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eTandem Language Learning Integrated in the Curriculum: Reflection from Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This article presents an eTandem course between two distant languages – Chinese and French, at institutional level – between the Unit of Chinese Studies of the University of Geneva, Switzerland, and the French Department of Hubei University, Wuhan, China. The course, targeted for second-year students (Level A2-B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR, 2001) from both sides, included theme-based asynchronous learning activities in the LMS Moodle platform as well as task-based synchronous oral communication via Skype. Taking into consideration the socio-institutional differences between the two counterparts, one focusing on literacy and cultural knowledge while the other emphasising pragmatic linguistic competences, the course design followed a careful and iterative instructional design procedure so that the eTandem course be gradually integrated in the curriculum of both universities. This article studies the students' expectations, participation, satisfaction and feedback based on the data collected during the three-year implementation of the project. The findings show that the students have benefited both linguistically and culturally from the eTandem exchange. However, issues like designing more contextualised online exchange tasks as well as normalising the course in both universities remain important future work.

Abstract in Chinese

本文介绍的中法文e搭档课程是由瑞士日内瓦大学汉学系和中国湖北大学法语系共同开发的。该课程面向具有中级汉语基础的法语母语学生和具有中级法语基础的汉语母语学生（正规学习汉语 / 法语至少一年并达到相当于欧洲语言标准A2到B1级的水平）。该课程依托网络课程平台Moodle和网络交流工具Skype为学生提供“活”的语言学

习环境，学生通过一对一的在线交流，参加以主题为基础的任务型语言实践课程，利用母语优势互相帮助，训练和提高综合运用所学语言知识和技能，同时增进对双方的社会文化了解。在充分考虑学校和专业差异的基础上

（汉学系侧重培养阅读能力和传播文化知识，法语系注重培养语用能力），本课程通过反复循环的教学设计，对将课程融入到各校教学大纲进行了初步的尝试。本文根据三年的实验数据，通过研究学生的课程期望、课程参与、课程评价以及反馈，详细分析了课程设计的得失。研究结果表明E搭档课程让学生从提高语言能力，培养文化意识，以及增强学习动机方面受益；同时也让研究者意识到如何设计更加适合学生学习情境的任务，如何使课程常态化仍然是将来重要的研究工作。

Abstract in French

Cet article présente un cours d'échange linguistique eTandem entre deux langues distantes – le chinois et le français en milieu institutionnel – entre l'Unité des études chinoises de l'Université de Genève en Suisse romande, et le Département de français de l'Université du Hubei de Wuhan en Chine. Prévu pour des étudiant-e-s de deuxième année de chacun des établissements (niveau A2-B1 du Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues, CECR, 2001), le cours comprend des activités d'apprentissage thématiques asynchrones sur la plateforme d'apprentissage Moodle, ainsi que des tâches de communication orale synchrones via Skype. Du fait des différences socio-institutionnelles entre les deux parties – esprit critique et apprentissage de la langue en vue d'acquérir des connaissances en histoire, en littérature et en culture chinoises pour l'une, compétences pragmatiques en linguistique appliquée du français pour l'autre – la conception du cours eTandem a suivi une procédure de scénarisation pédagogique soignée et itérative afin d'être peu à peu intégrée aussi bien que possible dans les curriculums de chaque institution. Sont présentées ici les données collectées sur les attentes, la participation, le degré de satisfaction et les retours écrits des participant-e-s durant les trois ans de la mise en œuvre du projet. Les résultats montrent que les étudiant-e-s ont bénéficié de l'échange eTandem autant du point de vue linguistique que culturel. Il reste toutefois des questions ouvertes sur comment, par exemple, mieux contextualiser les activités d'échange

dans la scénarisation pédagogique des leçons, ou sur comment pérenniser ce cours dans les deux universités.

Keywords: eTandem, Chinese as a Foreign Language, French as a Foreign Language, normalisation

Introduction

Tandem language learning, as an original language learning approach, occurs when “two language learners with different native languages communicate with one another sharing the common objective of learning from each other” (Little, 1998). How to benefit most from this “ideal” language learning approach within this autonomous, reciprocal and collaborative learning context has been an interesting research question. Many language teachers and researchers have applied the approach formally or informally in their teaching and research practices, be it through face-to-face or any other modes of asynchronous or synchronous interaction (O’Rourke, 2007).

This article presents a summary of the findings of a three-year eTandem exchange course between two distant languages – Chinese and French at institutional level – between the Unit of Chinese Studies of the University of Geneva, Switzerland, and the French Department of Hubei University, China. The summary focuses on the students’ perspectives about the eTandem course. It is based on the data obtained from four different sources: the pre-exchange survey of students’ language profile and expectations for the exchange, the formal yearly course evaluation administrated by the University of Geneva, the statistics given by the students’ logging on Moodle and the face-to-face interviews with the students from both universities at the end of each academic year.

The project was initiated in 2009 by the Unit of Chinese Studies of the University of Geneva as an important part of the Chinese blended-learning programme called ChineWeb. It is still ongoing. The participants are, for each academic year, the second year language students from both sides (Level A2-B1 according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001). The course includes theme-based asynchronous learning activities on the Learning Management System (LMS) platform Moodle as well as task-based synchronous oral communication via Skype.

The main objective is to promote autonomy in the language learning process in order to make the students aware of the importance of *learning how to learn* as well as helping them to become responsible for their own language learning. The immediate objectives involve developing the students’ linguistic competences through

communication with native speakers of the target language as well as getting them to better know and understand the target culture.

Socio-institutional context

The two universities share certain basic features in language teaching, such as the emphasis on the development of linguistic skills that include communication skills on similar topics. Compared to Hubei University, the Unit of Chinese Studies of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Geneva focuses more on developing the students' ability on learning and understanding Chinese history, society and culture, especially ancient and modern Chinese literature. The strength of the curriculum is thus laid more on reading and writing than on oral comprehension and communication. The eleven hours of Chinese courses that the second-year students attend each week do not involve linguistic skills practice courses such as listening and speaking. As a result, many students express a strong need for practicing what they learn in face-to-face instruction. Besides, the fact that some students take other mandatory or optional subjects at the same time also prevents them from investing too much time on Chinese learning.

On the other hand, the training and the practice of linguistic competences come first in the curriculum of the French Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Hubei University, especially for second-year students. However, they do not have many opportunities to speak French due to the great number of students in each class (25-30 per class). The opportunity to communicate with native French/Chinese speakers of their own age is undoubtedly a big attraction to students from both universities. In order to know exactly what the students expect to benefit from the eTandem exchange, we have collected information from a pre-course survey at the beginning of each year's course.

Figure 1 shows (see below) that the benefits the students expected from an eTandem exchange include improving oral communication skills, establishing a good friendship or a stable collaborative relationship with their language partners, exchanging cultural knowledge, and improving oral comprehension. Some also expected benefits in terms of vocabulary and grammar learning, as well as improving writing skills.

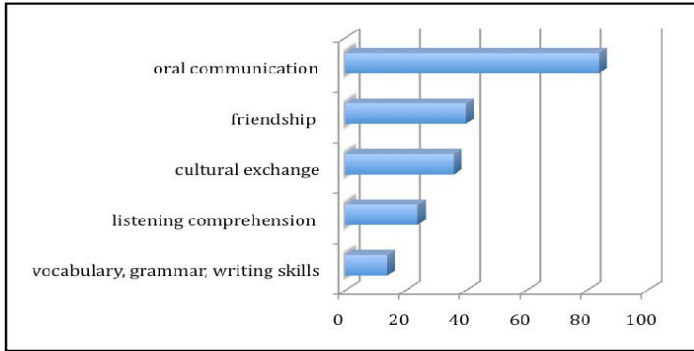


Figure 1. Students' expectations from the eTandem exchange (data from the surveys of 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013)

The course structure

As a language practice course integrated into the Chinese blended-learning programme, the eTandem course has chronologically gone through different design cycles. Before launching a large-scale course, a pilot project was conducted between the two universities. Based on the students' feedback and the ergonomical analysis of the course feasibility, pre-course preparation, fixed course schedule, the bilingual course environment and online tutoring were kept to design the large-scale course that started in 2010. The courses in the year 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 have been iteratively redesigned on the basis of the analytical results of the former design so as to better adapt to the curriculum as well as to the students' needs.

Before the course began, all students were required to fill an online questionnaire to get registered. The survey included students' language profile and open questions about their expectations from the exchange. A face-to-face training session was organized by the teachers of both universities to help the students get familiar with the Moodle platform and Skype. As for the forming of eTandem partners, in the year 2010-2011, it was the teachers who matched the language partners. In the year 2011-2012, in response to the students' suggestions, this was replaced by a *tandem forum* where the students were encouraged to present themselves, to exchange messages and get in touch with each other through e-mails to find their partner.

Before each exchange, the students checked the task instruction for the session and consulted their partners' learning materials as a reference as to what extent they could provide aid during the exchange. There were 3 kinds of tasks for each theme, including: (a) a theme-based description or narrative task in the target language; (b) a question-answer discussion in both mother tongue and target language; and (c) a

written summary of the exchange in their native language in the forum of each session. During the exchange, the students were required to strictly respect the principle of reciprocity: 30 minutes in French and 30 minutes in Chinese.

The outcomes of the course

Data collections

At the end of each academic year, the students from Geneva were asked to fill in a formal course evaluation questionnaire administrated by the University of Geneva. A complete evaluation report was sent to the teachers directly afterwards. The evaluation form consisted of 4 parts with 12 5-scale questions about the course content and its organisation, teaching evaluation, as well as global appreciation, and 4 specific questions on the eTandem exchange, together with 3 open-ended questions about the comments or suggestions on the exchange. The questionnaire was translated in Chinese and was sent to Hubei University, where the data was then treated separately. Besides, after each weekly session of the exchange, the students were required to fill in a short self-evaluation form to report on the exchange process. And finally, an interview at the end of each semester was organized at both universities to collect students' comments on the course.

Students' global appreciation of the eTandem course

In general, the Geneva students' perceptions as whether they have achieved the objectives are overwhelmingly positive (see Figure 2 below, 100% in 2010-2011, 100% in 2011-2012, 97% in 2012-2013). The result from Hubei University was not different from that of their counterpart.

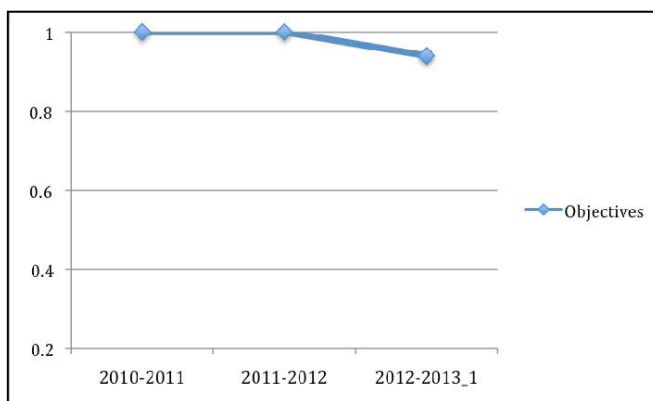


Figure 2. The attainment of course objectives (2010-2011, 2011-2012, 2012-2013_1) UNIGE

Despite a small drop in the year 2011-2012, the students showed their satisfaction with the eTandem course (see Figure 3 below).

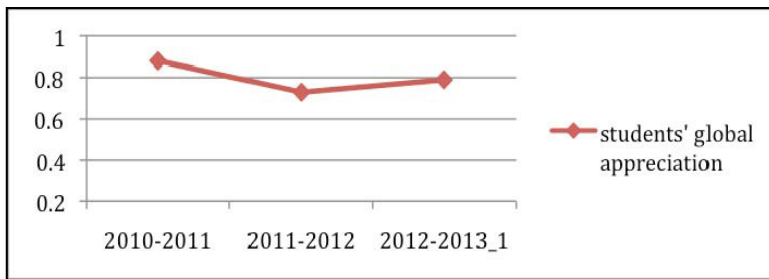


Figure 3. Students' global satisfaction with the eTandem course (2010-2011, 2011-2012, 2012-2013_1)

The obstacles

Technical problems were reported to be the biggest obstacle for a successful exchange (see Figure 4 below). The breakdown of the Internet connection (during the academic year 2010-2011, the campus internet current was limited by the government, which was especially disastrous for the students of Hubei University), the cutting off of Skype, as well as other small technical problems discouraged the students from time to time. Besides, some students also regarded the preparation load to be a little too heavy and they demanded that the course materials be more related to their curriculum.

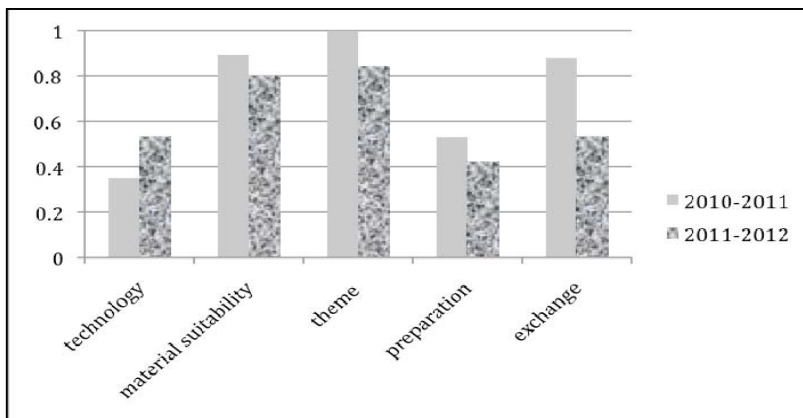


Figure 4. Students' satisfaction index with the eTandem course (2010-2011 and 2011-2012, UNIGE)

Do the benefits meet the students' expectations?

The students' perceived benefits included improving their speaking skills and understanding better understand each other's culture. A lot of students noted the increased confidence in their use of the target language, as they were not afraid of *speaking Chinese/French*. The practice in the authentic target language with native Chinese/French speakers helped them to better know the target language as they were really put *in the bath* during the exchange. They also emphasized the precious experience of learning about the target culture through exchanging with people of their own age. The statistics were completed by interviews with the students at the end of each year, from which we include their commentaries about the benefits that they mentioned.

Ils permettent de mettre en place du vocabulaire en plaçant les mots dans un contexte. Ils nous donnent des structures/phrases utiles à l'oral. (The course helped to put the vocabulary into context. They teach us structures and sentences that are useful orally.)

首先，交流课的时间比较灵活，便于我们自由安排；其次，可以与搭档畅所欲言，能了解到很多书本上学不到的东西；最后，对彼此的口语水平和词汇量都有很大的帮助。(First, the flexible exchange time helped us to organise our learning autonomously; second, talking with a language partner helped us to know a lot of non-book knowledge; last, it was really beneficial for the improvement of speaking skills and vocabulary learning.)

平时在学校有很少的交流机会，这个交流给我们提供了平台，我们可以在课余时间说法语，和真正的法国人说法语，还能谈论自己想说的话题，而不是局限于课本。而且可以让我们对说法语没有畏惧感。(As we don't have much opportunity to speak French at school, the course provided a platform for us to communicate in French with REAL French native speakers. Besides, we can talk about other subjects instead of being constrained by the textbook. We are no longer afraid of speaking French.)

该课程为我们所学的词汇和表达法提供了一个很好的运用的平台,帮助我们培养说法语的习惯,加深了对国外文化的了解。(The course provided a good chance for us to practice the words and expressions that we have learnt. It helped us to develop a good habit of speaking French, and at the same time deepened our knowledge about the French culture.)

Besides the linguistic benefits, almost all students mentioned the enthusiastic experience of the cross-cultural exchanges they had with their partners. For one Swiss student, the Chinese students were no longer OVNI (UFO) since he got a lot of information about Chinese culture *en live* (on live) with a *vrai Chinois* (real Chinese). The course was *grammaticalement et humainement intéressant* (grammatically and humanly interesting).

Most students felt that their partners *aident vraiment à nous ouvrir et progresser* (really help us to open up and make progress), that they mutually gained more confidence in oral communicative skills.

Parts of the students' perceptions were actually quite accurate as the final results of the oral test showed a clear improvement in the development of their speaking skills, especially pronunciation, higher confidence in their use of the target language and a greater knowledge of the target culture. However, more evidence is needed to prove the relation between these improvements and the eTandem exchange.

Students' participation in the forums

The statistics extracted from the Moodle LMS also showed the students' active participation in the online course, especially the posts in the forums opened for each session. After each exchange, the participants were encouraged to write a summary of the exchange in their mother tongue for their language partners. In the year 2011-2012, most students did not understand the real benefit of this task and they mentioned that during the interview. We thus emphasized the importance of the feedback-summary in the pre-course training. As a result, the messages that the students posted almost doubled during the first semester of the year 2012-2013.

Table 1: The comparison of students' posts in Moodle forums (2011-2012, 2012-2013_1)

Academic year	2011-2012	2012-2013_1
Students number	82	99
Total student post number	401	955
Average post per student	4.9	9.6

The students not only resumed what their partners said during the exchange, they also added their own comments concerning the cultural information that they had learnt during each session, their personal feeling about their partners and the exchange process.

By exchanging about cultural topics they get to know each other, understand each other, share the same point of view or become open to different opinions with less bias.

在瑞士，很多学生都是靠自己打工来支付所有的开销。(In Switzerland, many university students work on their own to pay for all the daily expenses.)

谈到怎样保护环境的问题时，我才发现Sara是个很热爱大自然的人，她作为一个志愿者加入了一个保护动物的机构，她认为自然和人类都是应该相互尊重的，Sara真是个讨人喜欢的女孩！(When talking about environmental protection, I found out that Sara was a nature-lover. She joined an animal protection association as a volunteer; she thought that nature and human being should respect each other. She is really adorable!)

我们都觉得没必要花钱玩网络游戏，钱应该花在更有价值的地方。(We both agreed that money should be spent on something more worthwhile than on playing video games.)

这次对话，我从James身上了解了很多巴黎人的日常开销以及他们对待奢侈品和中国人对待奢侈品的或相同或不同的态度，我受益匪浅！(In this exchange, James let me know how most people in Paris pay for their daily expenses, and the different

attitudes towards luxury products between the Chinese and the French. I've learnt a lot!)

Elle m'a appris l'adage : le matin, manger comme un empereur, à midi manger comme un homme ordinaire et le soir manger comme un mendiant. Je suis donc un mendiant du matin qui devient empereur le soir ! (She taught me a Chinese saying: Eat breakfast like an emperor, lunch like a king, and dinner like a beggar. I'm a beggar in the morning and an emperor in the evening!)

Selon l'expression, 'les voyages forment la jeunesse', il est vrai que les voyages en solitaire permettent de prendre confiance en soi et de pouvoir prendre les bonnes décisions. C'est une bonne occasion pour apprendre à se débrouiller seul. (According to the expression, "travel broadens the mind", it is true that traveling can help to gain confidence and to be able to make good decisions. This is a good opportunity to learn to be independent.)

The joyful learning experiences enrich their vocabulary, especially the proverbs.

Je remercie beaucoup mon etandem Fanny qui me fait mieux connaître la Chine et qui m'apprend des nouveaux mots et a beaucoup d'humour. (I am very grateful to my tandem Fanny who helps me to know better China and who teaches me new vocabulary with a lot of humor.)

Elle m'a appris une expression pour parler des gens qui, contrairement aux gens qui voyagent, ne connaissent pas grand chose: 井底之蛙. (She taught me an expression to describe people who, contrary to those travel a lot, know nothing about the outer world: a frog at the bottom of the well.)

A propos de Guilin, elle m'a appris une expression disant que les paysages de Guilin sont les plus beaux du monde: 桂林山水甲天下. (About Guilin, she taught me an expression to say that the Guilin landscapes are the most beautiful in the world: East or West, Guilin landscape is best.)

A pleasant collaborative friendship was also established step by step as the course progressed.

我们互相了解，互相帮助，互相学习，纠正聊天中的错误。我觉得能有一个互助的伙伴是一件很好的事情，很期待下次的交流。(We tried to understand each other, to help each other, to learn from each other and correct each other. I found it wonderful to have a helpful partner. I'm looking forward to our next exchange.)

Elle parle très bien français et elle me corrige quand je fais faux. C'était très sympathique de parler avec elle et je pense qu'on va devenir de bons amis. Trop cool / 太酷了! (She speaks very good French and she corrects me whenever necessary. It was very nice talking to her and I think we will become good friends. It's really cool! /Too cool!)

Elle m'a corrigé mon chinois avec beaucoup de patience. J'ai eu des scrupules à raccrocher après 1h de conversation avec une personne aussi adorable! (She corrected me with a lot of patience. I was reluctant to cut the conversation after talking for one hour with such an adorable person!)

The teachers felt very happy to read the high-spirited posts written in the forums week after week. Another proof of the success of the exchange was found in the fact that several students from the 2010-2011 academic year reported keeping contact and communicating with their partners even after the course. They decided their own learning objectives, chose the topics they felt like discussing, and tried to get the best from the exchange with their language partners.

Future work

Undoubtedly, the Chinese-French eTandem course has brought great benefits to the students, not only linguistically, but also culturally. We will continue this course with a more adaptive design according to the students' feedback. A solid partnership between the University of Geneva and Hubei University is vital for the success of this Chinese-French eTandem exchange project. Taking into consideration a long-term collaboration, the future work will focus on finding a solution to the technical problems as well as *normalizing* the course (O'Dowd 2010) in Hubei University.

Among others, research questions like how to evaluate the oral exchange, how to foster students' learner autonomy for their future language learning remain to be solved in the long run.

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