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Tandem language learning via e-mail: from motivation to autonomy

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Abstract

This paper examines the affective dimension of tandem language learning via e-mail. It begins by highlighting some of the obstacles to this mode of learning, including organisational and pedagogical issues as well as the particular issues confronting learners. Drawing on a small body of empirical data, it explores the interactions between these issues and what learners perceive to be intrinsically motivating about tandem learning. It concludes by suggesting that affective learning experience has a potentially powerful role to play in fostering the development of learner autonomy through the reciprocity on which successful tandem learning is founded.

1 Introduction

Fundamental to the argument of this paper is the assumption that learner autonomy is underpinned by intrinsic motivation. Learner autonomy is understood here as a "capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (Little, 1991: 4). This capacity is underpinned by intrinsic motivation in the sense that such motivation is defined by personal needs and interests, by the development of skills in their natural context of use, and by the exercise of freedom, control and choice in the learning process (Deci, 1980; Ushioda, 1996; van Lier, 1996). Viewed thus, it is clear that the engagement of learners' intrinsic motivational processes has a significant functional role to play in fostering their autonomy.

This paper examines the close association between intrinsic motivation and autonomy in relation to a specific type of language learning experience – *viz*. the experience of tandem language learning via e-mail. It begins by considering some of the obstacles to successful tandem language learning via e-mail, including organisational and pedagogical issues, and their interaction with the demands facing learners: specifically, the need for tandem learners to give one another equal support, take control of the learning process and be responsible for their own as well as for their partner's learning (Little & Brammerts, 1996). The paper argues that from a motivational perspective, these features of tandem learning are also its principal sources of attraction.

Drawing on empirical data gathered from learners of German engaged in an e-mail tandem project, the paper discusses how learners' own perceptions of what is intrinsically motivating about e-mail tandem strongly reflect the principles of self-appropriated learning and shared support on which it is founded. The paper acknowledges that these

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findings are hardly surprising, given the close relationship between intrinsic motivation and learner autonomy. However, it argues that this is where the particular strength of e-mail tandem lies: this form of learning has certain features which act as a significant catalyst for learners' intrinsic motivation; in turn, the process of reflecting on this motivational experience helps learners to come to grips with the principles of autonomy and reciprocity on which successful tandem learning is founded.

2 Tandem language learning via e-mail – some basic issues

In recent years there has been considerable interest in tandem language learning via e-mail. This has been due in large part to the infrastructures established by the International E-mail Tandem Network, which has participating institutions in a number of European countries and currently operates 30 different bilingual subnets (`http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/`; see also Little & Brammerts, 1996). In addition to providing a central dating agency service whereby language learners seeking tandem partners are paired up with one another, the Network and its subnet co-ordinators provide various advisory and support services for tandem learners. In reality, nevertheless, there is little doubt that such centralised structures are insufficient in themselves to guarantee successful tandem partnerships, and that the practice of e-mail tandem needs to be embedded in an appropriately controlled organisational and pedagogical framework. Without a controlled framework of this kind, there is the danger that tandem learners may fail to take fully on board the particular demands imposed by this mode of learning, and that their e-mail partnerships may quickly degenerate into mere penfriendships lacking any clear language learning focus.

Establishing appropriate organisational structures, however, is not a straightforward matter, since in essence a similar framework needs to be put in place for both members of an e-mail partnership. After all, there is little point in carefully instructing one set of learners in the principles of e-mail tandem and procedures for formulating messages and providing feedback and error correction if there is no guarantee that their tandem partners will be equally attuned to these principles and procedures. By the same token, attempts to integrate e-mail tandem as a compulsory component in a course of study may backfire if students' e-mail tandem partners do not face similar coursework obligations in their own institutions and are thus liable to be less committed or to correspond less regularly or even to stop writing altogether. Another problem is posed by the varying rhythms and structures of the academic year in different countries and institutions, which often make it difficult for tandem partners to sustain prolonged periods of regular correspondence.

Perhaps the only effective approach to addressing these problems is to set up an exchange between two institutions, and to negotiate and co-ordinate a joint organisational framework and parallel pedagogical structures for the practice of e-mail tandem (see, for example, Little & Ushioda, 1998; Little *et al*., 1999). Institutional co-operation would entail the setting up of individual partnerships, the joint planning of course design, structure and content and the provision of a shared set of guidelines for tandem partners. Both institutions would also need to negotiate approaches to providing appropriate ongoing support and counselling as a means of helping partners to develop and sustain effective working partnerships (see, for example, Lewis *et al*., 1996).

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A concerted approach of this kind goes a long way towards ensuring some degree of compatibility between the two different learning contexts in which partners are situated, and ensuring a mutual level of awareness and commitment between partners. A tightly controlled pedagogical framework has the desired effect of concentrating tandem partners' learning efforts in a clear and purposeful direction. At the same time, however, the framework needs to be couched in such a way that it does not dictate what tandem partners must do but fosters the conditions for realising the principles of shared responsibility and mutual support underpinning this mode of learning. For example, tandem partners might be required to collaborate on a joint project as part of their individual coursework, but be given the freedom and responsibility to negotiate the content and design of their project, establish mutually agreed working methods and so on. Essentially then, success will depend on whether or not tandem partners learn to exercise this freedom and shared responsibility effectively. Putting in place an appropriate framework and support structures can do no more than control and optimise the conditions for tandem learning. Ultimately, it is up to tandem learners themselves to confront a set of challenges which are largely new, or at least different from those that they have encountered in their previous language learning experience.

Unfortunately, the educational culture to which the majority of language learners have traditionally been exposed does not make it easy for them to rise to these challenges, and in particular to realise their capacity for autonomy in a principled manner. Tandem learning requires that they take control of the learning process, select its content, set themselves objectives, and plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. Tandem learning also requires that they share responsibility for their partner's learning and give him/her equal linguistic support. These twin principles of autonomy and reciprocity form the basic foundation of tandem language learning (Little & Brammerts, 1996:10–12). Where e-mail tandem is concerned in particular, the use of the written medium and the fact that communication is asynchronous and that partners cannot see each other further complicate the issues facing learners as they work to put these unaccustomed principles into action and negotiate an effective and mutually supportive partnership.

On the face of it then, the odds seem heavily stacked against the development of successful tandem partnerships. Yet experience readily suggests that this is not the case – the rapid expansion of the International E-mail Tandem Network is itself testimony to the growth of interest and proliferation of e-mail tandem schemes across Europe. Moreover, when students themselves are asked to reflect on their tandem learning experiences, positive attitudes and perceptions are not uncommon (see, for example, Woodin, 1997; Appel, 1999). This raises two interesting empirical questions: what is it that learners find especially appealing about e-mail tandem, and how do their own motivational perceptions interact with what we have identified as the key features but also potential problem areas of this mode of learning?

3 The study

A focus on tandem learners' attitudes and motivation formed part of an e-mail tandem research project conducted in 1997–98 at Trinity College Dublin, in which Irish university students learning German were twinned with German students learning English at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum (for a more detailed account of the project, see Little &

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Ushioda, 1998; Little *et al*., 1999). Set up as a joint institutional exchange along the lines described above, the e-mail tandem scheme involved correspondence between partners in relation to project work stretching over a number of weeks. At the end of each tandem-supported project cycle, the Dublin students were encouraged to reflect on their tandem experience by responding to a brief self-evaluation questionnaire administered via e-mail. The questionnaire items were mostly open-ended, and asked students to evaluate their tandem experience, compare it with other language learning experiences, and analyse its perceived benefits and sources of appeal.

The questionnaires were completed by 34 students, of whom 27 had working tandem partnerships at the time of responding. Analysis of the data focused initially on the collective set of responses to each questionnaire item in turn, identifying the range of perceptions elicited and tracing common patterns across each particular data set. These patterns were then used as the basis for characterising the data corpus as a whole, and examining interactions between learner perceptions and the basic theoretical principles at the core of tandem language learning.

4 Some findings

Space does not permit a full account of the findings – these are described in detail in the report on the e-mail tandem research project as a whole (Little *et al*., 1999). The paper here will concentrate on students' perceptions of e-mail tandem's main benefits and sources of appeal.

The learning benefits of receiving corrections and feedback as well as cultural information of various kinds are undoubtedly highlighted in most approaches to inducting and counselling tandem learners. Not surprisingly then, help with grammar and vocabulary and access to information were perceived by a number of students as among the benefits of their tandem partnership. However, the majority of responses suggested that students were principally focused on the benefits of using the German language and of observing it in use, rather than receiving corrections and feedback. For example, they felt greater encouragement to think in German and express themselves in a more German way, take risks, try out new phrases and develop a facility for operating bilingually. In particular, they valued the fact that e-mail tandem gave them access to a variety of German perceived to be informal, useful and relevant to their own needs and interests. In this respect, they were clearly aware that e-mail discourse has close affinities with the spoken idiom, as is evident from the following comments:

> "Everyday German which is more useful in real situations than formal textbook German such as I have always encountered before is used in the e-mails."
> "I have the opportunity to write German in a conversation style and 'chat' so my fluency will improve somewhat."
> "It helps in learning colloquial German and the German that is spoken in Germany as opposed to the German we learn from books."

Students also valued the personal dimension of their tandem partnership, and felt that this personal interaction helped to stimulate an increased interest in learning and using German, as indicated by the following remarks:

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"It encourages you to write to a person around your own age and discuss different views – learning German in a more informal way, finding out what the person's life is like in a different environment."
"I now have a greater interest because I am now interacting in German with a German person as opposed to just reading German literature."

Students' perceptions of the particular appeal of e-mail tandem similarly stressed these features of language use and personal interaction. These motivational perceptions could be classified as follows:

- interest and enjoyment of personal interaction with a native speaker
- access to informal everyday German
- focus on own needs and interests
- the mutual partnership factor
- speed and convenience of e-mail communication

In point of fact, these features of e-mail tandem were also largely those which students identified as the main differences between this and other modes of language learning they had experienced. Taken collectively, they suggest that students are essentially attracted to e-mail tandem because it offers them an efficient means of regular communication and interaction in the target language and thus a vehicle for learning. At the same time, they are in a position to offer linguistic help to their partner on a mutually supportive basis. As one student put it, "the practice of the language, in an environment of students alone talking, is what makes it interesting." Moreover, students' motivation for communicating and interacting is shaped by the fact that communication is focused on individual needs and wants, and conducted using a form of the language that is close to the preferred idiom of informal spoken discourse to which they have had little direct exposure. Indeed, personal relevance of content and language emerges as a salient factor in students' attitudes to e-mail tandem:

"It is different because we write about things that are of interest to ourselves unlike the mundane assignments we are used to completing in secondary school. The same applies to the e-mails we receive – we can relate to them and hence benefit more from them."
"the German I am learning is that which I would use, so it is more aimed at me and less general […] it is a lot better because it is an interaction with real people (not just books) and the German I use reflects my life, so it is necessary that I learn it correctly."
"With this type of learning we have more freedom to talk about what we are interested in. It is more informal and is suited more for individual needs."

5 From motivation to autonomy

Because of its limited design and scope, this small scale qualitative study does not of course permit us to make any significant generalisations about the affective dimension of e-mail tandem. Affective learning experiences are bound to vary from individual to

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individual, and depend also on the organisational and pedagogical context in which e-mail tandem is situated. Nevertheless, as the discussion that follows will argue, the findings do point to the potentially powerful role that affective learning experience may play in the development of successful tandem partnerships.

What the students in this study identify as appealing about their tandem experience relates largely to a sense of personal ownership of the content and process of learning, since tandem learning is content driven, and the content is dictated by the partners' own interests and concerns. Freedom and personal relevance here relate not only to topics of discussion and information exchange but also to the forms of the language in which communication takes place. There is the general perception that e-mail tandem is predominantly concerned with language use and language in use as a vehicle for learning, and that this is made interesting and attractive because it involves personal interaction with a native speaker on a mutually supportive basis.

In essence, these patterns strongly reflect the principles of self-appropriated learning and shared support which underpin the practice of e-mail tandem. In other words, the features perceived to be the main sources of attraction in e-mail tandem are also those which we identified earlier as the main demands it imposes on learners: the requirement that they take control of the learning process, select their own content, set their own objectives, etc., and reciprocate by sharing responsibility for their partner's learning and offering him/her equal support.

That there should be a close correspondence here between learners' motivational perceptions and the tandem principles of autonomy and reciprocity is perhaps not in itself surprising. Essentially, the finding reflects the important relationship that exists between intrinsic motivation and learner autonomy (for a fuller discussion, see Ushioda 1996; also van Lier, 1996). In brief, intrinsic motivation is the motivation that we bring to the learning situation. It is defined by our own personal interests – the subject matter and activities we enjoy, the areas of knowledge we want to develop, the challenges we want to tackle, the skills we want to master. Intrinsically motivated learning is also contextualised learning, whereby skills are developed in their natural context of use through regular practice. Thus the intrinsically motivated learner will learn to paint by painting, to work with computers by working with computers, and to learn languages by using them. A particular feature of intrinsically motivated learning is a sense of personal control and choice. Research suggests, for example, that the imposition of external controlling influences, even in the shape of rewards, can reduce a person's intrinsic motivation by encouraging the perception that the conditions of task engagement are being externally dictated (e.g. Lepper & Greene, 1978). In this respect, collaborative learning helps to minimize the perception of external control since it explicitly puts the initiatives and control of the learning process into the hands of learners themselves, and harnesses their sense of peer group solidarity and shared responsibility (Ushioda, 1996: 46).

Intrinsic motivation is, of course, characteristic of developmental and experiential learning, and fundamentally shapes autonomous learning. In any learning context then, the development of students' capacity for autonomy must go hand in hand with the engagement of their intrinsic motivation. Language learning must cater for the meanings that students want to express and the things they want to do that are relevant to them in their lives (Ushioda, 1996: 43).

This is where the particular strength of tandem learning lies. Its natural focus on

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language use, collaborative learning, and on subject matter and language of personal relevance and interest acts as a significant catalyst for learners' intrinsic motivation, as suggested by the findings in this study. By the same token, the engagement of these intrinsic motivational processes helps tandem learners to come to terms with the central principles of autonomy and reciprocity in a manner that is meaningful to them. Asked to reflect on the affective dimension of their tandem learning experience, the students in this study in effect gave expression to these central principles in their own terms.

In short, it is clear that the affective dimension of learning experience has a potentially powerful role to play in promoting the practices of autonomy and reciprocity on which successful tandem learning is founded. It is also clear that the key to developing this role is reflection (for further discussion on the importance of reflection in relation to affective learning experience, see Boud *et al*., 1985; Ushioda, 1996). As suggested by the findings in this study, getting learners to reflect on their tandem experience and to analyse its personal benefits and motivational appeal helps to raise their awareness of the underlying principles of autonomy and reciprocity. The process of evaluative reflection encourages them to give expression to these principles in their own terms, and thereby ensures that their personal commitment to the exercise of these principles will have a much surer and more meaningful foundation.

6 Conclusion

Of course, the significance of the interactions between motivational experience, reflection and the practice of autonomy is by no means confined to the case of tandem learning, but is central to all formal and informal learning situations. Nevertheless, because autonomy and reciprocity form the explicit shaping principles of tandem learning, these interactions assume a particular importance in this context.

This paper has set out to explore the nature of these interactions. It began by drawing attention to some of the obstacles to successful tandem language learning via e-mail, including organisational and pedagogical issues, as well as the particular issues confronting learners. Drawing on a small body of empirical data, it explored the interactions between these issues and learners' own motivational perceptions of their tandem experience. The paper concluded by highlighting the significant role of affective learning experience in the development of successful tandem partnerships.

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