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LANGUAGE LEARNING IN TANDEM VIA SKYPE

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Abstract

Skype is the largest of the new companies offering Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). It allows users to call anyone in the world for free, while offering a precious opportunity to practice foreign languages with native speakers on the Internet. ‘Mixer’ is an educational site created to help students and teachers find partners for language exchanges. Through this site, for example, native Italian speakers studying English can find English speaking students worldwide studying Italian with whom a Skype tandem exchange can take place. The next frontier is Skype Casting: by merging Skype and Podcasting it is possible to run personal mini-radio stations, which can be accessed by any Skype user. New technologies continue to offer challenging solutions to language learning.

Introduction

Language teachers have always embraced the world of opportunities offered through new technologies. The Internet continues to provide challenging and intriguing possibilities for language learning. Nowadays many tools, such as e-mail, mailing lists, discussion forums and chat are familiar to many language teachers. Although recent innovations such as blogs, wikis, and VoIP may be less familiar, they are powerful media for online language learning.

In the new millennium the first-generation of synchronous tools have not disappeared from the Internet landscape. E-mail continues to be a useful tool for tandem learning and classroom exchanges and many teachers are using forums more and more as the principal tools for written communication and are starting to use wikis for collaborative projects. They have found that students can benefit from the extra writing done in these interactive and collaborative environments to communicate meaningfully in real contexts. It is the encouragement of peer-to-peer networking, so central to a constructivist learning approach, which has made forums and wikis the central ‘meeting point’ of web courses in many disciplines.

Other language teachers have embraced the use of synchronous tools, such as chat, for its effective communicative power as the speed of chat exchanges forces concise and spontaneous messages among language learners located in different parts of the world. Although students make frequent use of instant messaging (MSN Messenger, AOL), it is not used officially for educational purposes. However, quick and informal discussions with native speakers have revealed themselves a useful aid to communication. The attractiveness of instant messaging for language learners resides predominantly in the addition of voice and video options for communication.

A variety of different tools, currently available on the web, have an incredible communicative power. Webcams have become less expensive and more efficient in terms of picture size and transmission quality through the use of USB2 which brings immediacy and

direct personal connection. VoIP is becoming a very popular solution for communication, just as the cell phone did years ago. Nowadays Skype¹ is the largest of the new companies offering VoIP, which lets internet connections double as telephone lines, by treating calls no differently than e-mail, web pages, or other common internet travellers.

What is Skype?

Skype, a relatively new program launched in July 2004, is a free, downloadable, real-time voice and text chat communication tool with the capacity to share files and 'conference' with up to five people simultaneously. The program also includes SkypeOut, which enables Skype users to pre-pay and call any phone number in the world at highly competitive local rates. The program is predominantly for Windows, but new beta versions for Linux and Pocket PC are also available. Skype is simple to install and use. It requires no personal information for registration. Each user is required to set up a Skype name and password to start using the tool. Its buttons and commands are intuitive and first-time users with little computer experience have no difficulty in navigating (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Skype video calling.

The focus of Skype is convenient communication with existing contacts. The default authorization requires the user to add contacts to a list and to obtain subsequent agreement from that contact to do so. This prevents the user from being submersed with calls and text messages from unknown Skype users. This a great tool for group discussions and collaborative work. If using PC-to-PC, the user simply needs to double click on the contact's name and the call will be initiated (Goodwin-Jones, 2005; see Figure 2).

Skype, as reported in the website page 'About Skype,' is available in 27 languages and is the fastest growing worldwide software for voice communication. Skype Technologies S.A. has its headquarters in Luxembourg. Niklas Zennström, Skype CEO and co-founder stated in the interview 'Skype opens its platform to the web' (2005):



Figure 2. Making a call.

In two years, Skype has pioneered a revolution in global internet communications by making it simple for anyone with an internet connection to make and receive superior quality phone calls for free. People love to talk, and voice is fast becoming the key category for global internet communications. Skype's mission is to make communicating through the Internet natural and easy to do, so in addition to voice communications we offer the power of both instant messaging and presence, which have become as ubiquitous as email over the last five years (<http://about.skype.com/2005/08>).

Anyone can benefit from Skype and through the integration of both presence and instant messaging features into websites and applications can instantly build communities and connections between people who can chat and alert others to their online availability. As a synchronous online tool, it can be also be used for audio conferencing for groups smaller than five (see Figure 3). It offers other useful options such as answering machine, instant messaging (see Figure 4), and file sharing and it has the potential to be used in collaboration with other web tools, such as Podcasting.

Skype's level of growth already eclipses the growth of today's internet giants. After two years it is already twice the size of Yahoo! (26 million registered) and over six times that of AOL. In just two years, it has seen over 150 million downloads in 225 countries and over 51 million people registered to use Skype's free services. Its exponential growth (see Figure 5) is due to a number of reasons. First of all, Skype offers a good audio quality and is easy to use. It works anywhere and calls are free. It works on all popular operating systems and also on Pocket PC. Furthermore, it can work like an ordinary telephone, so consequently non-computer users can also utilize it.



Figure 3. Conference call.



Figure 4. Chat.

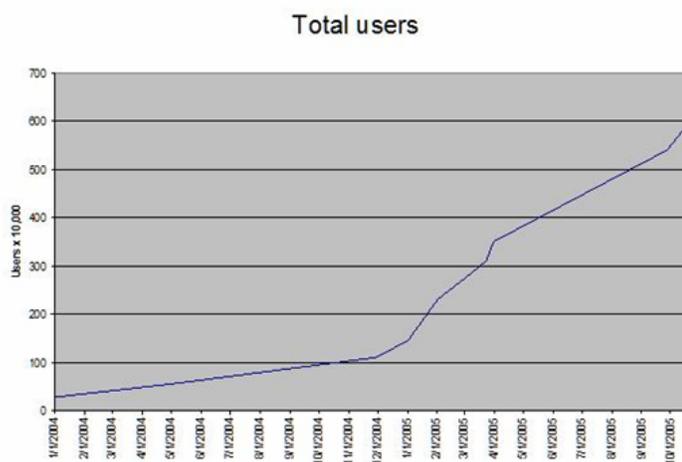


Figure 5. Total Skype users (from <http://www.wikipedia.org>).

From Traditional 'Face to Face' to Skype Language Tandem Exchange

Language Tandem Exchange means that two people of different mother tongues collaborate in the learning of each other's language. They normally do it by 'Face to Face' (F2F) conversation or by email². Tandem Exchange is mainly based on the principle of autonomy, which establishes that each partner is responsible for their own language learning. Furthermore, it is also based on the principle of reciprocity as both partners should benefit equally from the exchange. The impetus behind the implementation of traditional F2F tandem learning is to develop autonomy in language learning. F2F tandem exchanges, for example, have been practiced with this goal in mind in the Self-Access Centre of the University of Naples "L' Orientale," in order to develop an effective language exchange between Erasmus/

Socrates students and the Italian students of the faculty of Languages and Foreign Literatures who wanted to improve their conversational fluency in the studied languages.

Another motivation could be its integration into the curriculum. Many teachers around the world are actively experimenting with internet telephony in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes as Skype can be used for communicating and sharing files and can be used as a tool to facilitate small group class projects or small discussion forums. With Skype it is possible to have up to five people on a conference call at the same time, so discussions could take place even if class numbers did not match up perfectly. Some teachers have integrated Skype exchanges in their curricula or in conversational classes in order to develop learners' communication skills with EFL students or native speakers. In this way, language learners can have the opportunity to speak in real-time with people from a variety of different countries. A problem to individual or class connection could be the time zones, which has to be more or less the same. If everyone uses 'Greenwich Mean Time' (GMT), then the opportunities to link up are greater. A community formed of experts are integrating Skype with open source e-learning platforms (e.g. Moodle³).

Learner autonomy has become one of the most important skills for students to acquire given the way society is evolving (Mariani, 1994). The aim of a digital tandem exchange via Skype is to put into practice a model for learner autonomy such as that advocated by Holec (1981), where the subject to self-develop the capacity for directing personal learning during the language acquisition process is offered.

While people have been learning languages on their own for many years, the concept of learner autonomy as we know it today emerged in the late 1970's in a report that Holec was commissioned to write for the Council of Europe. In this report, he defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). He emphasized that learners have to work within a learning structure which enables them to exercise their ability to take control of their learning. According to Holec (1981), to take charge of one's learning means to be responsible for all the decisions related to the learning process. In other words, learners take an active role in determining their own objectives or goals, selecting the content and deciding on the methods and techniques they will use, also monitoring the process through the constant evaluation of what has been learnt.

Skype and Podcasting, defined by Godwin-Jones (2005) as "disruptive technologies" (p. 9), allow new and different ways of doing familiar tasks. They provide unique opportunities to the development of autonomy in learning, offering additional channels for oral language practice and communication which threaten traditional industries. Distance to countries where target language is spoken has always represented a problem in language practice. If Skype tandem exchange is integrated into a language course or as a self-directed conversational activity into a self-access centre, tandem learners can be helped to develop their oral skills and take responsibility for their own language learning.

Skype Tandem Learning Portfolio

A useful support traditionally adopted in F2F tandem learning exchange is the use of a diary which helps to record, structure, and develop autonomous learning. Through it learners are helped in reflecting and defining what they want to do with the target language and decide on their own linguistic priorities. Traditionally used in F2F tandem exchange or in its asynchronous "E-mail tandem" evolution, a 'portfolio' can also be useful when adopted in Skype tandem language exchanges. In this case, it has mainly three functions: (1) providing the learner with the logging of the weekly goal set, (2) taking notes of information concerning language and culture covered in the e-tandem meetings, and, finally, (3) reflecting on the learning process.

The core of a ‘Tandem Learner Portfolio’ is the ‘Needs Analysis Grid’ inspired by Ellis and Sinclair’s (1994) model. Learners have to be encouraged to explore the Skype tandem exchange retrospectively in order to decide whether the prefixed goals have been achieved totally, partially, or not at all. They have to be spurred to reflect on the adopted language strategies. A proactive approach has to be developed in the online learners to give prompt answers to the following questions: What worked and what didn’t? Was the online meeting successful? What is the next goal and how to plan it?

Another purpose always to keep in mind is the reciprocal observation. Learners have to acquire awareness of the adopted strategies in learning a foreign language, but they must also be encouraged to observe and analyze their partner’s approach in learning their own mother-tongue. Such reflections promote a real awareness in the language learning management.

Learners have the opportunity to develop and acquire, in this way, various skills in the different spheres of the partnership. If the partnership and the learning process are to be successful, learners have to acquire and display a set of interpersonal skills. The acquisition of negotiating skills, enhance a fruitful interaction between learners. Developing good social and affective strategies is important to promote language learning skills. In this new environment, partners have to become self-confident. They have, for example, to learn how to equally share the time allocated to language learning and to decide on the frequency and type of error correction. The language exchange, in the perspective of the Holec model (1981), gives learners the chance to develop skills such as how to analyse and give priority to personal needs, how to set reasonable and reachable goals, and how to successfully evaluate and implement their own learning strategies. Taking notes on a portfolio can generate empirical evidence of learners’ awareness and develop cognitive and meta-cognitive skills in the language learning. A prototype of a ‘Skype Tandem Portfolio’⁴ to use in online exchanges is reported in Appendix A.

Mixer: An Educational Website

An effective way to find tandem partners online is offered by the ‘Mixer’⁵ website (see Figure 6). It is an educational site created to help learners and teachers to find partners for language exchange via Skype. The service offered is entirely free. Students must be at least 13 years old to join the site. In order to access Mixer website, these three steps have to be followed: (1) a Skype program has to be downloaded, (2) the user must then log in, and finally, (3) set up a personal profile. Pages can be viewed in Spanish, French, and German. Up to now there are more than 2,100 individuals and 126 teachers looking for a language exchange.

Mixer is the Skype name of the computer that runs the website. Like most computers, it only speaks the binary language (1’s and 0’s). Thus, it is not interested in a language exchange with people. Its sole purpose is to help language learners find a Skype partner. Learners have to be active, login, search for a partner and then contact them via Skype or email. It is advised to contact more than one person. Patience is recommended as the balance between native English speakers and EFL students varies depending on the time



Figure 6. Mixer homepage.

of year. During summer, for example, most Americans are on holiday. As the semester starts in September for most of them, there will be more English speakers.

There are no particular rules to respect in the site. Mixxer is just a dynamic database which has been created to help a person find someone who speaks the desired target language. In exchange for them helping you, you help them with the language they are learning.

Some precious advice can be followed as in the traditional F2F tandem. For example, it is very important to agree in advance how often students meet and how long they have to spend on each language. It is advised not to switch back and forth throughout the conversation. It is better to deal with one language at a time; otherwise, the person with more advanced second language skills tends to dominate the conversation. It is essential to be very polite. Since learners are from different cultures, communicating over the Internet can result in intercultural misunderstandings.

If teachers would like to assess oral skills, conversations with language partners could be recorded in MP3 files. In order to do this, some software has to be acquired, as well as the consensus of the partnership. It is very offensive and illegal to record them without their knowledge. Once obtained, different options are offered for recording. ‘Pamela’⁶ software can be acquired (it adds features to Skype, of which recording is one), or a virtual sound card or, alternatively, a software program such as ISound, which captures any sound that passes through the computer’s sound card, can be used.

If someone says something offensive or unacceptable, it is possible to send an email to the project coordinator (bryantt@dickinson.edu) to block them from the site. You can also stop them from contacting you in Skype in the future (Tools->Options->Privacy). In most of the cases, people on this site are very pleasant as they are generally happy to help people who are trying to learn their native language.

Skypecasting: A New Trend in Peer-to-Peer File Sharing

As already mentioned, Skype is an online software service that allows users to contact one another over the Internet for free voice conversations. Podcasting is a personal broadcasting phenomenon in which users create digital recordings and post them on a web site for distribution to music players such as iPods or desktop PCs. Technologically-skilled users are merging Podcasting to Skype using Skype’s service to distribute recordings across the Internet for free. This allows expert users to run their own mini-radio stations, which can be accessed by any Skype user. As stated by Ben Charmy (2005):

“Skypecasters,” as they call themselves, use Skype’s peer-to-peer telephone network to distribute recordings over the Internet directly to each other for free. Some evidence suggests that Skypecasters may be becoming more widespread, even though it requires a high level of technical know-how.

(http://news.com.com/VoIP+calls+get+podcast+treatment/2100-7352_3-5645776.html)

Skype does not actively support these uses but encourages developers to find new applications for their service. Skype spokeswoman, Kelly Larrabee (2005) stated in an interview reported in ‘Peer-to-Peer Radio’ in Amol’s blog:

All of the work is being done without Skype’s active input. Some of its source code has been made public so developers can tinker with new applications, such as Skypecasting.

Skype's peer-to-peer infrastructure makes it well-suited for turning Net phones into a broadcasting system, as Skypecasters are doing. Other possibilities discussed by Skypecasters at 'Moodle' open source e-learning platform are to turn an MP3 player into a radio station for any of Skype's 29 million registered users to dial up using their Skype line.

Conclusion

Applications of technological advances have always found a direct use in language learning. The use of audio and video cassette, to CD-ROMs and DVDs, to the most recent e-learning solutions, has always brought very successful results in language learning. Skype language learning through 'Mixer' can be a convincing application to be widely supported, experimented, and its efficacy monitored in different language learning contexts. Skype can be a valid aid in trying to support language learners who always face problems connected to the difficulty in having contact with native speakers. In the new millennium, the developing of Skype intertwined and interconnected with Podcasting can be a challenging frontier in expanding the horizon of language learning online.

Endnotes

¹ See <http://www.skype.com>

² See: <http://www.tcd.ie/CLCS/tandem/etandem/etindex-en.html>

³ See: <http://www.moodle.org>

⁴ Skype Tandem Portfolio has been adapted from the ‘Tandem Learning Diary’ developed by Katia Carraro for the Sprachlabor Wirtschaftsuniversität Vienna.

⁵ See: <http://langtech.dickinson.edu/globalclass/login.aspx>

⁶ See: <http://www.pamela-systems.com>

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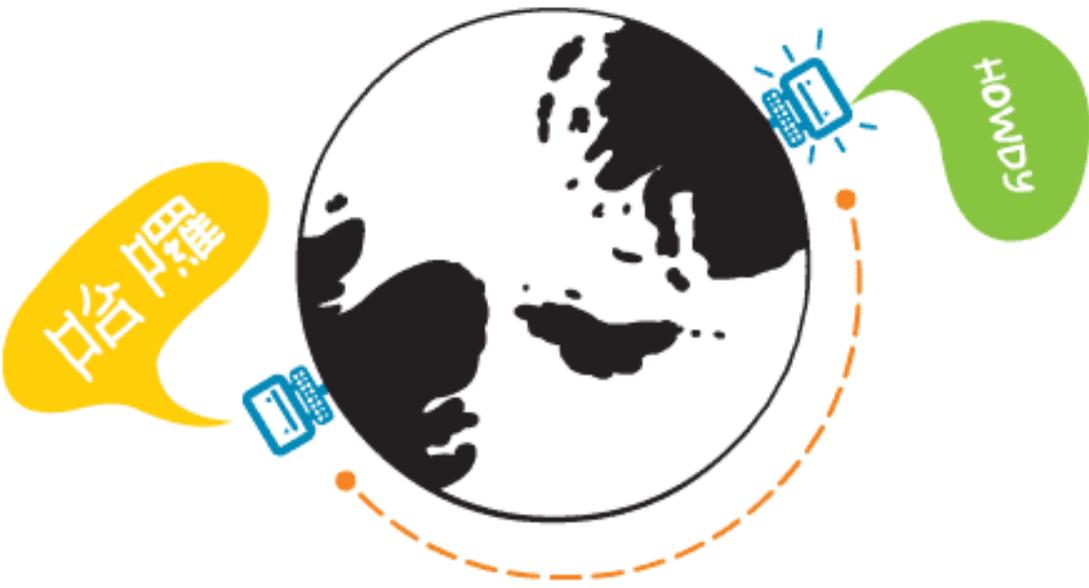
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Appendix A



TANDEM LANGUAGE EXCHANGE PORTFOLIO



STARTED:
 BY:
 SKYPE TANDEM PARTNER:
LANGUAGES:

Skype Tandem Portfolio has been freely adapted from the 'Tandem Learning Diary' developed by Katia Carraro for the Sprachlabor Wirtschaftsuniversität Vienna.

A1. MACRO GOALS & PRIORITIES	
<input type="checkbox"/> Broaden vocabulary	1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Improve grammatical accuracy	1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Improve pronunciation	1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Get better listening skills	1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Improve reading skills	1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop speaking skills	1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop cultural understanding	1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/>

A2. GENERAL OBJECTIVES				
What would I like to be able to do?				
In how long?				
How often?				
Day and time schedule				

DATE:**SKYPE EXCHANGE N.****1. Today's objective(s):****2. Main meeting discussion topic(s):****3. New words and expressions learned:****4. New cultural information:****5. Reflections on grammar and accuracy:****6. Self-observation:****7. Observation of tandem partner:**

GUIDELINES

A1. MACRO GOALS & PRIORITIES

Here you have to write down your priorities to be reached in your Skype tandem language exchange program. Tick the relevant objectives and specify their degree of importance:

1. not important 2. some importance 3. quite important 4. important 5. very important
--

A2. GENERAL OBJECTIVES

Keeping a record of what you have learned during your Skype tandem learning exchanges will help you to reflect on your progress and increase your awareness about how you learn a foreign language. At the end of every Skype session try to summarize what you wanted to learn and what you have actually learnt.

When you start a new session it is essential to define your goals clearly. Try to set objectives that you can pragmatically achieve in your “virtual meetings”.

It is essential that you share them with your Skype tandem partner.

LEARNING LOG

TODAY'S OBJECTIVES

Fill in this box by trying to answer the following questions:

- Did I succeed in reaching the objectives I had set out for today?
- What did I learn?
- Was (or not) the Skype session good, useful, fun or motivating?
- What worked well, what didn't? Why?
- Am I satisfied with my personal performance and with my partner's performance?
- Did I ask for help?
- Did I get enough help?
- Did I use other tools such as Skype chat or on line dictionaries for help?

REFLECTIONS ON GRAMMAR AND ACCURACY

Fill in this box by trying to answer the following questions:

- Did I correctly adopt and imitate grammatical structures used by my Skype tandem partner?
- Did I imitate my tandem partner's pronunciation?
- Did I use newly learnt words and structures?
- Did my tandem partner use language learning strategies that I would like to adopt?

OBSERVATION OF TANDEM PARTNER

- What do you think your partner has learnt from you today?