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Pedagogical Design of an eTandem Chinese-French Writing Course

Jue Wang
(ESTAS, Faculty of Arts, University of Geneva, CH 1211 Genève 4, Switzerland
Jue.WangSzilas@unige.ch)

Claudia Berger
(ESTAS, Faculty of Arts, University of Geneva, CH 1211 Genève 4, Switzerland
Claudia.Berger@unige.ch)

Nicolas Szilas
(TECFA, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, University of Geneva, CH 1211 Genève 4, Switzerland
Nicolas.Szilas@unige.ch)

Abstract: Based on previous research conducted concerning eTandem or telecollaboration Foreign Language education, especially a detailed analysis of the "failed" experiences of related courses, an original pedagogical design of an eTandem course is proposed. This small-scale pilot design-based research project involved 6 students from two very different languages and cultures: Chinese/China and French/Switzerland. The eTandem Chinese-French writing course included theme-based oral communication and writing activities, peer-corrections by native speakers, and tutoring. Despite the cultural and language differences, most of the pedagogical purposes of the project have been achieved and it has proved that most potential "failures" in telecollaboration projects could be possibly avoided. The result of this pilot research has been taken into consideration for the design of a larger-scale eTandem project between Switzerland and China, following an iterative design methodology.

Keywords: Foreign Language teaching and learning, tandem language learning, telecollaboration, intercultural competence, peer-to-peer correction, tutoring, design-based research
Categories: L.3.5, L.3.6, L.6.2

1 Introduction

It has been proved by many language educators and researchers that Foreign Language (FL) learners need to have more exposure to authentic/natural language environments and to communicate more with native speakers to learn live languages [Bacon and Finnemann 90; Cook 00; Herron and Seay 91; Ramsey 09; Toyoda and Har 02]. As presented in [Cziko 04], FL acquisition occurs generally in two different environments: the formal classroom environment and the informal authentic communication environment. The former provides formally organized traditional language courses, but the limited exposure to authentic FL communication and cultural knowledge exchange makes FL acquisition less effective; the latter provides a large input of native-speaker FL exposure and communication, but the FL learners do

not develop very high levels in either language or cultural competence due to the lack of sufficient feedback [Cziko 04]. Cziko proposes a third environment called *tandem* language learning that combines authentic environment and formal instruction.

In fact, tandem language learning has been conducted by many language educators and researchers. With the development of technology, it has gone through from face-to-face tandem to eTandem, also called telecollaboration. This paper starts with a overview of previous eTandem and telecollaboration language learning researches and projects. The overview is followed by an analytic study on failed experiences and their reasons as categorized by [O'Dowd and Ritter 06]. As will be detailed below, many tandem language learning projects were subject to communication failure even within European countries, and it appears that the techno-pedagogical design of such courses needs to be undertaken with particular caution. Based on the analysis of these failed experiments, the pedagogical design of an eTandem Chinese-French writing course is described hereafter and observations regarding the first phase of the project which took place during the 2009-2010 academic year are discussed. Future work is previewed at the end of the paper.

From a methodological point of view, our research is design-based, iterative and progressive, an approach that we consider as essential as soon as practical findings are targeted.

As presented in the definition of [Wang and Hannafin 05], Design-Based Research is "A systematic but flexible methodology aimed to improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design, development, and implementation, based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings, and leading to contextually-sensitive design principles and theories." The five basic characteristics proposed by them: "(a) pragmatic, (b) grounded, (c) interactive, iterative and flexible, (d) integrative, and (e) contextual" (p. 7) all underline our research.

The three main phases in a design experiment brought to the fore by [Cobb et al. 90], namely I "Preparing for a Design Experiment", II "Conducting a Design Experiment", and III "Conducting Retrospective Analysis", were served as designing guidance in the following way :

Phase I, preparing the experiment. Published research results have been considered to design the first small scale version of the course, the pilot study presented in this paper. We focused on the clarification of the theoretical background of the previous research, that is, we did a ground study of the literature on the subject to establish the theoretical intent and the assumptions about the design. At the same time, it was the basis on which we worked together to set up an envisioned form of learning.

Phase II, conducting the experiment. At this stage, we had set our sights on the anticipated learning pathways and means of support, which included the general course plan, learning tools as well as a tutor supporting system. The roles of the teachers, the tutor and the coordinator of the project were precisely fixed. The coordinator insured the communication and the regular report and debriefing of the project between all the members involved (Chinese teacher, French teacher, tutor). Only three pairs of students were chosen to attend the course of the pilot study, since it would have been a risk to start the pilot project with too large a group. The small number of students ensured that the pedagogical design be properly tested, in

preparation of a course for larger groups. The participants were Swiss Chinese-language students of Geneva University (native French speakers) and Chinese French-language students of Hubei University (Wuhan, China). The course was a supplementary course to their formal curriculum. Internet communication tools were used for communication and collaboration in eTandem peer-to-peer interaction. The students had at least achieved two academic years in their respective branches, and to join the project, their language level had to be equivalent to the B1 or B2 level of the European Language Portfolio [European Language Portfolio].

Phase III, the retrospective analysis: At the end of the project, interviews with students and teachers were conducted. The feedback and opinions were collected and analyzed and were previewed to serve as guidance for redesigning the coming research.

2 Telecollaboration in language learning: success and failure

In recent years, with the development of computer technology and the increasing demands of foreign language learning, a great many computer-aided FL intercultural language exchange projects have been produced [Liu et al. 02]. The benefits and advantages of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), embedded in the larger domain of Computer Assisted FL learning and teaching, have been proved by many researches [Nguyen 08]. Communication tools like e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, chat, blogs, wikis, etc. have been adopted to facilitate FL learning. These teaching methods proved to be "convenient, authentic, direct, and speed access to native speakers and their cultures" [Nguyen 08].

In particular, eTandem or telecollaboration as a new approach to online collaborative language learning has attracted the attention of many researchers and practitioners because "two language learners with different native languages communicate with one another sharing the common objective of learning from each other" [Cziko 04]. The reciprocity and autonomy principles of tandem learning [Little and Brammerts 96] make it possible for all partners to benefit equally from collaboration with native speakers of their target language and each partner is responsible for his/her own language learning; of course, learner autonomy is highly required [Kötter 03].

As presented in the “History of Tandem Learning” at the *TANDEMcity* website [Tandemcity], face-to-face tandem dates back to 1968, while eTandem, tandem language learning based on CMC technologies, started in 1983. One of the pioneer projects named LINGUA, known as the International E-mail Tandem Network initiated by Helmut Brammerts in 1992/1993 [Brammerts 95; Brammerts et al. 97], was conducted and developed for English-German discussions at a tandem network for more than 10 European universities [Lingua]. Later on, more media tools were adopted in tandem language learning. For example, Electronic Network for Language And Culture Exchange (ENLACE), a chat-based-tandem learning network, was created for language learners to find language learning partners by using synchronous text chat alone or in combination with video and/or audio conferencing [Lingua]. Similar tandem community websites such as *pyngo.com, italki, MyLanguageExchange, Lingozone, Livemocha, SharedTalk* by *Rosetta Stone, Xlingo, ChinesePod*, etc. provide similar services.

However, these projects concentrate essentially on providing a free online language exchange community where language learners sign up to find language exchange partners and learning resources. Some provide pedagogically designed task-based activities based on the online audio-visual learning materials or even paid organized courses, but there are few positive reports concerning the result of these learning activities.

Since 1994, Tandem Foundation, initially established by Michael Friedrich and Jürgen Wolff, has put an impact on the improvement of tandem language courses [Tandemcity]. These eTandem courses have adopted good online video teaching materials, language exchange with text-based chat, or audio-visual talk, some task-based or project-based activities. However, the programs are intended for a general audience, and there are not many well-organized courses for specific learners, for example, learners at university level. What is more, the tandem courses remain inside Europe or occidental circles, and no Asian language courses are involved.

Later on, a much broader term, telecollaboration, as "a form of foreign language education which links language students both cross-linguistically as well as inter-culturally through computer-mediated communication" [Carney 06] began to attract the attention of language educators and researchers. ETandem or telecollaboration language learning projects have been extended and reproduced in many universities on different research focuses, including French-American partnerships with e-mail and Instant Messaging [Tamdemcity]; German-US tandem focusing on how to develop learners' intercultural competence from linguistic perspective and the importance of teachers' roles [Beltz 03b]; Spanish-English intercultural exchange telecollaboration [O'Dowd 03]; researches on MOO's status as a "facilitator" in FL acquisition, by analysing through discourse code-switching in German-American tandems [Kötter 03; Schwienhorst 02]; the study of "tension" between German-American tandems [Ware 05]; the telecollaboration between EFL teachers [Keranen and Bayyurt 06], etc.

The potential of telecollaboration language learning has been often reported to develop FL linguistic competence and intercultural competence [Belz and Mueller-Hartmann 03; Jin 08, O'Dowd 03; Thorne 03; Ware and O'Dowd 08]. The authors found that most of these projects focus on oral comprehension and speaking practices but less on writing competences at academic levels.

What is more, as noted by [Belz 03a], experiments involving non European languages (Asian, Semitic languages, etc.) are not common. A series of language exchange projects involving Japanese have been described in Nathaniel Carney's review [Carney 06], but only one project among them followed the principle of reciprocity, as most projects used only one language. Projects involving China or Taiwan are still very rare too. In the University of Bristol, an experiment with CFL (Chinese as Foreign Language) students from the University of Bristol and EFL (English as Foreign Language) students from a university in Taiwan has been conducted by using instant messaging, wiki and e-mails [Hung 07]. However, limited information is provided regarding the outcome of this experience.

At the same time, a series of difficulties that occurred during the unfolding of the projects have been reported [Bernier 07; O'Dowd and Ritter 06; O'Dowd 07a]. O'Dowd and Ritter did a comprehensive review of what they called "failures" in these projects, and listed ten criteria of possible causes of these failures in telecollaboration

language learning, ranging from individual factors, classroom-level factors, socio-institutional factors to interactional factors:

1. Lack of Intercultural Communicative Competency (ICC): students' lack of ICC may reinforce their stereotypical images of the other side. In particular, misunderstandings often "arise from cultural differences in communicative style and behaviour" [O'Dowd and Ritter 06].
2. Low learner motivation and divergent expectations: different motivation and expectations between tandems are susceptible to generating negative attitude within the group.
3. Teacher-teacher relationship: given the fact that they don't meet face-to-face, the teachers of tandems often do not coordinate very well.
4. Loose Task design: a proper design of tasks and their sequencing play an important role in learning result for any instructional design activity; there is no exception in telecollaboration. Special attention should also be paid to the choice of the task content in telecollaboration to avoid topics that may cause tremendous negative effect on the group's dynamics. The task designer's ICC should also be taken into consideration.
5. Learner-matching: random matching creates a high risk of mismatch, which of course hinders learning. Whenever possible, personalized matching, for example, matching based on personal preference is to be preferred.
6. Local group dynamics: when groups involve more than two persons, there is also a local group dynamic to consider. While it tends to be neglected, because of the focus of the tandem communication, the local group dynamics is reported to impact the learning success.
7. Pre-exchange briefing: briefing at the level of the classroom can constitute a useful way to avoid failures, by discussing issues such as expectancies of improving the intercultural competency.
8. Technology: early projects were more or less bounded by the available technology (e-mail), while recent projects have more choices of appropriate tools according to the pedagogical scenario, like more synchronous tools (instant messaging, voice on IP) and non-textual media (audio-visual chat). Note that many projects simply use the institutional e-learning platform that is made available by their universities. However, the managing of the system and the availability of "permanent out-of-class access" [Ware 05] may still remain problems that hinder tandem relationship and cause misunderstanding.
9. General organization of course of study: despite the principle of reciprocity mentioned above at the level of the individual learners, the two distant universities are, by definition, different: different calendars, different academic organization, different assessment methods, different teaching approaches, etc. These differences can have significant consequences on the tandem course.
10. Prestige values: cultural stereotypes, feeling of inferiority/superiority, cultural resentment can naturally hinder the flow of communication within a tandem group. Pre-exchange briefing can be a useful step to prevent this.

Many of these potential causes of failure are difficult to solve. Some even seem irreducible and inherent to the very idea of telecollaboration between two universities

from different countries. However, being aware of these 10 potential causes of failures can efficiently inform the design of a new telecollaboration-based project and prepare all actors to avoid potential communication problems.

3 Description of an eTandem Chinese-French Writing Course

3.1 Design principles

The technological and pedagogical design of our Chinese-French eTandem course was inspired by the research discussed in the previous section. In Table 1, we recall each potential cause of failure in telecollaboration discussed by O'Dowd and Ritter [O'Dowd and Ritter 06] and provide our "solution" to each problem, in terms of pedagogical design.

Table 1: Potential failures and their "solution" in terms of course design.

Potential failure	Design features to avoid the failure
Lack of ICC	As the two cultures are radically different, we took this issue very seriously. We opted for much more constrained tasks than usually defined in other similar projects. We gave specific task instructions to lower potential communication difficulties arising from the ICC.
Low learner motivation and divergent expectations	In Wuhan, the teacher dispatched an invitation to join the project and recommended some students. Those who expressed strong willingness to attend the project were accepted. This enabled a high level of motivation, since they were considered as the "happy few". The same procedure was repeated in Geneva and the students from the continuous education programs showed strong motivation and were selected to participate in the project.
Insufficient teacher-teacher interaction	The coordinator of the project, who also played the tutor's role in the project, served as an intermediary between the two teachers. This person originally came from the University in China but is based at Geneva now. She provided a useful link between teachers, relieving them from a communication load that is not easy to manage in telecollaboration courses.
Loose task design	The crucial role of tutors on distance learning has been often observed [Daele and Docq 02; Ware and O'Dowd 08], and tandem learning should not be an exception to this observation. Though learner autonomy is considered as essential for tandem language learning, we decided to scaffold it with a close tutoring. Regular communication between the teachers and the tutor were organized for optimal curriculum-attached task design. The purpose was to achieve a good combination of improving specific linguistic competence, theme-related cultural knowledge and intercultural communication. Following the peer-to-peer correction, the tutor gave a feedback on it and a final assessment of the writing procedure was given as a summary of this theme-based writing session. Later on, the students were encouraged to do such a summary, which turned out to be more precise than the tutor's.

Table 1: Potential failures and their "solution" in terms of course design (cont.)

Potential failure	Design features to avoid the failure
Learner-matching	Individual tandem-matching preferences were collected through audio interviews (via Skype) or email questionnaires, they made the base on which the teachers matched the students.
Local group dynamics	This problem was avoided because of the small-scale learning pairs registered.
Pre-exchange briefing	It mostly concerned the technical aspects of the course. We expected that our effort in terms of production-constrained discussions, tutoring and theme selection (see below) should be sufficient to avoid communication failures.
Technology	The Moodle platform of Geneva University hosted the course, and Skype was chosen as the oral communication tool. The students in China were good at using Skype but had never used Moodle. A small training was organized for them by the teachers in China.
General organization of course of study	This factor could not be neutralized simply. We extended the deadline in accordance with the difference of the academic calendars. Taking into consideration the fact that the way that native French speakers learn Chinese is different from the way that native Chinese speakers learn Chinese, and vice versa, the tutor and the teachers have had much discussion concerning the adjustments of teaching methods and the adaptation of classroom activities to online activities as well.
Prestige values	The selection of discussion themes and related learning resources was central for this point. Themes concerning politics and prestigious cultural themes were avoided, while those related to everyday places, people (themselves!) and activities were chosen. Interviews have been done at the task-design stage concerning the selection.

3.2 Course timeline

The course was designed to last for about one academic year, altogether 20 weeks. However, the teachers from both sides spent two weeks before and after the course for preparation and evaluation. The course was organized as follows:

- During the academic Autumn Semester lasting from October to December 2009, 2 weeks were necessary for the interviews and tandem-matching, 8 weeks were taken for the course (1 theme for each 4 weeks), the last week being used for term questionnaire and interviews.
- As for the Spring Semester lasting from March to June 2010, the course was given for 8 weeks (1 theme for each 4 weeks), and 2 weeks were necessary for term questionnaire and interviews.

4 Actors and roles

- Teachers: One Swiss Chinese-language teacher (Geneva University) and one Chinese French-language teachers (Hubei University).
- Coordinator and tutor: During the pilot phase, for the sake of efficiency, the roles of coordinator and tutor were played by the same person. As a coordinator, she communicated with teachers on each side to decide the planning of the course; she also got in touch with all students to understand their needs and to ease the communication between tandems when misunderstanding or unavailability happened. As a tutor, she gave instructions, provided task-based language learning resources (warm-up questions for oral discussion through audio conference, text-based sample writings, questions or exercises to help understanding vocabulary and structures), answered questions in the forum (questions concerning the use of technical tools and questions concerning the understanding of specific learning resources), reminded the students of the task deadlines, gave encouragement when they were less motivated, and gave detailed feedback, etc.
- The participants: In the pilot phase there were 3 advanced adult Swiss Chinese-language learners from the Continuing Education Program of the Chinese Unit, ageing from 30 to 50 years old; and 3 Chinese French-major second-year students from PR China ageing from 19 to 20. The participants had been recruited on a voluntary base with regard to the result of the interviews taken on both sides (for more details, see Table 1).

4.1 Theme-based activities

Figure 1 helps to explain the pedagogical design of the theme-based activities in the course.

Tandem matching: After the recruitment of the participants, individual tandem-matching preferences were collected through face-to-face interviews or email questionnaires, base on which the teachers matched the students. For example, one male Swiss student expressed his preference for having a male tandem partner due to an unhappy learning experience with a female partner in a previous language stay experience in China.

Theme selection: The first theme of the course was deliberately designed as "Ravi/e de faire votre connaissance / 很高兴认识你" (Nice to meet you) so that they meet on the audio conferencing tool and introduce each other.

Combining the suggestions from both teachers and students, the following themes were chosen: "Ravi/e de faire votre connaissance /很高兴认识你" (Nice to meet you), "Un endroit qui vaut le détour / 一个值得一游的地方" (A place worth visiting), "Publicité/广告" (Advertisement), and "Lettre / 写信" (Writing a letter).

Platform preparation: The Moodle platform of the University of Geneva hosted the course. The course designers created course information and course documents accessible at any time for all participants. There were three main sections in the platform's home page:

1. The "Introduction" section is an area for general considerations. It includes a brief presentation of the content, the teacher's forum accessible only to teachers and tutors, the general announcements forum for every participant, the tandems' forum, as well as a calendar.

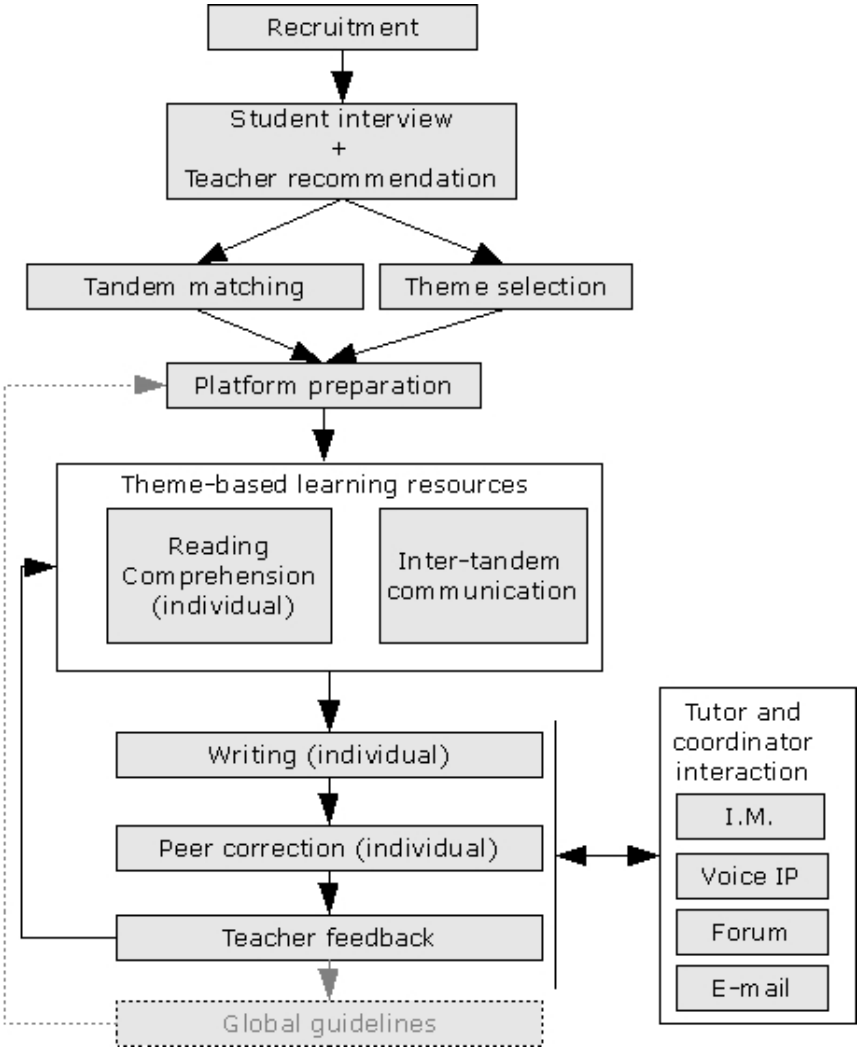

Figure 1: Diagram representing the activities involved in the eTandem course.

2. The "Theme" section is the space for each theme-based activity that is estimated to last about 4 weeks. Two weeks for individual learning of resources and skype exchange for comprehension, another two weeks for writing and peer correction. There are as many spaces as there are themes. Each space is further

subdivided into a) assignments instructions and the submission of writings; b) “learning resources” (see below); c) a "Vos textes" (Your texts) data base for students to collect what they find interesting or useful in link with the theme.

3. The "Learning resources" section is an important area in each theme section where a variety of learning materials as well as exercises are uploaded by the teachers. They include word procession documents, audio-visual files, handwritten texts, grammatical and vocabulary exercises, etc. Instant grade can be obtained by the students for given exercises.

Theme-based learning resources: The students worked individually on the learning resources to get maximum comprehension and note down what they didn’t understand. Then they fixed a time to communicate with their tandems via audio conference to check their comprehension and at the same time to practise their oral communication skills. They were encouraged to provide/recommend supplementary theme-related resources.

Writing: Once the theme was open, the students needed to define a specific title for their writing. Some got good inspiration from their tandems. Each student was required to spend 1-2 hours doing the writing task individually, with the time and number of words noted down. When finished, each writing was sent to the tandem partner for correction.

Peer-correction: Each student corrected the tandem's writing work with the help of the "comment" function of the word processor. With a correction template (formulated by the teachers and the tutor) as a format guide, students were required to correct faults concerning vocabulary, grammar, inappropriate use of language, etc. They were encouraged to put summaries at the end of the page. The finally finished writing had to be submitted in the “assignment” area.

Teacher feedback: At the pilot stage, our intention was to study how the students corrected each other’s writing, which explains why we gave feedback/comment after students peer correction. Questions we asked ourselves included: "What do they focus on when they correct other's writing?"; "Is it necessary that the teachers comment on students' writing after the peer’s correction?", and so forth.

The teachers' feedback was made of two parts: a feedback using "comment" as a supplementary correction to the peer’s correction and an improved version at the end as a sample. The supplementary "comment" was necessary because the partners were not language teachers and they were not as keen as teachers in spotting language errors. The feedback thus consisted in at least 3 texts for each tandem – the original text, the peer-corrected text together with teacher comment, and the improved text. After getting the students' approval, we put all the feedback in Moodle for sharing.

Global guideline (planned but not realized): We had planned to summarize all the feedback concerning each theme, but unfortunately couldn’t finish it in time. The summary would have included the usual errors, both semantic and grammatical, made by the students and possible reasons would have been noted, which could have been used as a guideline for the next-year project. However, due to time pressure, only informal feedback was collected from the teachers. Though not a formal guideline, some relevant considerations have been included in the project for the academic year 2010-2011.

4.2 Technical tools: Moodle and Skype

For this project, simple to use, easily available and robust technologies were favoured over innovative ones, hence our choice for Moodle and Skype.

Moodle in FL learning: As a free, open-source, e-learning, cross-platform course management system (CMS) [Wu 05], Moodle has been adopted by more and more FL teachers or institutions as e-learning platform for various FL courses. Klaus Brandl [8] presented a detailed overview of Moodle features for language learning. He pointed out that the "flat view" format Webpages allows easy course set-up and course navigation.

Skype: Skype is a synchronous communication tool that includes instant messaging, voice on IP and video conferencing. It has been adopted by many language exchange communities such as ConversationExchange.com and organised language exchange programme such as *Mixer* and tandem learning projects [European Language Portfolio]. Students in our project were free to use any mode of communication offered by Skype, and they mostly used audio and video conversations.

5 Evaluation

The evaluation of this pilot study that lasted from mid-October 2009 to June 2010 consisted in three parts:

- During the course, informal feedbacks from students were collected. In particular, in February 2010, the coordinator/tutor in Geneva went to China and met with the Chinese students. The students involved in the pilot project shared their learning experience and gave their comments and suggestions on the project.
- After the course, directed interviews were conducted with four (two Chinese, two Swiss) out of six students.
- During and after the course, informal feedbacks from the teachers were collected.

5.1 Informal feedback from students

The informal discussion with students revealed a high level of satisfaction with the learning method. No "cultural dissonance" was reported. All the tandems were impressed by each other's strong motivation and diligence.

On the Chinese side, the age gap between the tandems in this project brought about problems concerning the selection of themes but it did not affect their learning motivation. Though they preferred doing the project with students of their age, they reported that they enjoyed learning with those "adult" learners, and that they had discovered a lot of new knowledge from them.

5.2 Interviews with students

The directed interviews contained six questions (and a last one related to suggestions for improvements, not reported here):

- All the interviewed reported having benefited most from oral communication, that is, having made great progress in speaking

French/Chinese. Some detailed that they had learnt to speak real French instead of Chinese-French. Others said that they put into practice what they had learnt in class, for example, vocabulary, grammatical rules, etc.

- All the participants interviewed said that the general layout of the course design and the task instructions were clear. However, they were less satisfied with the learning resources. One student suggested that more audio-visual learning materials be added.
- Generally, all participants found that the themes were well-selected except for theme 4 since it was too large. They suggested that a more precise theme like “motivation letter” would be better.
- Since handwriting is thought to be necessary for learning Chinese characters, we asked the students whether it would be necessary to get handwriting integrated in the course. Surprisingly, all the participants thought it not quite necessary to do the written work in this course; they said that they can practise that with other methods.
- All participants found peer-correction difficult to do but interesting to read. It was not easy to correct their partner's work as they were not sure to which extent they should do the corrections. Was it necessary to correct each grammatical error? Did I need to provide a perfect sentence? How should I deal with vocabulary mistakes such as wrong use of expressions? They suggested that the teachers provide a “peer-correction guide”, like a list of important vocabulary and grammatical points for each theme.
- In this pilot project, the teachers spent a lot of time giving the feedback. But was it really necessary to do that? The participants appreciated the feedback from the teachers under the condition that the teachers do not have to do so much extra work. They proposed two main methods: the teachers give their comments on the corrections done by the tandems, and the teachers give a final improved version. However, the authors doubted the feasibility of both proposals. The question remains open..

The result of the interview shows that both Chinese-speaking students and French-speaking students have benefited from this course, especially in oral communication. All the participants enjoyed the learning procedure and were satisfied with the learning result, even if the result was not evaluated formally at the end of the course. But the authors noticed that during the interview, the Chinese students chose to speak in French and the Swiss students chose to speak in Chinese when they were told that they could choose the language.

5.3 Feedback from teachers

Finally, feedback from teachers provided useful information.

The Swiss Chinese-language teacher reported that two of the participants were enthusiastic about the project, while the other failed to meet the course requirements because of unexpected workload. What she particularly appreciated is the fact that the course offers the possibility for the students to talk live with the partner at least once a week.

The Chinese French-language teacher mentioned that the Chinese second-year French-major students must pass the TFS-4 ("Test du Français Spécialisé"), a national examination for French-major students at university level. Taking into consideration the Swiss Chinese-language students' needs to pass the HSK (The Chinese Proficiency Test), how to integrate better the curriculum requirements of both universities appeared to be a major concern for both teachers.

Both teachers found that much more attention should be given to peer correction, both in content and in form. For example, one Swiss student, though she used to be a French-language teacher, had completely ignored the numerous punctuation errors made by her Chinese tandem; the same thing happened on the Chinese side as well, punctuation orthodoxy seemed to be ignored by the students. Also, as one Swiss student complained, the "comments" appeared chaotic after the teachers had added their second or even third layer of corrections.

How to provide accurate and useful feedback was a topic largely discussed by the teachers during the setting up of the course, but it was difficult to have a clear idea of how to frame it. As the course went on, the teachers quite naturally shifted from rather exhaustive commentaries made for each correction to lighter "reformulation touches", i.e. instead of explanations, they just gave one or two more correct or more idiomatic ways of expressing what was said. Teachers realised that the students involved in the project should be better trained on how to correct the partner's writing task, as observed in [Ware and O'Dowd 08].

6 Summary of the pilot study

The Chinese-French eTandem language learning project presented in this article has been carefully designed based on a detailed research and analysis of a variety of researches on telecollaboration and tandem language learning. According to the feedback of the participants, the project has achieved the two main purposes:

1. satisfactory learning result as learners have enjoyed the language exchange experience and reported having improved both their speaking and writing skills and intercultural competence without cultural dissonance,
2. and practical course management in that the communication within the pedagogical team has been going on smoothly.

The pilot study contrasts with past experiments as it shows that formal eTandem language learning can be successful if carefully coordinated. This result is noticeable as previous experiments had almost never implied so distant cultures and languages.

Of course, the main issue at this stage is how the course can be scaled to a full foreign language course. While several features of this project could remain with larger classes (dealing with limited intercultural competency, motivation, task structuring), the critical aspects are the organization of the course at institutional level, the involvement and the workload of the teachers from both sides, the correction, more precisely the balance between peer correction and teacher/tutor feedback, etc.

7 Future work

The pilot project was meant to pave the way for a larger scale course for about 40 second-year bachelor students from both sides. As mentioned above, some features or experiences from the pilot stage can be kept for designing the course at the extension stage, like the e-learning platform and the online communication tool, the thematic course structure, the timeline, the tutoring, etc. However, it is necessary to consider some important issues.

First, pre-course preparations will be previewed. An improved pre-course questionnaire for partner matching will be sent to students as soon as they get registered in the course. A short technical training session can be organized at both sides to acquaint students with necessary technical skills, for example, using Skype and Moodle course.

Second, considering that there will be much more students involved in the academic year 2010-2011, the course schedule needs to be fixed in order to better manage the tandems. Students' coming to language labs at fixed time will be the first step.

Third, the current strategy is not scalable to large classes, since it would require too much effort from the tutors or teachers. The solution lies in helping students to properly correct each other's productions. Several possible methods will be employed as follows:

1. To organize special sessions to train students on how to perform peer-corrections and to provide them with a peer-correction form based on reformulation rather than on grammatical explanations.
2. Helping the students to improve their metalinguistic knowledge by giving them opportunities to reflect on their online interaction, asking them to use portfolios and learner diaries to maintain on-going record of their linguistic and syntactic experiences [see Ware and O'Dowd's 05 summary on the subject, p. 55].
3. Establishing a formal self-evaluation at individual level, for example, a self-evaluation questionnaire after each theme-based task.

Fourth, to ensure the learning result of the course at larger scale, tutoring during the course is necessary. For example, tutoring during each session of the course (guiding students to learn each theme-based course content, solving technical or connection problems during the course, as well as answering their questions in the forum, etc.)

Fifth, since there will be more students and teachers involved in the second phase of the project, a more solid cooperation within the pedagogical team will be established. The role of the coordinator will be reinforced. In particular, the implementation of thematic content will be performed more cooperatively.

In order to motivate the students from both sides, it is necessary that both universities integrate this course in their curriculum, though it might be too early to do it at the extension stage. Making the course content compatible to both sides will be our first step. A pre-course test and a post-course test will be conducted as part of the evaluation of the learning result.

8 Conclusion

We have conducted a pilot study of eTandem language exchange course between Switzerland and China. Despite the cultural and language differences, most of the pedagogical purposes of the project have been achieved, avoiding potential "failures" in telecollaboration. The result of this pilot research is currently being taken into consideration for the design of a larger-scale eTandem project following an iterative design methodology.

More research topics concerning eTandem language and culture exchange will be brought about. In particular, the following hypothesis will be tested in future iterations of the project:

- Is it possible to establish a peer-correction standard that can make students more autonomous with their learning?
- Will the course go more smoothly if there is a platform for teachers to communicate and share their designing ideas?
- To integrate the course in university curriculum, can we take the bottom-up procedure, that is, from course level to faculty level and to institutional level step by step?

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