

Language Learning via E-mail – Autonomy Through Collaboration

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Abstract: This paper will describe the development of different forms of language learning via e-mail with students on the BA German course at Bolton Institute of H.E, U.K. It will show how three different projects using the medium of e-mail have facilitated autonomous language learning, inter-cultural learning in a European context and ultimately if and how technology has brought students from Germany and the UK closer together in a shrinking world. It will outline the principle features of language learning autonomy, which is understood not to be a matter-of-fact state that learners reach once and for all, but one they have to keep working towards. It is thus the aim of instruction to provide learning scenarios that will foster language learning autonomy. I will put forward the view that collaborative group work via e-mail can provide such a language learning context. The paper will be presented with a view to outlining problems, pitfalls and success stories and to giving advice to other individuals and institutions who are wishing to implement similar projects and also to generate discussion about using the medium of E-mail to facilitate learner autonomy through collaboration.

Keywords: email, project-based learning, situated learning

Introduction

Language teaching in Higher Education in the United Kingdom has changed considerably over the past decades. Conditions in Higher Education have made the introduction of autonomous learning possible. The ever-increasing range of language provision and the growing role of media and information technologies in language teaching seem to have become linked to Autonomous Language Learning. This link has supported the growth of self-access language learning. Computer software for language learning is an example of a technology which claims to promote autonomy simply by offering the possibility of self-study. Research has shown, however, that there is no necessary link between learning a language in a self-access facility and the development of autonomy as there is a danger that students become more dependant on the materials and technology that support this situational autonomy (Benson & Voller 1997).

However Brian Tomlinson has shown how self-access materials can be developed to facilitate autonomous learning. His so-called 'access-self activities' provide the learner with the opportunity to choose when and what to work on and at his/her own pace, be open-ended (variety of acceptable responses), provide opportunities for personal development and learner discoveries. He describes his approach to autonomous language learning as humanistic, clearly going beyond situational autonomy (Tomlinson 1997).

We can not therefore be content simply to promote self-access; we must be concerned with how autonomous language learning works and what its influences are. There are influences that are rooted in the communicative approach to language teaching, which has nowadays become prevalent in many Institutions of Higher Education. These are learner-centredness, authenticity, language use with a purpose, open-endedness of tasks and materials, negotiation, collaborative group work and individuality. These concepts, if developed beyond their current boundaries, are also central to autonomous language learning.

E-mail tandem learning

Learner autonomy is not a permanent state the learner reaches once and for all. Instead we need to provide language learning environments that promote learner autonomy and e-mail tandem learning is, in my view, one of them. Certain aspects of language learning autonomy can be fostered through e-mail tandem learning, mainly those of collaboration and reflectivity.

Tandem learning can be described as a situation where learners come together both as foreign language learners and native speaker experts at the same time. In e-mail tandems the mode of communication is writing, although e-mails often display an informal style and register not dissimilar to oral interaction. However, the asynchronous form of e-mails provide the participants with the opportunity to analyse and look back at their own and their partners' writing, in order not only to support each other's learning (collaborative element of autonomous learning), but to reflect on the learning process, as a vital element in becoming a 'more autonomous' learner.

Tandem learning is characterised by the principles of learner autonomy and reciprocity. Reciprocity is described by Bobst & Krohn as

‘das gleichberechtigte Geben und Nehmen zwischen Partnern’ (Bobst & Krohn 1993).

(the giving and taking in equal shares between partners)

Giving and taking in equal shares is seen to facilitate tandem learning and as such can be described as the collaborative element of autonomous learning. Edith Esch names this criterion ‘shareability’ and describes it as a system for learners to share activities and/or problems and difficulties (Esch 1996). The establishment of social relations in e-mail tandem learning as a means of anchoring ones language learning must also be stressed.

In e-mail tandem learning there are two or more participants whose native language the partner is learning. The aim is to learn from each other through the active negotiation of the communication as partners have to make decisions with regard to the subject matter, the frequency and the rules of the exchange. In e-mail tandem learning the partners have to take responsibility for their own as well as each other’s learning. Individual needs and learning styles have to be brought in line with those of the partners. In evaluating this aspect I looked at the distribution of messages, the use of native language and foreign language and support structures amongst partners.

E-mail tandem learning will not only bring closer the ‘real world’ of the country whose language the participants are studying, but it is truly authentic as participants will act as native speaker models for language and cultural acquisition. Language will be used to communicate a purpose and not simply for language practice.

Using the criteria above I will attempt to show to what degree the participants of the three email projects have moved towards becoming autonomous language learners. As autonomy is not a state one reaches once and for all I will show the opportunities the participants had to become ‘more or less’ autonomous.

The projects

3 different projects involving the medium of e-mail for communication have taken place at Bolton Institute of Higher Education. The first project of e-mail tandems took place in the winter semester of 1997, followed by the second one in the winter of 1998. The third project is a discussion forum that took place in the summer semester of 1999. A further collaborative e-mail project has been planned for the winter term of 1999.

I will first briefly summarise the results of the first project which have been disseminated at Eurocall 98 in detail. The second project will then be described in detail highlighting the differences between the first and the second project. I will finish with the third project, which can be described as a collaborative e-mail discussion list.

The first E-mail tandems

The first e-mail tandem learning project took place in the winter semester of 1997/8 in conjunction with out long-standing Socrates partner the Hochschule für Technik, Wirtschaft und Kultur (HTWK) in Leipzig/Germany. Two co-ordinators monitored the e-mail exchanges throughout the project. Evaluation took place through the use of questionnaires, interviews and the analysis of the actual correspondence, as participants from Bolton were asked to send a copy of their e-mails to the co-ordinator. 18 e-mail tandems started in October 1997. Participants were required to be available for 1 semester, write regularly and use the foreign and native languages in equal amounts. They also had to decide on the subject matter and negotiate the rules of the exchange, especially with regard to correcting each other. Integration of the e-mail tandem learning into the existing curriculum at BIHE was achieved via an assessed oral seminar presentation that gave the students the opportunity to disseminate the work of their tandems. The actual writing during the e-mail exchanges was not assessed.

Out of 18 partnerships 4 never got started. Despite efforts from the co-ordinators these ‘dysfunctional’ partnerships could not be revived. In another two partnerships new partners were allocated after initial problems. The number of messages sent varied between 4 and more than 10 messages during the 10-week period. Uneven distribution of messages between partners was found in the less successful partnerships, while the active partnerships showed an equal distribution of messages and languages used. Not all partnerships were successful in negotiating the rules of the exchanges, finding the right way and amount of

corrections was perceived as most difficult. Most students at least offered some sort of help to their respective partners. Some students clearly felt uncomfortable in their role as native speaker expert. The lack of control of the partnership was especially evident in the case of negotiating the topic or subject matter of the exchange. Responses from participants ranged from wanting to relinquish all responsibility to genuinely shared responsibility.

On the whole though it can be said that the principle of reciprocity was adhered to, only one partnership totally ignored each other's need to be able to benefit from each other as native speaker models and saw the e-mail exchange as a practice exercise in writing in L2.

The students' perception of e-mail tandems was on the whole positive. 3 participants found the tandems very useful, 5 found them useful and 2 found them not useful. They felt that they had gained more confidence in using German away from the normal classroom setting through authentic communication with a native speaker.

Perceived benefits were primarily seen in the area of language learning rather than inter-cultural learning. The problems most frequently mentioned by students were technical problems, no or infrequent messages from their partners and no common interests.

Conclusion drawn for the second round of e-mail tandem learning

It is quite clear from the first round of e-mail tandems that learners need help in becoming more autonomous, as they do not automatically become autonomous simply by being placed in a self-study situation. The following changes were therefore implemented for 1998. The concept of 'double-dating or double tandems' has been introduced not only to reduce the failure rate of partnerships but also to stress that e-mail tandem learning is a collaborative effort in an autonomous learning setting.

As autonomous learners via e-mail who are meant to take charge of their own as well as their partner's learning students have only partly been successful. As reported above 'subject matter autonomy' proved to be a problem especially in terms of selecting an appropriate topic for the seminar presentation. To alleviate this problem for the next set of e-mail tandems participants had to sign up for a specific project, which will provide the framework for the exchange. This project work will then be presented together by all partners during the face-to-face meeting in Leipzig, which has been made possible through funding from the DAAD.

Participants of the first round of e-mail tandems also found it difficult to control the partnership. The negotiation or reflective component of autonomous language learning only functioned well in some of the partnerships. The participants clearly need some 'learner training' (Little 1995) in terms of negotiating the rules of the partnerships and how to critically reflect on each other's learning. An introductory session on learning via e-mail was again conducted at the start of the second e-mail tandem project. The principles of learning in tandem were discussed and students were shown various strategies of communicating with and helping each other so that students could choose appropriate strategies that fitted their needs (theirs and their partners).

The second e-mail tandem learning project

The organisational and evaluation procedures remained the same for the second round of e-mail tandems. Two co-ordinators set up and monitored the scheme throughout the usual 10-week period. Evaluation took place via questionnaires and informal interviews with participants and through the analysis of the e-mail correspondence. Integration into the existing curriculum was achieved by means of a common seminar presentation at the face-to-face meeting in Leipzig.

As described above to facilitate the collaborative element of e-mail tandem learning it was decided to set up so-called 'double-tandems' consisting of 2 students each from Bolton and Leipzig. They were 'paired up' according to the choice of topic made, which was to give them the overall framework of their discussion and final seminar presentation. 24 participants were thus put into 6 'double tandems' of 4 people each. One 'double tandem' never got moving. Other groups had inactive elements, i.e. one partner out of four was not corresponding. Altogether 6/7 students out of 24 must be described as inactive.

It became quickly apparent that the mode of 'double tandems' had advantages and disadvantages. The major advantage identified was that discussion could still take place even if one partner was inactive thus preventing 'dysfunctional' tandems. On the other hand there were organisational problems in that participants found it more difficult to organise the writing to more than one partner. Problems encountered were in the area of whom to correct, when and how to address the different partners.

Monitoring the correspondence via copies of all e-mails was mainly restricted to e-mails from Bolton students, although some of the students from Leipzig also send copies to me.

Principles of shareability, authenticity, reflectivity

I will first of all look at how students perceived the idea of 'double tandems' to facilitate the collaborative aspects of autonomous language learning. The view on this aspect was divided. I have found some evidence in the e-mail corpus sent that some groups recognised the potential of 'exploiting' all partners:

Zum Beispiel H.: Es würde mich sehr freuen, wenn Du mir auch einiges über dein Heimatland und deine Beweggründe, warum du dich entschieden hast in Bolton zu studieren, schreibst.

(For example H.: I would be very interested to find out something about your home and why you decided to study in Bolton)

Genauso interessiert es mich, wie du J., Dein Jahr in Deutschland empfunden hast.

(student K.)

(I am also interested how you J. enjoyed your year abroad)

Some others ask for help or offered help and encouragement to group members thus recognising the dependency on each other in order to make the exchange a success:

Kannst du bitte meine Fehler korrigieren. So ungefähr 5 Fehler jedes Mal korrigieren. Das würde mir sehr helfen. Ich korrigiere einige Sachen für dich.

"As I drived home" sollte "As I drove home" sein, weil 'drive' in der Vergangenheit 'drove' ist." [...]
(student E.)

(Could you please correct my mistakes, about 5 each time. That would help me a lot. I will correct things for you.

"As I drived home" should be "As I drove home", because 'drive' is 'drove' in the past tense.)

It was originally left to the 'double-tandems' to sort out whom, when and how to correct each other. It became quickly apparent that this approach did not work for most groups. Participants did not want to 'publicly correct' any of the partners. Instead they preferred to have one of the partners allocated for corrections, whom they then corrected in separate emails.

Thank you for your long message. I'll address to you only the corrections of your first message. I have rewritten the sentences that needed correcting. (student N.)

Some participants unfortunately then continued writing to just one partner. The wish to have a close and more personal relationship with just one partner was named as one reason for this approach:

It is, in my opinion, better to write to only one person. It is closer. (student questionnaire)

The social anchoring of learning in a personal relationship with a partner was obviously perceived as more important than the potential benefits of enhanced group discussion. One student named as the main benefit of the scheme 'that a friendship had developed' (student questionnaire).

There were also instances in which participants wrote to both their respective partners in Leipzig, but left out their second English partner (group 3). I guess that they were less interested in learning from another native speaker. This seems to be supported by answers in the student questionnaire that stressed, just like the first time, that language learning took precedence over inter-cultural learning.

Although we tried to provide a learning environment conducive to the development of collaborative forms of autonomous learning, individual learning styles, preferences and needs cannot be left out of the equation. The following example illustrates how different attitudes about language learning can affect the communication adversely:

Na gut, ich weiss, dass ich meine größten Schwierigkeiten mit der englischen Grammatik habe. Da kannst du mich auf jeden Fehler hinweisen. Sei ruhig pingelig, ich verkrafte das schon. (student M.)

(Well, I know that I have huge difficulties with the English grammar. Please correct every mistakes, be really fussy, I can take it.)

The student in question applied 'his' approach (correction of all grammatical errors) to the partner's messages and corrected most, if not all, of her mistakes. This is her reaction in the student questionnaire:

I can write a bit more although he made me have an even greater lack of confidence by correcting every word – some words were only machine errors. (student J.)

The incompatibility of the two individual learning styles made collaborative group work almost impossible. Both students did not possess the ability to change their approach in order to accommodate their partner's needs. They have failed to reflect on the learning process and have missed the opportunity afforded to them to become 'more autonomous'.

The authenticity of the e-mail exchanges was shown in the conversations of various groups and most obviously during the face-to-face presentations in Leipzig. The following extract from student R's contribution shows that he has realised the unique potential of communicating with native speakers and fellow British students alike:

I would really appreciate if the Germans could tell me whether or not they feel truly European after 7 years of the Maastricht treaty [...]

S., do you know of any websites dealing with the European Union?

Student R. realised that he can only get this kind of information from native speakers who can provide insights into the topics to be discussed he could not otherwise have obtained in a classroom setting. The general topic areas, in this case 'Europe' were only meant to provide a general framework for the discussion, but not meant to be restrictive in any way. It was up to the various group members to determine in which direction the discussion was heading, depending on individual needs and preferences.

The majority of students thought that working on a specific topic helped the discussion (5), only one student thought it was limiting the discussion. The face-to-face presentations in Leipzig confirm that assessment. The possibility of meeting one's partners face-to-face was clearly motivating for the students. Not all participants met in Leipzig, as the study-trip took place during the inter-semester break and some students were not available. The individual groups met first to get to know each other and to prepare and co-ordinate their presentations, the second session was then dedicated to the actual presentations. Each group member presented their side of the topic, e.g. the status of foreigners in Germany and the U.K. in general and their personal experience with foreigners in Bolton and Leipzig. This was followed up by a general discussion of everybody present. During the initial presentation students used their L2 during the subsequent discussion they could choose L1 or L2. Each mini-discussion took about 30 minutes each and was a truly authentic multi-lingual exchange.

The students' questionnaires revealed that students did appreciate the general learning potentials of e-mail tandem partnerships. 7/8 enjoyed taking part, the most frequent reasons given were 'learning with native speakers' and 'learning without the teacher' thus stressing the principles of authenticity and communication with a purpose rather than practising language for its own sake. The collaborative aspects of 'double tandems' were not perceived so positively by the participants as 6/8 did not find working in groups of 4 helpful. Although I generally found an equal distribution of messages and languages in the e-mails copied to me (principle of reciprocity), the German students said in the students' questionnaire that they preferred to write in L2 to gain maximum benefit from the e-mail tandem learning.

Conclusions drawn from the second round of e-mail tandem learning

It was the aim of the project to provide conditions conducive to develop language learning autonomy. 'Double tandems' were set up with 2 participants from each institution to foster group discussion and facilitate collaborative efforts to control and manage the e-mail tandem learning. As shown in the above examples some participants were successful in conducting a fruitful group discussion via e-mail. The perception of the students though points to the lack of a personal relationship previously experienced in 'single tandems'. This must lead us to the conclusion that the social anchoring of language learning is perceived as paramount to the success of autonomous language learning via e-mail.

The principle of authenticity can be accommodated well in e-mail tandem learning. Communicating with native speakers whose language the partners are learning will bring the 'real world' of the foreign country much closer to the learners. Together with their partners learners can participate in 'real' conversations, practising skills they were able to put into practice during the face-to-face meeting in Leipzig. This is described by Koschmann et al as 'calling upon students to engage in the same activities in their learning that they will be called upon to perform in eventual practice (Koschmann et al 1996).

Reflecting on the learning process in order to control and monitor an asynchronous communication via e-mail still needs further 'learner training'. As shown above taking control of one's own learning needs to be done in relation to the partners' learning taking account of each other's learning styles and preferences. Not all the participants were totally aware that their partners were meant to learn from them as native speaker models. Those students insisting on using L2 only denied their partners opportunities to learn from them. The nature of e-mail should be conducive to reflection on the learning process as participants end up with a database of real life communication they could utilise for their learning. I observed though that most students did not prepare their e-mail messages at home, but replied rather spontaneously to messages received from their partners, treating it very much as an oral conversation rather than a reflective medium. In future tutorials with participants have to make this aspect much clearer. Learner training of this kind does already take place during normal classes in that groups of students analyse a text with a view to deciding what they personally could learn from a specific text. This approach then needs to be transported to future collaborative learner via e-mail.

Discussion forum via e-mail

A discussion forum via e-mail took place during the summer semester of 1999. Participants of the 'double tandems' project were asked to sign up to the electronic discussion forum called 'Deutschland in Europa' (Germany in Europe). For students from Bolton the aim was to provide an opportunity to discuss matters related to the seminar they were doing as part of their BaHons German course with students from Germany. Despite the personal contacts made in Leipzig no German students actually signed up, limiting discussions to 8 students from Bolton. Although the forum was originally envisaged as being conducted in English and German with obvious benefits for all students it was now decided to conduct the discussions in the foreign language only (collaborative group work in writing in L2). As with previous projects the forum was monitored by myself (analysis of e-mail messages and student questionnaire). The work done by students was assessed as part of their coursework mark for the seminar. Students had to submit a portfolio of e-mails at the end of the project. A minimum of 10 messages was required. Students were assessed according to the principles of collaboration and reflectivity rather than purely on language skills.

8 students took part, one dropped out of the seminar and one submitted only one message. The other six students took an active part in the discussion. I was interested to find out if and how students initiated discussions through the introduction of new topics, if and how they reacted to other students, if and how they provided help for the other students, how well they were informed about and involved with the topic (principle of collaboration). In terms of reflectivity I looked at how they composed the messages and if they looked back at their own and other participants previous messages.

After an initially slow start the six students involved had very lively discussions about issues centred around the topic of the seminar. Some topics of the forum were directly related to the subject matter discussed in the seminar. Students thus used the forum to clarify issues or discuss them further. The topic discussed most was the war in Kosovo. But there were also instances where entirely new topics were introduced by the students (comparison of school and exam systems in Europe) or current news related to European matters were discussed (blockade by British truck drivers). Two students performed exceptionally well in the forum. Their contributions show a good understanding and involvement with the topic. They tried not to discuss topics on a purely abstract level, but bring them down to a personal level, i.e. discuss how issues have a personal bearing for them, thereby making learning more relevant for them (e.g. effects of a particular school/examination system on their career prospects). Both students prepared their messages at home, taking great care, not only with sentence construction and use of language, but also with the way they reacted to other students. They frequently tried to involve the other students in the discussion through thanking them for their contributions, by answering questions or directly addressing other members of the forum. For example one student conducted a mini-survey:

Wer denkt, dass ein größeres Europa, ungefähr 21 bis 30 Mitglieder, besser sein wird? Und warum? Welche Vorteile und/oder Nachteile siehst du? (student R.)

(Who thinks that a bigger Europe with 21 to 30 would be better? And why? Which advantages and disadvantages can you see?)

Three students wrote their contributions at home, the other participants wrote spontaneously with their writing displaying all the obvious features of high number of mistakes and colloquial use of language. Although they succeeded in collaborating with the other group members (principle of collaboration) they

did not spend the time to look back at their partners' contributions in more detail in order to analyse and reflect on the learning process (principle of reflectivity).

One student commented that improvement in writing in the foreign language was greatly diminished due to the lack of native speaker participation. Although this is certainly true, students did not realise that their writing in L2 should nevertheless serve as a model, so that learning from each other is made possible. An example of language development within the forum is student E.'s list of 'Austrian equivalents' to German words, she had learnt during a stay in Austria. Some examples of reflecting on their own learning was also evident in the messages from the forum:

Die Aufnahme (kann mir jemand sagen, ob das Wort richtig ist?) [...]

(Student E.) (reflection on language development)

('Aufnahme', can someone tell me if this is the right word?)

Ich denke, daß dieser E-mail Dialog besser geht als die vorherigen E-mails? Was denkt ihr? (student R.)
(reflection on learning via e-mail)

(I think that this e-mail dialogue is progressing much better than the other ones? What do you think?)

Compared with the two previous e-mail tandem learning projects, I personally agree with the view voiced by the above student, that the e-mail discussion forum has been the most successful 'dialogue' between students in being the one that has facilitated collaborative and reflective elements of autonomous language learning most. Students have clearly demonstrated more features of collaboration and reflectivity during the discussion forum than during the e-mail tandems. This might be attributed to the fact that this is the third project in which students (most of them took part in all three projects) are asked to collaborate via the medium of e-mail on a topic directly related to their studies and have by now become more familiar with forms of collaborative group work. I do believe that by making available to learners a variety of learning environments conducive to reflective and collaborative group work they will move towards becoming 'more autonomous language learners'.

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