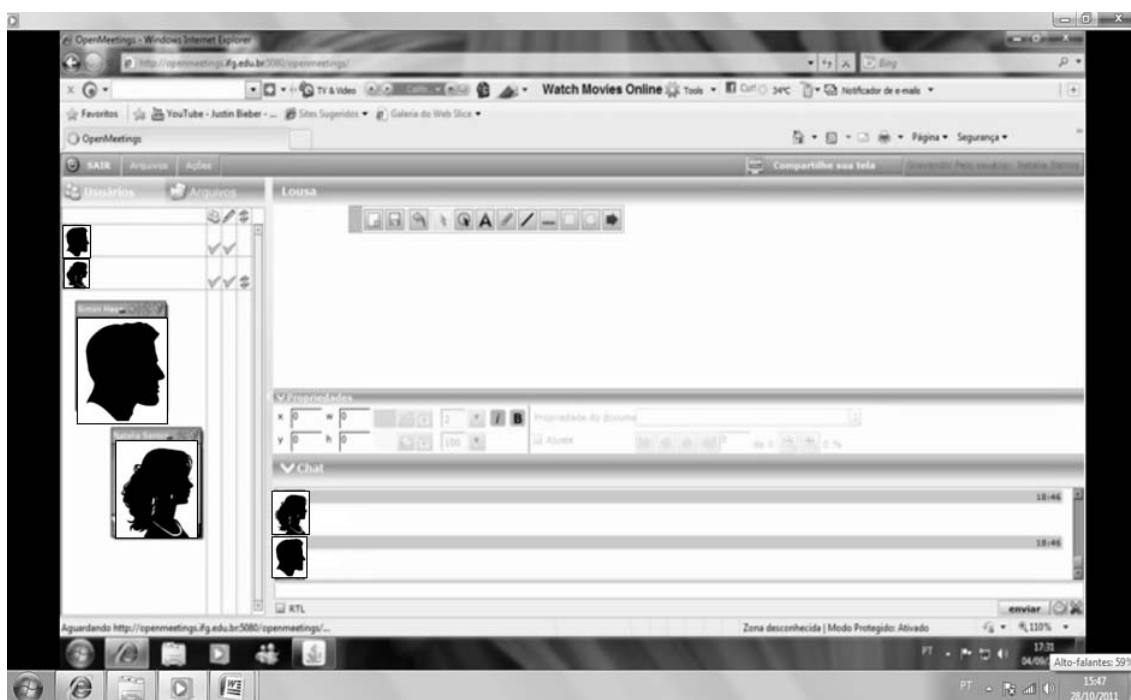


Figure 1. *Openmeetings* conference room.

Interactions via *Openmeetings* occurred from August 28th to September 4th, 2010, and were audio- and video-recorded by means of a recording device integrated in the software and were transcribed verbatim.

Before initiating the teletandem sessions, a series of steps were taken for the selection of the pairs of students. A list with the names of 11 students from the University of Worms and a student from the University of Trier, who volunteered to compose partnerships with the Brazilian learners, was sent to IFG. The IFG also produced a list of Brazilian learners with 23 volunteers. From that list, the first 12 students who signed up were selected to form partnerships with the foreign learners. Then, a first contact by email between the Brazilians and the foreign students was made to establish the partnerships and to allow the pairs of students to suggest days and times for their first interaction. Subsequently, the pairs scheduled the teletandem sessions according to their own availability.

Regarding the language pair involved in this study, it should be stated that in IFG undergraduate courses the foreign languages taught are English, Spanish, and French. As the Brazilian learners wished to enhance their knowledge of English, this was the language chosen by them to be crafted with Portuguese in the teletandem sessions. Considering that the German students were proficient in English, they assisted their Brazilian partners in the learning of this language and were assisted by them in the Portuguese language learning.

As participants of this study, we have three pairs of teletandem language partners: three Brazilian students who were majoring in Tourism at IFG and three foreign students (three from University of Worms and one from the University of Trier). Table 1 shows the participants, identified by their pseudonyms, as well as the resources used by them during the interaction sessions in teletandem.

Table 1

The Participants and Resources Used by Them

Participants		Resources used by the participants
Brazilian	German	
Natalie	Teego	Microphone and webcam, chat, whiteboard, electronic dictionary
Drica	Red ¹	Microphone and webcam, chat, whiteboard
Jujuba	Peregrino	Microphone and webcam, whiteboard

In this study, the participants made use of some resources which enabled them to see each other, to write messages to each other (chat), to engage in a conversation, to post pictures and to draw. All these resources contributed to the development of consistent interactions which allowed the participants to learn or to improve their linguistic skills regarding the target language as well as to carry on discussions concerning environmental issues and sustainability, which were the main themes of the interactions. It is also important to state that the Germans visited Brazil, specifically the state of Goiás, in order to meet their Brazilian partners and finish the project related to sustainability.

Analyses of the Teletandem Sessions

This initial example refers to an interaction held by Drica and Red. Drica was already online when the image of Red appears on the screen, indicating that she had entered the conference room. They waved their hands to each other as a way of greeting. Red tries to synchronize the microphones so that they could engage in a

¹ Although Red is Romanian, she was a regular student at Worms University and spoke English and German fluently.

conversation, but Drica had not clicked on the button which allows them to share the audio resource. Since they were not able to solve this problem, Red suggests that Drica should use the audio resource while Red would use writing as a communication channel, as can be seen in Example (1).

Example (1) Interaction via *Openmeetings*—August 30th, 2010

(The interactants wave their hands as a gesture of greeting)

Drica: I'm listening you. Are you listening me?

Red: [Chat] Yes. Can you hear me?

Drica: [Chat] I can't hear you. I can't... It's bad...

Red: [Chat] hum... you can talk i write :o

Drica: Ok. So, I'm one of the people responsible to receive you here in Brazil. [...]

Red: [Chat] thank you... it will be great. I can't hardly wait to meet you and the others.

Drica: I saw that you take some pictures and you have to... how can I say... 'picture machine'? ...The 'camera'? 'Camera'! You have to, you will have here many places to take much, many, many pictures here, we are going to see falls...

Red: [Chat] o:o:o:o: yeah that's really beautiful :o yeah one of my hobby and Love is photography.

The suggestion Red had made, which was readily accepted by Drica, reveals an exercise of autonomy in the decision-making of the two participants since they find ways to continue the interaction. By doing this, they solve the problem posed by the lack of audio communication and opt to make use of different channels to interact with each other: speech and writing.

On the other hand, Natalie and Teego, in Example (2), when having audio problems, started to negotiate if they would interact with each other by only using the chat as a communication channel. Natalie tried to solve the problem by logging in and out the communication software before suggesting that the meeting should be postponed to the next day. After negotiating for a little while, the participants concluded that orality was an essential element for the interaction and decided to have the interaction on the following day, as shown by this second excerpt:

Example (2) Interaction via *Openmeetings*—August 27th, 2010

Natalie: [Chat] No... now I can't listen you too...

Teego: Perhaps it is working now. I don't know. I don't know what the problem is.

Natalie: [Chat] I think is better we try tomorrow because today here is everything closed or do you prefer talk only for Chat?

Teego: [Chat] well I don't know. What do you think?

Natalie: [Chat] I think is better to talk than to write... [...]

Teego: [Chat] I haven't planned anything yet so it would be ok, if there are any changes I would contact you again... so let's keep it at 5/10 pm, and if I have to cancel it I would write you an email.

This example also illustrates the autonomy of the participants, which was favored by the negotiation they had about what they believe is the best option for the learning of languages in a teletandem approach. The decision to postpone the interaction session emphasizes the fact that collaborative learning enables learners to express their points-of-view, by discussing them and making decisions about the problems they face while interacting in a virtual context (Vassallo & Telles, 2009).

The whiteboard was also used by the participants as an aid to communication and, by extension, to language learning. Peregrino, for example, uses the whiteboard as a complementary resource to illustrate what he was explaining to his partner, as can be seen in Example (3):

Example (3) Interaction via *Openmeetings*—September 3rd, 2010

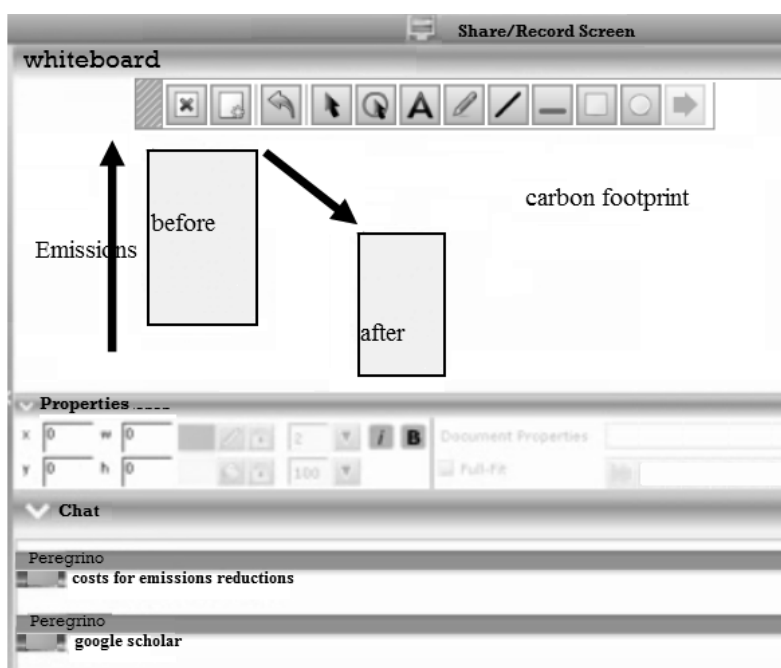
Jujuba: Emission...

Peregrino: Do you see on the whiteboard? Like this one would be a normal and you have another scenario, just like this, so you have a reduction here to here, and this reduction, hum, costs something (Peregrino draws on the whiteboard while he talks about carbon emission).

Jujuba: Hum, ok.

Peregrino: Here on the left is like... hãa... [...]

Jujuba: Hã?



Peregrino: (He writes 'carbon footprint' on the whiteboard). Like this, (Explaining from the two pictures he had drawn on the board) You have one scenario. It's like when a tourist comes to Rio and he goes to the beach and to the clubs or another stuffs, that's the left scenario, the trip like one week, that they stay in Brazil, ah, how much emissions will be emitted? And the other scenario would be, for example, Chapada or Pirenópolis, they're doing sustainable tourism and there would be less emissions, so we calculate them both and then we, we make a comparison. What do you think?

In Example (4), Natalie makes use of an electronic dictionary to help her in the production of messages in English. She was talking to her partner about Brazilian typical food and she introduces a kind of fruit which is used in the cuisine of the Central-West region of Brazil. Natalie uses the electronic dictionary to assist her in explaining to her partner that although the fruit is edible, it has thorns around the stone, which makes it difficult to eat.

Example (4) Interaction via *Openmeetings*—September 4th, 2010

Natalie: And have you ever known about 'pequi'?

Teego: ‘Pequi’? No.

Natalie: It is a typical food here in Goiás, in Goiânia... and all the State of Goiás, is very good.

Teego: But what is it... what is it like?

Natalie: Is?

Teego: What is it like? What is it, actually?

Natalie: It is, it is for you have lunch, when you almoça, have lunch. It is uhhh... salt, but it has... (She checks in the dictionary <<http://translito.com>> the word ‘espinhos’ in English). I don’t know the pronunciation, but I think is ‘thorns’.

Natalie: [*Chat*] thorns

Teego: ‘Thorns’?

Natalie: With...

Teego: Like in a rose, like the flower of a rose? It’s ‘thorns’, as well as, ... I think. Yep. Can you write the really name for the ‘pequi’?

Natalie: [*Chat*] espinhos.

Teego: ‘Espinhos’?

Natalie: ‘Espinhos’ is ‘thorns’. How can you pronounce this word?

Natalie: [*Chat*] Pequi.

Teego: Pequi.

Teego: ‘Thorns’.

Natalie: ‘Thorns’, it is. ‘Pequi’ has ‘thorns’.

Teego: Ok.

Natalie: So, you have to take care with it.

Teego: Ok

This example shows that there is an alternation in the assistance the participants give to each other. According to Figueiredo (2006) and Vassallo and Telles (2009), this change of roles is quite common in the context of collaborative learning.

In Example (5), the term “quality” arises when Natalie and Teego are talking about a tourist town in the state of Goiás called Caldas Novas. This town is mainly visited by old people because of the thermal groundwater present there which is considered therapeutic. Natalie was trying to express the idea that the improvement in quality of life has contributed to the longevity of the Brazilians when she realizes that she does not know exactly how to say in English the word “qualidade” (quality). She elaborates the hypothesis that this word would be “quality”. However, she uses the word “qualidade” in Portuguese to check the accuracy of the term in the English language. Teego confirms her hypothesis, thus solving her doubt.

Example (5) Interaction via *Openmeetings*—August 26th, 2010

Natalie: I think that is not so many old people like in Germany, but some, the last ten, five years, the people that is sixties, seventies grow up here, because the... I’m thinking the word in English... the ‘quality’ of life.

Teego: Yeah.

Natalie: ‘Qualidade’?

Teego: Yes, the ‘quality’.

Natalie: Yes, ‘quality’, yes the ‘quality’ of life grow up too, so is the both.

In Example (6), it is Natalie who assumes the role of assistant and teaches Teego how to pronounce some words in Portuguese. Natalie and Teego were talking about Teego’s trip to Brazil, particularly about some of Teego’s relatives who live in a Brazilian city called São Paulo. The topic of the conversation leads the participants to deal with some vocabulary related to family members. Natalie begins to work with the Portuguese language by helping Teego with the learning of the word “mãe”, as shown in Example (6).

Example (6) Interaction via *Openmeetings*—August 28th, 2010

Natalie: Yes, yes, it is. You want to learn how pronounce the name of the relatives in Portuguese?

Teego: Yes, I would like to, yeah.

Natalie: Yes. ‘Mother’ is ‘mãe’.

Natalie: [Chat] mãe

Teego: How do you pronounce it?

Natalie: ‘Mãe’.

Teego: ‘Mãe. Mãe, mãe, mãe’.

Natalie: Or if you want to, like me, I pronounce like a... some child pronounce like this... But is a very... with love, very carefully way to say: ‘mamãe’.

Natalie: [Chat] mamãe

Teego: ‘Mamãe’.

Natalie: Yes? Yes, ‘mamãe’ is more cute.

Teego: Yep. Ok.

According to Brammerts (1996) and Telles (2006), reciprocity in tandem learning can be observed in the attitude of one of the participants being concerned and interested in the language learning success of the other. In this sense, the work with vocabulary in English and in Portuguese reveals the commitment of Natalie and Teego towards each other’s language learning process: Natalie is improving her English language learning, and Teego is learning some Portuguese vocabulary.

In Example (7), it is Teego who takes the opportunity to teach German, his native language, to Natalie. They were still talking about family members, when Natalie asks Teego how to say the word “sister” in German. It is important to elucidate that German was not a language to be learned in the teletandem sessions, but it was also introduced in the interactions because Natalie wanted to benefit from the fact that Teego was German and so he could help her with the learning of some vocabulary in that language.

Example (7) Interaction via *Openmeetings*—August 28th, 2010

Natalie: And how do you say irmã in German?

Teego: Irmã was, eh, sister, wasn’t it? Brother? Sister?

Natalie: Yes. Sister.

Teego: Sister. Sister would be, ah...

Teego: [chat] Schwester.

Teego: Schwester.

Natalie: Uau. Schwester.

Teego: The first three letters is always like a /ʃ/ basically ‘sh’ in English /ʃ/, yeah? And then the ‘w’ is /v/

Schwester.

Natalie: Schwester, Schwester.

Teego: Yes, Schwester.

Natalie: Yes? Schwester.

Teego: Yes, perfect.

Natalie: Schwester. My Schwester. I have just one Schwester. And brother.

As we can see, *Openmeetings* gave the participants the opportunity to write and speak in the language they were learning. By means of the interactions, they were able to learn vocabulary and to discuss the major theme of their presentations: environmental issues. The results of this study allow us to assert that *Openmeetings* is an extra resource that can be effectively used in English classes in a technological context of education.

Conclusion

By analyzing the interactions between Brazilian and German students, we noted that the English language has been, besides the target language of the Brazilian students, the mediational tool used by the partners of students to assist each other in the practice of Portuguese and German, since the Germans had no knowledge of Portuguese, and the Brazilians had no knowledge of German either. English as an anchoring language was the way the participants found to jointly assist each other in the learning process of their target languages. The use of language to support the teletandem sessions helped the Brazilian students improve their learning of English.

In relation to the software used in this study, we can affirm that *Openmeetings* has all the features necessary to be used in teletandem learning sessions, but the use of these features depends on the knowledge the participants have about the functioning of the software. It is the degree of learner autonomy in relation to the available resources related to the software that enables the participants to qualitatively expand their language learning opportunities.

The microphones and webcams are the primary resources of *Openmeetings*, and it is through them that the participants can speak, see and listen to each other. Besides, these resources, the chat and the whiteboard were also important tools to complement microphone and webcams. The use of all these resources caused qualitative changes in the actions of the participants of this study making the teletandem approach more similar to face-to-face interactions, as it enables learners to feel as if they were in the same physical environment of their partners. They could also learn vocabulary, help each other solve their doubts and find ways to carry out the interaction activities. This also contributes to the feeling that there is a connection between the partners themselves, strengthening their bonds of friendship.

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