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Facilitating a Face-to-Face Tandem Language Exchange on a University Campus

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Abstract

As the 21st century progresses and the internationalisation of higher education is gaining momentum, encouraging students' intercultural communication has become of paramount significance. A Tandem Language Exchange (TLE) is among a number of initiatives taken by the Language Learning Hub (LLH) at the University of Limerick (UL) to bring together foreign and home students. The TLE takes place in both semesters of the academic year, attracting over two hundred students including UL undergraduates and some postgraduates as well as international students of many nationalities. It is offered across faculties (Humanities, Business, Education, and Engineering) to students with levels of second language competence ranging from elementary to advanced. Drawing on the empirical data collected at various stages of the TLE, this study first looks at some of the organisational and pedagogical challenges encountered during 15-years of experience of pairing foreign and home students. It then presents the various means of support that the LLH has put into place to raise cultural awareness and encourage linguistic diversity among students. Finally, it puts forward some recommendations for implementing this type of peer-to-peer language exchange in university settings.

Keywords: Face-to-face language exchange, intercultural interaction, authentic communication

The Institutional Context

The internationalisation of the university campus

Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on the 'internationalisation' of student bodies in educational institutions worldwide. However, the University of Limerick (UL) has viewed internationalisation, both "as a way of thinking and in the implementation of specific actions" (The University of Limerick's Strategic Plan, 2011-2015, p. 7) for many years, making it a central component of its strategic plans (past, present, and future). To this end, the institution boasts the following three activities: its Erasmus Exchange programme (since 1988), its Study Abroad programme (since 1991), and its Summer School programmes (since June 2002).

The most salient feature of these activities is the internationalisation of the UL campus with over a thousand international students coming to UL each year (mostly from Europe, North and South America and Asia). In parallel, Irish students (approximately one thousand,

majoring in French, German, Spanish or Japanese) can avail themselves of study exchange programmes and participate in internship programmes abroad.

The invaluable opportunity to study a language in this international environment led Dr. Marie-Thérèse Batardière, a lecturer of French who was teaching both foreign and home students on a translation module, to consider at a very early stage the implementation of language exchanges which would bring Erasmus and international students into contact with home students. For the latter it could serve as preparation for their sojourn abroad in the target language country. For foreign students, it could facilitate their integration into the host institution and Irish society. Marie-Thérèse approached the then coordinator of the Language Learning Hub (LLH) to discuss ways to set up a language exchange. The next section will describe their joint effort to bring the project to fruition. Over the years, Marie-Thérèse has gradually stepped back and taken on an advisory role. Catherine Jeanneau, the current coordinator of the Language Learning Hub (LLH) manages the programme referred to herein.

A prime place for language learning

The programme described in this paper takes place in the context of the Language Learning Hub (LLH). The unit, created over thirty years ago and formerly known as the Language Resource Area, is part of the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics. Five years ago, it moved to a new location in the heart of the Languages Building making it a popular place for both home and international students. Its main ‘raison d’être’ is to support and promote language learning in the Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics (MLAL) School by providing materials, equipment, guidance and language learning activities to students (at postgraduate and undergraduate levels) and staff.

At its onset, the unit was designed to provide access to varied language resources (authentic material such as films and documentaries or pedagogical material such as grammar books and class resources and access to satellite TV channels). With the advent of the Internet and its plethora of online learning and teaching materials, the centre has evolved and the emphasis has turned to developing novel ways to support language learning and enhance student engagement. It is interesting to note that, in an era when the use of digital tools for language learning is increasingly becoming the new ‘norm’ (Allhouse, 2014), offering face-to-face activities is welcomed by learners. As a result, the LLH provides a range of activities which include the Tandem Language Exchange programme (TLE), peer-facilitated discussion groups and one-to-one sessions alongside ‘pre- and post-study abroad’ online intercultural exchanges via a discussion forum on SULIS (the University of Limerick virtual learning environment) or an email exchange or Skype. These diverse activities aim to advance

internationalisation by enabling students to develop their language and intercultural communication skills.

The Language and Cultural Learning Initiative

Designing and setting up the Tandem Language Exchange programme

The type of exchange which was deemed most appropriate was a face-to-face conversation also called ‘tandem learning’ (Calvert, 1992). It involves two speakers of different native languages (and different cultural backgrounds) meeting in-person “to help each other improve their language skills and learn about each other’s culture” (Calvert, 1999, p. 56). It was felt that tandem language learning would encompass aspects of both natural settings (i.e., it would closely approximate the language immersion environment by providing exposure to the L2 as spoken by native speakers and encouraging the authentic use of the L2) and formal L2 instructed learning (i.e., the communicative nature of the activity would require some focus on form and some form of corrective feedback, whether explicit or implicit (Gass, 1997). In addition, it was hoped that ‘informal conversation’ with peers would give L2 students the opportunity to negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries (Kramsch, 1993).

The Tandem Learning Exchange (TLE) was based on the principle of (i) reciprocity, whereby both learners should contribute as equally as possible to the learning process: “learners should be prepared and able to do as much for their partner as they themselves expect from their partner” (Brammerts, 1996, p. 11) and (ii) autonomy, which holds that students must take control of their own learning experience: “learners alone determine what they want to learn and when”. Setting up the programme involved: (i) defining the team members’ responsibilities for the execution of the preparatory tasks; (ii) writing an enrolment questionnaire (so as to obtain details on participants’ profiles and also in order to draw up a mailing list); (iii) finding the right meeting room venue for the introductory meeting; (iv) planning advertising (selecting communication channels and designing posters); (v) contacting the UL International Office to let them know of project.

The TLE is a free and extra-curricular initiative (i.e., there is no academic credit given for participation) that started as a small pilot project in autumn 1997. The program has grown since then and for spring semester 2015, 123 students are taking part in the program. The TLE programme runs as follows: in week 3 of a 12-week long academic semester, all UL students (home and foreign) are invited, via an institutional email, to an informal meeting where they will have an opportunity to be paired up with a tandem language partner. An average of 200 students, with a record number of 234 participants in the autumn of 2014, attend every

semester (some would have already experienced the TLE in the previous semester or previous year). At this introductory meeting, we, the two organisers (and authors of this article), assisted by a small number of volunteering students, welcome students as they enter the meeting room and hand out a profile questionnaire as well as a coloured sticker which indicates the native language of each participant. The wearing of a colour-coded sticker plays a crucial role in the pairing of students (i.e., it facilitates the recognition of a potential L2 partner towards the end of the meeting). We then present the language exchange programme, emphasising the following ground rules: (i) allocate at least one hour per week to meetings; (ii) keep appointments; (iii) be prepared for each session; (iv) dedicate the same amount of time to each language (v) take some notes on what was learnt. Next, we explain the sticker colour coding, identifying that orange is for English, blue for French, red for German, yellow for Spanish and white for other languages (students are asked to write their 'specific' language). Lastly, we invite participants to follow three practical steps to find a language partner that evening: *Step 1: Wear your sticker visibly; Step 2: Look for students wearing the colour of the language you study; Step 3: Go and talk to them!* We also remind them to fill out and return the enrolment questionnaire before leaving the meeting. Students then start mixing and talking to each other. They usually find 'their' language partners quite quickly. Newly-formed dyads and groups tend to linger a little longer after the 'official' meeting has ended. Some years, we have been able to prolong the evening with refreshments thanks to a sponsorship from the UL International Education Division. In the following nine weeks tandem partners are expected to make contact and meet on a weekly basis. They are fully in charge of their learning; that is to say that they negotiate between themselves how they will practise their languages. The organisers do not interfere with the dyads' activities.

Reviewing the TLE programme.

The TLE program had been running for ten years on a *laissez-faire* approach (as explained above) when we undertook an evaluation study in 2008 after receiving institutional funding. Our aim was merely to review the TLE programme. As well as examining participants' profiles and expectations through the initial enrolment questionnaires, it was decided to conduct an anonymous online survey (using SurveyMonkey) which would be put to students about two-thirds of the way through the semester. It sought to investigate students' perceptions and practices of the TLE (Please see Appendix A, for the format and content of the online survey). It was offered on a voluntary basis; one third of the TLE participants completed it. The following section reports on two main issues that were brought to light through the questionnaire and the survey and how these issues were subsequently addressed.

First, the examination of the initial enrolment questionnaires confirmed that the majority of foreign students originated from countries which were target language countries for home students: Spain, France, Germany, and Japan. However, there was a ratio imbalance between home and foreign students' numbers, that is to say, over 60% of the TLE participants were home/Irish students and nearly 40% were foreign. This meant that, due to the lack of native speakers of their target language, a number of home students could not be matched with a language partner while the rest (sometimes reluctantly) agreed to join other pairs. We consequently decided to take action to increase foreign students' participation. A promotional campaign targeting foreign students took place the following academic semester using new communication channels: (i) eye-catching posters in all taught languages were displayed on bulletin boards and other strategic places where there was a lot of student traffic (e.g. the buildings where language classes are held; the Student Union Building); (ii) a digital version of these posters was sent to academic and administrative staff in the various faculties and displayed on a number of LCD screens on campus at regular intervals during the week prior to the enrolment information session; (iii) an email invitation to disseminate information on the TLE programme was sent to colleagues teaching foreign students (i.e., English as a Foreign language (EFL), French, German, Spanish, and Japanese lecturers).

The results of the promotional campaign amongst prospective foreign students were strikingly visible in the autumn 2008 enrolment numbers. The previous imbalance between home and foreign students' numbers had noticeably decreased: almost half (45%) of the tandem participants were foreign and just over half (55%) were home students. It is worth noting the positive response from language colleagues and their influential role in advertising the TLE programme in their multicultural classes. This upward trend in the foreign participation ratio has since continued, hence reversing the pattern found in the 2008 survey. This phenomenon will be further discussed in a later section of this paper.

Second, the feedback survey responses uncovered another issue: some participants (19%) had found the experience "*quite challenging*" (home student) and even "*daunting*" (foreign student) during the first few weeks (these were additional comments to Question 4 of the feedback questionnaire shown in Appendix A). While the *laissez-faire* approach suited the majority who perceived the TLE programme as "*only the catalyst*" (home student) and embraced the autonomous experience inherent to a tandem language exchange, others would have liked some initial support like "*having a place to meet*" (foreign student) and "*a few game nights*" (foreign student) in order to break the ice with their partners. Among suggestions to improve this type of exchange, some expressed the wish for "*more structure*"

(foreign student) and “*an acknowledgment of [his/her] participation in this exchange programme*” (home student).

On the strength of this feedback, the organisers introduced several changes in the TLE programme. Firstly, to address the need for more structure the following adaptations were made: (i) a follow-up session was added two weeks after the introductory session to take questions and offer advice; (ii) a ‘common room’ was provided for two hours every week, to facilitate gatherings; and (iii) a ‘Tandem Language Handbook’ was created. The booklet, which was distributed to students at the enrolment session, is divided into two parts: ‘Your practical guide’ (Part One), to provide general information, and ‘Your learning diary’ (Part Two), to scaffold reflective learning (Please see Appendix B for a detailed diary page). Secondly, to address the need for more recognition of students participation, we started to issue a certificate for taking part in the TLE programme.

These initiatives were piloted for four consecutive semesters; some were very popular and were kept on; those that were poorly received were discontinued. Accordingly, the follow-up session which was scantily attended (attendance never rose above 10 per cent) was replaced with an optional ‘one-to-one meeting’ with the LLH coordinator to iron out any issues. Often these are related to the lack of availability or commitment from the tandem partner, where the coordinator suggests simple strategies like partners sharing time-tables or drawing a list of topics of interest) to overcome these initial hurdles; however if the partner is not cooperative, the LLH coordinator intervenes by email urging him/her to call to the LLH. In the case of a partner failing to turn up for meetings or to answer emails, the LLH coordinator endeavours to find a new partner for the motivated student by either choosing a name from the list of ‘late comers’ (list of students who did not attend the initial meeting but have called to the LLH soon after for a late registration) or by posting a request on the popular LLH Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/languagesUL>).

In contrast, the ‘common room’ was always buzzing on a Wednesday afternoon so the original idea has been retained, albeit in a slightly different way. Language partners can take advantage of the relaxed atmosphere in the spacious LLH main room to simply chat or to access the material at their disposal (DVDs, CD-ROMs, TV stations etc.). As for the Tandem Language Handbook which was available in a printed version for the first two years (thanks to institutional funding), it is now available electronically on the TLE website (<https://sites.google.com/a/ul.ie/language-exchange-programme/>) and can be downloaded or printed at very little cost. From anecdotal evidence (i.e., positive comments gleaned in conversations with students), the booklet is perceived as useful to “*keep track of what has been learned*”, “*write down new words and phrases which came up in the conversation*”,

“remind you of grammar rules to revise” and *“make a list of topics to prepare”*. Lastly, the certificate of participation in the programme is nowadays seldom requested at the end of term. It would seem to be of interest only to foreign students who are non-specialist language learners as language majors gain enough credits for the modules they take.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study indicated that a face to face TLE programme can be offered at an institutional level to a broad range of users. In addition, it has shown that we (the organisers) have an active role in the initial phase (i.e., the design and implementation) of the language exchange at the start of each semester and that this role becomes more responsive during the course of the semester. Indeed, the LLH coordinator’s unobtrusive presence (as described earlier, she is available on an as-needed basis) seems to be the preferred role in a programme that relies on a peer-to-peer, collaborative exchange.

Through reflecting on the evolution on the TLE programme at UL, we have identified the importance of targeted marketing to ensure a good balance of students and the need for support –handbook, meeting space, online repository, and, where possible, the International Bureau cooperation – for the TLE programme to take place and exchanges to flourish. Furthermore, we have found that the key element to keep in mind when organizing a TLE is for the programme to be adaptable to changes. For instance, the expansion of UL’s global network with international universities has brought greater cultural and linguistic diversity among the student population (i.e., languages such as Portuguese, Hindi, and Mandarin, have emerged on campus). This has lead to new grouping configurations last semester in order to accommodate all foreign participants. Indeed, many home students have paired up with two or more partners and among them, a partner who is not a speaker of their target language. As a result home students have embarked with some of their foreign partners on what appears to be foremost a ‘cultural exchange’. We (the TLE organisers) will be seeking feedback this autumn from students involved in this type of partnership as we need to determine whether or not the addition of a ‘non-target language partner’ is beneficial to a ‘target language partnership’. This extended form of the TLE, the tandem language -and culture- exchange, may well grow in demand in other institutions with the widespread phenomenon of internationalisation in higher education.

And on a final note, we believe that the TLE, bringing together foreign and home students, positively contributes to advancing real internationalisation of UL campus (Green, 2005).

Notes on the contributors

Marie-Thérèse Batardière is a lecturer in French at the University of Limerick. The co-founder of an Erasmus student exchange with her former university in Angers in 1989, she is a strong advocate for an interdisciplinary and multicultural approach in the classroom. Her main research interest lies in the area of CALL and more specifically on the use of Computer Mediated Communication tools to promote intercultural collaboration and authentic dialogue.

Catherine Jeanneau is the Coordinator of the Language Learning Hub at the University of Limerick. This unit aims at implementing a learner support strategy and providing language learning services outside of formal classroom time. Her research interests include second language acquisition, technology and language learning, particularly social media and online communication as well as learner autonomy.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Online Feedback Questionnaire.

TANDEM LANGUAGE EXCHANGE – Feedback questionnaire (Spring 2008)

1. Your profile

Nationality:

Male/Female:

Age:

2. Your language partner's profile:

Nationality:

Male/Female:

Age (if known):

3. How did you get your language partner?

- At the Language Exchange Meeting in Week 3
 Through the LRA office

Other (please specify): _____

4. Would you say that this language exchange is very satisfactory, satisfactory or unsatisfactory regarding...

	very satisfactory	satisfactory	unsatisfactory
improving your language skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
experiencing a new culture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
building a new friendship with a native speaker	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Feel free to comment: _____

5. Do you think the language level is an important factor for the success of the language exchange?

- Yes
 No

Please explain: _____

6. During meetings:

- You both speak one language for a period of time and then you alternate
- You choose one language for each meeting
- You speak your second language and your partner speaks his/her second language
- You speak your own language and your partner speaks his/her own language

7. How easy/difficult do you find it to...

	Easy	Difficult	Neither easy nor difficult
understand your partner's second language?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
speak to you partner in your second language?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. How often do you meet and for how long?

	Half an hour	One hour	More
Once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twice a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
More	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Where do you meet with your language partner?

- Canteen
- Library
- Stables bar / Java's coffee shop / Sports Bar, etc.

Other (please specify): _____

10. What do you do with your language partner during meetings?

- Have a chat
- Have a drink / Go for a meal
- Watch TV together
- Read magazines, newspapers
- Help your partner with his/her written work

Other (please specify): _____

11. What topics have you covered during meetings?

- Food
- Cinema
- Travel

- Studies
- Music
- Social life

Others (please specify): _____

12. From a cultural point of view, how easy/difficult do you find it to...

	Easy	Difficult	Neither easy nor difficult
agree on a topic of discussion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
recognise/acknowledge your partner's opinion(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
get your own opinion(s) recognised/appreciated	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
discuss cultural differences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. Do you think that a face-to-face language exchange is better than an e-mail/ on-line language exchange?

- Yes
- No

Please explain: _____

14. Do you have any suggestions to improve the language exchange?

Thank you!

Appendix B

Learner Diary (page 1)

Section 6: Learner Diary

MEETING 1

Date _____
Duration _____
Language(s) spoken _____

Main topics covered during the meeting:

--

What have I learnt?

Vocabulary and phrases
Grammar tips
Cultural aspects

What needs improvement?

--

Next meeting

Date & Time _____
Topic to prepare _____