





# Telecollaboration in Spanish as a Foreign Language in Trinidad<sup>\*1</sup>

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**Objective:** To study how participation in tandem partnership influences the motivation towards the target language and culture and the autonomy of learners of Spanish as a foreign language in Trinidad and Tobago. **Method:** An action research project was conducted with 33 learners of Spanish in Trinidad and 33 learners of English in Colombia, who engaged in a seven week telecollaboration during which they used email and Web 2.0 technologies to communicate. Data were collected through questionnaires and a weekly journal. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out. **Results:** The objectives of the project were all met. **Conclusions:** The project was a rich source of learning for all the participants and stresses the need of a deeper understanding of learners' language learning, an analysis of the sociocultural, psycholinguistic, and linguistic dimensions of intercultural competence in a specific context, and the critical assessment of the role of Web 2.0 technologies in fostering autonomy.

**Keywords:** telecollaboration, Spanish as a foreign language, new technologies, learner autonomy, intercultural competence

**Objetivo:** estudiar cómo la participación en un intercambio tándem influye tanto en la motivación hacia la lengua y la cultura meta, como en la autonomía del proceso de aprendizaje de estudiantes de español como lengua extranjera en Trinidad y Tobago. **Método:** se llevó a cabo un proyecto de investigación-acción con 33 estudiantes de español de Trinidad y 33 estudiantes de inglés colombianos, quienes participaron en un intercambio lingüístico de telecolaboración durante 7 semanas a través del correo electrónico y plataformas de comunicación de Web 2.0. Los datos fueron recogidos mediante encuestas y un diario semanal. Se hicieron análisis cualitativos y cuantitativos de dichos datos. **Resultados:** se cumplieron todos los objetivos. **Conclusiones:** el proyecto resultó ser una rica fuente de aprendizaje para los participantes y pone de manifiesto la necesidad de alcanzar una comprensión más profunda del proceso de aprendizaje de un idioma, así como la de analizar las dimensiones socioculturales, psicolingüísticas y lingüísticas de la competencia intercultural en contextos específicos, y la evaluación crítica del papel que desempeña la tecnología de la Web 2.0 en la promoción del aprendizaje autónomo.

**Palabras clave:** telecolaboración, español como lengua extranjera, nuevas tecnologías, autonomía del aprendizaje, competencia intercultural

**Objectif:** Étudier l'impact d'un échange linguistique e-tandem sur la motivation aussi bien envers la langue et la culture cible qu'envers l'autonomie au cours du processus d'apprentissage d'étudiants

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- 1 The paper derives from a research project done at the Centre for Language Learning, University of the West Indies St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad, involving 33 learners of Spanish as a foreign language.

d'espagnol langue étrangère à Trinité-et-Tobago. **Méthode:** Nous avons réalisé un projet de recherche-action avec 33 apprenants d'espagnol langue étrangère à Trinité et 33 étudiants en anglais langue étrangère colombiens, qui ont participé à un échange linguistique e-tandem pendant 7 semaines par le biais du courrier électronique, ainsi que de plates-formes de communication 2.0. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'enquêtes et d'un journal hebdomadaire. Nous avons ensuite procédé à une analyse qualitative et quantitative des données. **Résultats:** Nous avons atteint tous les objectifs. **Conclusions:** Le projet a constitué une source d'apprentissage particulièrement riche pour les participants, et il souligne la nécessité de parvenir à une compréhension plus approfondie du processus d'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère, la nécessité d'analyser les dimensions socioculturelles, psycholinguistiques et linguistiques de la compétence interculturelle dans des contextes spécifiques, et la nécessité d'évaluer de façon critique le rôle de la technologie Web 2.0 dans la promotion de l'apprentissage autonome.

**Mots-clés:** télécollaboration, apprentissage de l'Espagnol Langue Etrangère (ELE), nouvelles technologies, autonomie de l'apprentissage, compétence interculturelle

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Adult learners usually have clear goals for their language learning (Parker, 2004)—vocational, business, leisure, academic—yet may be constrained from maximizing learning opportunities because of preconceived ideas about language learning; a lack of confidence due to previous experience; or unreasonable expectations about the length of time necessary to achieve fluency in a foreign language. Guarneri and Usastegui (2000) note that in programmes for non-specialist learners, the learners' diversity, arising out of differing academic backgrounds, previous learning experiences, motivations, linguistic needs, and aspirations presents a particular challenge to devising appropriate language curricula. For teachers in such settings, engaging learners, responding to their age and maturity on the one hand and their novice understanding of language learning on the other represents a formidable challenge. Teachers must manage adult learners' independence and their potential lack of autonomy in the face of new learning tasks. Learners must reconcile their own learning goals and needs as well as their peers'. The learning programme must be responsive to all these issues, while promoting communicative and intercultural competence.

Teaching and learning Spanish at the Centre for Language Learning, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, present many of the challenges referred to above. Our target audience consists of non-specialist students enrolled in language courses as an extra-curricular option, university staff, and adult members of the community. Resource constraints prevent us from establishing

separate streams for leisure, versus academic or vocational needs. Thus, one of our programmes' objectives is to promote learner autonomy, thereby encouraging learners to personalise their learning, particularly their out-of-class learning. The literature on learner autonomy also links autonomy and motivation (Dickinson, 1995; Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002; Ushioda, 1996, 2000). Our programme seeks to increase motivation for and engagement with the target language (L2) and culture (C2), with learner autonomy serving as scaffolding.

An action research project conducted in Semester 2 2008/09, sought to draw on the following factors—adult learners; Spanish as a foreign language; autonomy; communicative and intercultural competence—to investigate learning in our Spanish programme, boost motivation and encourage out-of-class learning. Learners were encouraged to use the Internet to conduct research, to consult resources, and so on. They were also expected to use Web 2.0 applications to develop an experiential understanding of the social and collaborative dimensions of new technologies and their application to language learning. To facilitate these objectives, the research project required learners to participate in a tandem partnership with learners of English from Colombia.

This paper presents some of the results of the project. It reveals how the Trinidadian learners' motivation and language learning autonomy were influenced by their participation in the partnership. The partnership was facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies so another finding of the study was the role of new technologies in promoting intercultural competence.

One of the paper's authors, a native of Colombia, was able to gain us access to an institution interested in developing links with our university and language centre. The project with Universidad EAN was a prelude to our formal collaboration. That collaboration would be the third exchange agreement between our faculty and partner institutions in Colombia. Colombians also work as instructors, tutors, and foreign language assistants in the Centre's programmes and in the Spanish degree programme offered in a sister department. The positive intramural attitude to Colombians unfortunately did not reflect societal attitudes to Colombia/Colombians. An Internet search for Colombia/Colombians in the 2008 archives of a popular daily paper revealed 81 references. Some of these—for example,

articles reporting a gold find; participation by a champion Colombian cyclist in a local event; or the singer, Shakira's appearance locally—were positive. However, a large majority of the reports—and consequently the most frequent association in most persons' minds—concerned negative events, linked to drug trafficking and organized crime, including prostitution. Another objective of the tandem partnership therefore was to have learners reassess negative stereotyping about Colombia/Colombians.

## **2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.1 The Language Culture Nexus**

The importance of culture to L2 learning and teaching is well documented (Byram & Morgan, 1994; Hinkel, 1999; McBride & Seago, 2000; Seelye, 1984). However, Seago (2000) reminds us of the changing conceptualizations of language and culture and their impact on the nexus between language and culture. Kelly (2000) notes that historically language was simply the conduit to the study of philology, literature, and intellectual history. In contrast, recent pedagogical approaches consider both language and culture, objects of study. In the case of culture, intercultural competence has become a primary object of study.

A focus on intercultural competence moves us beyond thinking of culture as content, easily transmissible by teachers during culture lessons. Where the goal is intercultural competence, the instructional focus is on knowledge and understanding, and the development of skills for engagement with the L2 and C2 and on developing a critical stance to the L1 and C1. A focus on intercultural competence also problematises earlier approaches that advocated a kind of subtractive “biculturalism” whereby, adoption of or assimilation into an idealised C2 was a desirable goal of foreign language learning. For the proponents of intercultural competence, learners function as mediators between the two cultures. According to Coleman (2001, p. 137), “Acquiring intercultural competence is both a cognitive and affective process, a long-term process during which the student must understand the relativity of all beliefs, values and behaviours—including his or her own.” But classroom-based acquisition is seldom thought to provide sufficient opportunities to fully develop intercultural competence, although researchers have theorised how a curriculum might do

this (Byram, 1997). It is often through study abroad programmes that students gain the opportunity for a deeper engagement with the C2 (Coleman, 1995; Freed, 1995; Parker & Rouxville, 1995).

Earlier study abroad research (Carroll, 1967; Liskin-Gasparro, 1998) tended to focus on gains in linguistic proficiency — now, the research focus has widened to include more qualitative studies for a holistic understanding of students' experiences. Many of these studies (Carter, 2006a; Freed, 1995) have substantiated earlier findings on the difficulty of cross-cultural encounters when students move from the sheltered immersion of the classroom to L2 and C2 immersion.

Recent research has thus led to a more nuanced view of the benefits of study abroad to individual learners. Acknowledging the mixed nature of the experience, educators posit that embedding an intercultural approach in language curricula can prepare study abroad students for immersion and develop awareness in those unable to afford study abroad (Byram, 1997). Corbett (2003, p. 2) underscores the importance of intercultural approaches, which train “learners to be ‘diplomats’, able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding.” Given the negative stereotyping of Colombia/Colombians, the possibility of having learners act as “diplomats” or mediators between the C2 and their C1 seemed a desirable learning outcome for this action research project.

## **2.2 Telecollaboration in Language Learning**

The ubiquity of the Internet and its applications has allowed the stay-at-home student to have a deeper engagement in the L2 through tandem partnerships—in these partnerships, the target language of one partner is the native language of the other— facilitated by technology.

As early as 1997, Marsh (1997) was extolling the benefits of computer-mediated conferencing in helping learners work together, independently of the tutor. Although Marsh researched students learning in a single site, it was nonetheless clear that by using e-mail for communication during a period of teacher absence, students discovered their own agency and the value of peer support. It is the reciprocity and autonomy that these partnerships seem to engender,

that researchers and educators (Kötter, 2003; Ushioda, 2000; Walker, 2000) find particularly attractive. A point of note is that here, as in other contexts where autonomy is promoted, teacher guidance and scaffolding is a necessary condition of autonomy (Blake, 2008; McBride, 2009). Notwithstanding this, telecollaborative partnerships, as other forms of network-based learning, with their focus on mutual support and reciprocity are likely to be sites of growing autonomy for students (Little, 1996; Ushioda, 2000; Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

While earlier studies (Brammerts, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Kern, 1996; Kinginger, 1998; Kinginger, Gourvès-Hayward, & Simpson, 1999) on telecollaboration, which Belz (2002, p. 61) defines as “the application of global communication networks in foreign language education... embedded in different sociocultural contexts and institutional settings”, presented mainly descriptive reports of projects with a focus on the partners’ linguistic competence, more recent studies have also included empirical investigations on intercultural competence in telecollaborative partnerships. Two recent studies are especially pertinent to our study.

O’Dowd (2003) conducted a longitudinal study on an e-mail exchange between Spanish and English second year university students. In this yearlong exchange, students engaged in a variety of tasks, both real world and academic. Through this ethnographic study, which he also deemed action research, O’Dowd identified links between key characteristics of e-mail exchanges and the learners’ developing intercultural competence.

A second study conducted by Belz (2003) adopted a different research stance, as a counterpoint to “discussions of intercultural competence... primarily in alinguistic terms” (p. 69). Using a framework of appraisal theory, Belz aimed to “flesh out the notion of IC in the special case of telecollaboration through close attention to its encoding and expression in the medium of electronic discourse” (p. 69). Belz looked at a failed tandem partnership between two German second-year TESL students and an American second-year computer science student whose L2 was German. Although the students shared many goals, their many dissimilarities —specialist as opposed to non-specialist linguists; access to and familiarity with technology; different learning objectives—made for a toxic cocktail when mixed with the challenge of developing a telecollaborative partnership through the medium of e-mail. What Belz’s



fine-grained linguistic analysis shows is that in deploying the conversational and syntactic features of their respective L1s (even when writing in their L2), and in the absence of non-linguistic cues to modulate what they wrote, the students eventually found themselves in a breakdown of communication. Although the root cause was located in their mutual failure to comprehend the syntactic and pragmatic features of the L2, the tandem partners attributed their difficulties to characteristics inherent to the C2. Individual actions were no longer viewed as personal ways of doing or being, but interpreted as exemplifying ways of doing and being of the C2. The result was that the breakdowns reinforced and did not destabilize the stereotypes they held of each other's culture.

### 2.3 Language Learning Autonomy

The third body of research underpinning this project was on language learning autonomy (Benson 1996, 2001; Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999; Dam, 1995; Holec, 1981; Holec & Huttunen, 1997). A fundamental principle of autonomy is that learners take responsibility for their learning. Research into autonomy also serves to dispel two common misperceptions about autonomy. The first concerns the frequently held belief that autonomy and independence mean isolation. Researchers reject a notion of autonomy as synonymous with individualism and underscore the social dimension of autonomy (Dam, 1995), the importance of collaboration in autonomy (Carter, 2006b), the notion of shareability (Esch, 1996), and interdependence (Boud, 1988) as a feature of autonomy. A second popular misconception revolves around autonomy as product rather than process. Yet, Holec's (1981) conceptualisation of autonomy as deconditioning and acquiring suggests that autonomy is not a product to be transmitted from teacher to student. Promoting autonomy requires a gradualist approach in which teachers help students discard attitudes and behaviours that are not conducive to autonomy, before helping them to acquire a new set of attitudes and behaviours. Cornwall (1988), Cotterall (1995), Ehrman (1988), Knapper (1988), and Little (1996) are among those who stress the importance of scaffolding, of teachers meeting learners' affective and motivational needs as part of the psychological training for autonomy.

In short, researchers who theorise learner autonomy contend that a model of autonomy as product, with teachers operating in a transmission mode and learners as passive recipients, is deeply flawed. They argue that learners need

to be made aware of their capacity to assume responsibility and helped to do so, in ways both explicit (learner training, strategy training, and so on) and implicit (in activities which allow them to discover how autonomy could increase their engagement in their learning, as was the case in this study).

## **2.4 Research Questions**

This action research project sought to answer three research questions:

1. What was the influence of the tandem project on students' motivation towards the target language?
2. At the end of the project did students feel more confident about their ability to communicate in the target language?
3. At the end of the project did students feel more confident about their ability to function as autonomous learners?

For the purpose of this paper, only questions one and three will be addressed, and only in relation to the Trinidad-based participants.

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.1 Participants**

A total of 33 learners participated in the tandem partnership. Twenty-one of the learners were female. Twelve of them were male. As is in the norm in our programmes, the group was composed of both university students and adult learners. The students in the cohort were generally between 21 and 29 years old. They constituted 50% of the group. A small number of students were between 18 and 20 years old. The oldest adult was 59. In terms of their gender, age, and background, the participants were typical of the learners in our Spanish programme.

The Spanish programme is a six-semester programme consisting of approximately 50 contact hours per semester. Only learners with a minimum of 50 hours of prior study were invited to participate in the project. Thirteen of the learners were at this stage. Of the remainder, nine participants had approximately 150 hours of Spanish, three approximately 200 hours, and eight approximately 250 hours.

### 3.2 Instruments

Two of the three questionnaires that were distributed will be discussed. Questionnaire 1, an 18-item questionnaire (see Appendix) distributed just prior to the beginning of the tandem partnership, sought to gather the learners' biodata and other preliminary information according to four broad categories: I. General questions; II. Spanish skills and motivation; III. Cultural knowledge about Colombia; and IV. Expectations for the project. These data were useful in establishing the group profile.

Questionnaire 3, distributed in the seventh and final week, relied on a majority of questions using a 5-point Likert scale to gain feedback on the project. Questions 1-9 and 12 sought to capture data on the learners' engagement with the L2 and on their motivation towards the L2 and C2 as a result of participating in the project. The penultimate and last questions captured the learners' use of technology and their attitude to using technology during the project.

The third instrument to be discussed here is the weekly journal where participants wrote a minimum of 100 words in their L1 or L2.

### 3.3 Data Collection Procedures

In this action research project (see Wallace, 1998 for a definition of action research; and Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000 on the utility of action research in exploring network-based learning), data collection began in March 2009. The questionnaires were administered and collected in class ensuring a 100% completion rate. The teacher/researcher in charge of the tandem project had matched participants, based on their proficiency, with Colombian partners. Generally speaking, the Colombians were more proficient than the Trinidadians in their L2. The Trinidadian learners were asked to compose an initial e-mail in English, with a few questions in Spanish. Although they were encouraged to use the L2, they were not compelled to do so. In addition to the exchange of e-mails, some tandem partners used Skype, Facebook, and Messenger.

Given the varying levels of student proficiency no language tasks were assigned. Holec (1979) suggests that in contexts where language teachers are trying to promote autonomy, the teaching objectives should centre both on helping learners acquire linguistic and communicative ability and on learning to learn. Taking into

account the parameters of our study, making learning to learn the primary objective in the promotion of autonomy for this project seemed the better strategic choice.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The project generated a large amount of qualitative data and some that could be analysed quantitatively. The quantitative data elicited by the 5-point Likert were rendered numerically and as graphs. The qualitative data analysis relied on research methodologies such as those described in Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 1994; and Davis, 1995. They were analysed manually. All four authors participated in the data analysis using content analysis and successive readings to discern major themes in keeping with the research questions. Key words or phrases reflecting intercultural competence or learner autonomy were grouped together.

One of the paper's authors was the Colombian-born teacher who directed the tandem project. The second L2 teacher was the coordinator of the Spanish programme. The two L1 authors were involved in the Centre's English as a Foreign Language programme. The participation of multiple researchers and the adoption of several instruments made for a sound qualitative study.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Questionnaire 1**

#### ***a. General questions***

The data revealed that 21 of the 33 respondents had never lived outside the country of their birth. Of the 12 respondents who had, two were American citizens studying at the university. Nine of the Trinidad-born respondents had lived in countries ranging from England to Brazil, for periods up to five years. One Trinidadian respondent specified neither the location, nor the length of her residence abroad.

Participation in the project was contingent upon having access to, or at the minimum being familiar with e-mail. Not surprisingly, there was a generation gap in the use of Facebook, Messenger, and Skype which was first revealed in

this questionnaire and borne out in the journals, with the “digital natives” using a variety of Web 2.0 tools, unlike the “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001) who mainly used e-mail. Of the five respondents who did not use Facebook or Skype, only one was in her 20s. The others were between 49 and 53 years old.

### ***b. Spanish skills and motivation***

Sixteen of the respondents admitted that they did not seek out opportunities to use Spanish with native speakers. One respondent gave no response. Of the 16 respondents who stated that they sought L2 encounters, some of these encounters occurred virtually through Web 2.0 technologies. Some respondents interacted with L2 speakers in their community, at church, through their hobbies, even within the extended family where older relatives were L2 speakers; or in professional contexts. Others had interacted with L2 speakers on visits to L2 countries. One respondent had lived in a Cuban community in Miami. Yet, all expressed a willingness to engage with L2 speakers through the project.

Question 12 sought to follow up on information elicited in question five. Respondents were asked to quantify the numbers of hours spent studying Spanish each week. Learners are advised to spend as many hours on out-of-class learning as they do in class. Sixteen learners appeared to be following this advice, spending between eight and ten hours studying, including the four class hours. However, more than 50% of the respondents were averaging just one hour per week outside of class.

### ***c. Cultural knowledge***

A number of respondents claimed to know nothing, or very little about Colombia. A few named prominent Colombians such as Shakira and President Uribe Vélez. A few others cited Colombian products such as coffee, flowers, and precious stones. But the largest number of respondents, 10 out of 33 only knew of Colombia in connection with the drug trade. When respondents were asked what they would like to know about Colombia, one respondent answered, “positive aspects of the country and its people”, this is after saying that what she knew of Colombia was a “negative image, e.g. drugs, prostitution and poverty as portrayed by the media...” Despite the prevailing stereotypes, there was a clear

desire to know more. One respondent had two very specific concerns, “Are they welcoming to foreigners? Is it a good place to participate in a language immersion programme?” as opposed to the more general questions posed by the majority.

#### ***d. Expectations***

The respondents were almost unanimous in endorsing the learning objectives of the project, save the last objective “to translate in professional contexts”, which was endorsed by only 13 respondents. One respondent did not select any objective, but added her own, “to learn vocabulary”.

#### ***e. Discussion***

Questionnaire 1 revealed that with few exceptions, the learners had not lived abroad and those that had, had generally lived in L1 countries. Despite their lack of exposure to non-L1 societies and the many stereotypes about the C2, the fact that most learners were open to knowing more about Colombia, seemed promising for the promotion of intercultural competence. Although roughly half of the respondents sought contact with L2 speakers, half made no attempt to engage with L2 speakers, even though Trinidad’s geographical location gives it easy access to the L2 and C2, through satellite television and radio transmission, and the presence of many L2 speakers working, studying, and living here. Finally, approximately half of the respondents said they devoted little time to out-of-class learning. This means that 50% spent the recommended time or more on out-of-class learning. This was a welcome sign as learners’ reactions to out-of-class learning generally reveal their willingness to exercise autonomy.

### **4.2 Journals**

The learners were given a few guidelines about possible topics to discuss in their weekly entries. This semi-structured approach was intended to ease the sense of apprehension traditionally felt by learners in journal projects, while giving them freedom to include matters of significance. The extracts included here demonstrate the learners’ interest in and motivation towards the C2 and their growing intercultural competence (Extracts 1-8); and examples of learners taking responsibility for their own learning and seeking opportunities for L2 exposure (Extracts 9-16). Extracts 1 to 8 demonstrate convincingly how learners developed

knowledge and understanding of the target language. In doing so, the stereotypical images of Colombia were replaced by information from L2 informants. Learners found out about different aspects of Colombian culture, for example, food, music and religions celebrations. The new information challenged their assumptions, for example that rock music was popular. Sometimes the discovery was as simple as the fact that the warm and friendly tandem partner might be more representative of Colombian culture than the media stereotypes.

The journals also underscored what emerged in questionnaire 3 about the learners' growing autonomy. There were many examples of learners demonstrating self-direction. Learners gave many accounts of seeking out information on there own or using their tandem partners or the Internet to fill their knowledge gaps.

### *a. Intercultural competence*

1. I was surprised to learn that Angelica likes rock music, I did not think that type of music was popular in Colombia. (WG, week 6)
2. I feel very motivated. We've already become friends on Facebook and she's even delved some into her personal life already, so I feel we will become good friends and hopefully our exchange will continue after the program. Just the way she writes her e-mails makes her seem very friendly and outgoing. (EJ, week 1)
3. We've been talking a little about foods and exchanged recipes, so I could practice the food vocab.... She has been writing to me about some of the foods. She said each of the 32 states has a state food or dance or something. Her favorite food is something called *ajiaco* and she sent me a recipe for it along with other Colombian dishes. She also talked a bit about the different dances, such as *san pedro*. And the music, such as *sanjuanero*, *cumbia*, *mapalé*. (EJ, week 2)
4. I have learnt that Colombia has different climates and it is not what is really publicized, that is being a drug country. As a matter of fact it has some similarities to that of Trinidad and Tobago, i.e. beautiful landscape, strong heritage, the people are friendly. (PM, week 3)
5. One of the things I learned about Colombian culture is that there is a particular genre of music known as "vallenato" which is common to the country. Also I was able to listen to the music via a web link my penpal sent me. (JO, week 1)

6. I asked her if she was on Facebook and if we could link there. So we became Facebook friends. This I found was a good platform to gain insight as to what interested Latin American youth.... We were able to discuss our respective country's fears with respect to the global economic crisis. (PJ, week 7)
7. The linguistic tandem project is particularly easy and enjoyable it creates an open forum for friendly communication. It is not unpleasant at all... Yes, I feel motivated because he (Juan Sebastian) seems encouraging, welcoming and warm so I know I would learn a lot about the Colombian culture. (TG, week 1)
8. This week we talked about Easter and how it's celebrated in each other's countries. I learned that there are many religious activities during Easter time like walks, masses and representations of the seasons (sic) of the cross. I also learnt that in Colombia there are many Christians, Evangelists (sic) and a few Muslims and Jews. (SH, week 4)

#### ***b. Growth of autonomy***

9. Even though I had some challenges with some of the grammar in expressing myself and speaking about certain things, I think it was worth it as it has assisted me in building my confidence somewhat. I feel I can go out and really make a concerted effort in so far as my oral communication will take me. I really want to be able to speak with more confidence and, as a result I would be looking at taking a trip to Panama or Costa Rica or both, just to be able to speak in that type of environment. (PM, week 7)
10. The good thing is that I am trying to utilize Spanish in the majority of my social communication – facebook, msn, hotmail, etc. So, I will continue to use these media for communication in Spanish with my penpal, and other friends. (AG, week 4)
11. Case in point, recently I was looking up information on the summit and found some videos in Spanish which I was able to partially understand and get information from. I have also started looking up certain things through the Spanish version of Wikipedia. (AR, week 5)
12. "... sometimes I will look up words that I need. (i.e. last week = *pasada semana*, graduated = *graduado*). Really, just practicing how to write is helping me learn Spanish. She mentioned that she liked *Merengue* music and I went to YouTube to listen to some. I also gave her a Soca song to listen to (Destra's Bacchanal). (EJ, week 1)



13. We have organized a table with two columns: One column we each type in what the other wrote and the other column we type any corrections to the sentences. I find this to be very interesting and informative, because we also include how phrases are used in each other's dialect. (MS, week 3)
14. We continue to refine our system of correcting errors and it is quite remarkable to feel the spirit of cooperation and communication over such a long distance with a person you have never met in real life. (WG, week 6)
15. If there wasn't (sic) anything I did not understand I used either context clues or the dictionary get the meaning of what was said. I was able to use one or two of the structures she used when responding. (PJ, week 7)
16. I have been practicing the conjugation of Spanish verbs (present and past tenses) using an interactive programme via the internet. It is helping me very much. (MLSD, week 6)

Not all the tandem partnerships were successful. Difficulties arose out of different learning styles, or differences in age, or interests:

- ...I found the e-mail conversations were not in-depth enough to supply enough information about the penpal or her country. I think the reason is because people have such hectic schedules and that makes correspondence too hurried. (JM-K, week 7)
- My only concern (which I did not intimate to my penpal) was that she is considerably younger than I am. I would have preferred someone a little older. She turned nineteen during our correspondence. I could be her mother. (PJ, week 7)
- I initially thought that my partner would have been around my age, and sharing similar attributes as me —working and studying English. I guess I may have wanted this so that we would have more things in common, and the communication would flow smoothly, and who knows what else!!!!:-):-) with that said, I embraced the opportunity with open arms, and while the age difference may be significant, and we may not have too many things in common, we were able to have some useful conversations, and I hope we will continue to be friends. (AR, week7).

### *c. Discussion*

Many researchers (Bailey, 1983; Bailey & Oschner, 1983; Seliger & Shohamy, 1989) acknowledge the limitations of learners' self-reports. Yet, self-reports are

critical in understanding learners as complex cognitive, sentient, social beings. The journal entries allowed participants to engage in deeper reflection than was possible in the questionnaires. The journals also gave a longitudinal dimension to the study. They were particularly instructive in showing how learners revised their initial opinions. The growth of their confidence, motivation, and autonomy from beginning to end of the project, could also be more easily tracked through the process of journal keeping.

### 4.3 Questionnaire 3

Learners agreed (n=17) or strongly agreed (n=11) that they felt more motivated to continue learning Spanish after the project. Overwhelmingly (24 agreed and two strongly agreed), they felt that their knowledge of the C2 had improved. Five learners strongly agreed that they had learned something from the project. Twenty-one learners agreed that they had learned something new from the project.

In general, the project helped the learners to appreciate the benefit of the tandem partnership. It was the rare learner who did not turn to the L2 speakers for help with questions pertaining to aspects of the language. Five learners disagreed and two learners strongly disagreed that they sought help from their partners. One learner gave no response to this question. Similarly, the tandem partner proved to be a great resource in cultural matters. Indeed, twenty learners agreed and four strongly agreed based on the answers provided.

Of interest also were the learners' responses to questions that concerned their technology preferences. E-mail was preferred 1) by those who appreciated the asynchronous medium because of their schedules, time differences, or learning style; 2) in partnerships where it was the only medium to which one of the partners had access or was familiar with; 3) by persons who saw the real time demands of Skype and Messenger as more challenging linguistically, e.g.

- E-mail was easy as I could reference words via (a) dictionary. MSN was more challenging as it was real time so I had to ask my partner when I didn't understand something. (AG)
- E-mail because I could take time to make everything correct. We only used FB to look at each other's pictures. But I sometimes tried to read her wall which was comfortable when I understood it. (EJ)

- E-mail because it was a little slower than Messenger or Skype so I could think my responses through. (AR)

It was precisely the interactivity of Skype and Messenger that others preferred:

- Facebook because when she was online it provided instant feedback and helped to clarify questions. Moreover active conversations are better. (DU)
- Skype. You can get used to the rate of speed of the speech. (MC)
- Messenger/chat. I was able to communicate in real time with him. We were able to express feelings/what we were doing at that particular time. (SH)

As noted earlier, given the generational preferences, a future project would need to consider which Web 2.0 applications might be more effective.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Even a short-term telecollaborative project such as this one, with its limitations in terms of asymmetry in the partners' proficiency; technological competence and differences in learning styles, age, and interests, was a rich source of learning for all the participants. The project objectives—increase in motivation for out-of-class learning, increase in motivation towards L2 and C2, growth in intercultural competence, growth in learner autonomy, deeper understanding of the possibilities of Web 2.0 in language learning were all met.

Learners who considered their participation to have been less successful were realistic about the source of breakdowns, for example, their or their partner's lack of engagement, or technology constraints. No one attributed their lack of success to intercultural factors, as for example, the participant who attributed her partner's lack of engagement to the pace of modern society as opposed to a cultural artefact of Colombian society. The learners' change in attitude to Colombia is thus perhaps the project's major accomplishment. At the end of the project, it was clear that there was heightened motivation towards the target language and culture. The new attitudes are also significant in broader educational terms, given Colombia's status as the second largest Spanish-speaking population in the world and the importance of inter-university collaboration in a globalised higher education sector.

For the teachers/researchers involved in the project, it was instructive in showing us what to do and what *not* to do going forward. In a further study both language and learning tasks would be included. While this study gave a broad-based picture of the issues, a more fine-grained study would allow a deeper exploration of these and a closer look at individuals' relationships to intercultural competence, autonomy, and technology. Going forward, there will be the need to weigh the appropriateness of a project like this for all learners and decide whether, given our belief that it adds value to their learning, it should become mandatory.

In conclusion, the project has challenged our understanding of what it means to learn a foreign language when one is a non-specialist learner participating in a telecollaborative exchange. We have been able to draw upon the growing collection of best practices and research in the field. However, as this project has made clear, the need to deepen our understanding of our learners' language learning; to analyse the sociocultural, psycholinguistic, and linguistic dimensions of intercultural competence in our context; and to critically assess the role of Web 2.0 technologies in fostering autonomy, suggests that we have only taken a few steps into what promises to be an extensive research agenda.

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## APPENDIX

### FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TANDEM QUESTIONNAIRE 1

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of birth: \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, 19\_\_.  
D M Y

Tick ✓ where appropriate. (You may have to tick more than one box):

#### I. General questions:

1. Gender: Male ☐ female ☐

2. Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Have you ever lived abroad? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, how long and where? \_\_\_\_\_

4. How long have you been studying Spanish? \_\_\_\_\_

Where? \_\_\_\_\_

5. How often do you read/watch/listen to Spanish?

Daily ☐ weekly ☐ monthly ☐ less than once a month ☐.

6. Which foreign languages do you speak?

Spanish ☐ French ☐ Italian ☐ German ☐ Arabic ☐ Other ☐

Please specify \_\_\_\_\_ Where did you learn it? \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you use Facebook and Skype? \_\_\_\_\_



## II. Spanish Skills and Motivation

8. From 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest possible score, could you grade how confident you feel doing the following tasks?
- a. Reading in Spanish \_\_\_\_ b. Talking in Spanish \_\_\_\_
- c. Writing in Spanish \_\_\_\_ b. Understanding Spanish \_\_\_\_
9. Have you sought out opportunities to use Spanish with native speakers? Give an example. Yes ☐ No ☐ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Would you like to share experiences with Hispanic people?
- Absolutely ☐ Maybe ☐ No ☐
11. Why are you studying Spanish? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. How many hours a week do you dedicate to studying Spanish? (Include your class hours). \_\_\_\_\_

## III. Cultural Knowledge:

13. What do you know about Colombia? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
14. What would you like to know about Colombia? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## IV. Expectations:

15. What do you expect to gain from the project?
- To improve your Spanish ☐ To meet friends ☐

To have fun ☐

To learn about another culture ☐

Other ☐ (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

16. Your learning objectives with the project are:

To better understand written texts ☐

To better understand the spoken language ☐

To be able to speak better ☐

To be able to write better ☐

To translate in professional contexts ☐

Other ☐ (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

17. Would you agree to write a journal in English at least twice a week talking about your experience learning Spanish through the e-mail exchange? Yes ☐ No ☐

18. Please write below your e-mail address and your phone number if you are interested in being part of the study:

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TANDEM JOURNAL PROJECT

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Write your weekly entry to the journal in English talking about your experience (minimum 100 words). You can include:

- What things in the linguistic tandem do you find difficult/easy/enjoyable/unpleasant? Why?
- Do you think you have improved? Do you think you are learning? Give the reasons whether your answer is yes or no.

- After corresponding with your penpal, do you feel motivated to continue with the exchange?
- What new things have you learned from the Spanish language? Have you used any of them (from this or any other week)?
- What new things have you learned about Colombian culture?
- Have you ever looked for more information about something that you learned through your penpal?
- What problems did you encounter during the exercise? What questions occurred to you?

Feel free to include any other relevant details.

### FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TANDEM QUESTIONNAIRE 3

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of birth: \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, 19\_\_  
D M Y

Tick ✓ where appropriate:

1. You feel more motivated to continue learning Spanish after this project.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

2. You feel more confident about your ability to communicate in Spanish than before.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

3. This project has helped you learn Spanish from other sources apart from your teacher and your textbook.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

4. If you had language questions you asked your partner.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

5. If you had language questions you looked for more information by yourself.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

6. If you were curious about cultural things you asked your partner.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

7. If you were curious about cultural things you looked for more information by yourself.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

8. Your knowledge of Spanish culture has improved.

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

9. You learned something new with this project

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

10. Explain your answer to number 9.

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11. Explain the factors that helped you to learn and the ones which made learning difficult.

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12. In general this project has fulfilled your expectations

<b>1</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>2</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>3</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>4</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>5</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	disagree	neither (dis)agree	agree	strongly agree

13. Which one of the following did you use? You may tick several.

- a. Skype ☐                                      b. E-mail ☐
- c. Messenger/chat ☐                                      d. Facebook ☐

d. Which medium did you feel more comfortable using when working with your penpal? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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On behalf of the Centre for Language Learning thank you so much for your cooperation.

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