

Do Students Share the Same Experience in an Online Language Exchange Programme? – The Chinese-French eTandem Case

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Abstract. This article presents the findings of an eTandem Chinese-French exchange course during two academic years, the year 2010-2011 when the course was not credited, and the year 2011-2012 when the course was credited in one university but not in the other. It focuses on the students' perspective about the language exchange experience. The participants are second year language students from both universities – Level B1-B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001). The course includes theme-based asynchronous learning activities in the Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle of theme-based exercises, and writing a forum post in their mother tongue for language partners, as well as task-based synchronous oral communication via Skype. A course evaluation was done after each academic year and the data were collected. The findings showed that the fact that the course was credited really affected the students' appreciation of the exchange experience, even though it was only credited in one side.

Keywords: telecollaboration, online language exchange, eTandem, Chinese as a foreign language, French as a foreign language.

1. Introduction

eTandem language learning, as one of the main telecollaboration forms (O'Rourke, 2007), has been practised by many language teachers and researchers around the

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world (Brammerts, 1996; Chung, Graves, Wesche, & Barfurth, 2005; Cziko, 2004; Kabata & Edasawa, 2011; Kötter, 2003; Little & Ushioda, 1998; Mullen, Appel, & Shanklin, 2009; Stickler & Lewis, 2008; Telles & Vassallo, 2006; Tian & Wang, 2010).

However, most language projects were conducted among European languages, experiments involving non-European languages (Asian, Semitic languages, etc.) are not common (Belz, 2003). The eTandem Chinese-French course discussed in this article was initiated in 2009 by the Unit of Chinese Studies of the University of Geneva as an important part of the Chinese blended-learning programme called ChineWeb (initiated in 2006), collaborating with the French Department of Hubei University in China.

The participants were the second year language students from both sides (Level B1-B2). The course includes theme-based asynchronous learning activities in Moodle as well as task-based synchronous oral communication via Skype. The course aimed mainly to develop the students' linguistic competence through communication with native speakers and to help them to better know and understand each other's culture.

Based on the pilot research result (Wang, Berger, & Szilas, 2012), the course was re-designed and was expanded in the academic year 2010-2011 as supplementary learning activities for students from both universities. In the academic year 2011-2012, the course was credited in the University of Geneva, but not in the Hubei University for administrative reasons.

The participants of the eTandem Chinese-French course are from two distant languages and cultures. What is more, the pedagogical focuses of the two universities are different, as one strengthens the development of students' Chinese history and literature knowledge, while the other pays more attention on fostering students' linguistic skills. However, the pre-course survey result showed that students from both sides shared the expectations of "improving oral communication skills, establishing a good friendship or a stable collaborative relationship with their language partners, exchanging cultural knowledge, and improving oral comprehension" (Wang Szilas, Berger, & Zhang, 2013).

In this study, our research interest will be focused on the students' post-course feedback. The research questions are as follows:

- Did the students from both universities share the same learning experience?

- Did the students have different opinions toward the language exchange course?
- Did the integration of the eTandem course in the curriculum influence the students' course participation?

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

The data mainly came from the annual course evaluation questionnaire administrated by the University of Geneva. It consisted of twelve 5-scale questions about the course content and its organisation, teaching evaluation, as well as global appreciation, and four specific questions on the eTandem exchange, together with three open-ended questions about the comments or suggestions on the exchange. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese and was sent to Hubei University, where the data were then processed separately.

The online self-evaluation questionnaires of each exchange session served as complementary data. It contained questions concerning problems encountered during the exchange, the course preparation, the course completion as well as the tutoring. The questionnaire also served as proof of course presence and all students were required to finish it immediately after the exchange.

The face-to-face interviews organised at the end of each semester by both universities contributed to the data too. Open questions were asked about students' opinion toward their partners and how they communicate with each other, especially when they were allowed to set the exchange time themselves; whether they respected the reciprocity; how they helped each other during the exchange; and their comments on the course organisation, course content and tutoring.

2.2. Subjects

The participants in the academic year 2010-2011 consisted of 49 students; 19 from the University of Geneva (abbreviated as UniGe) and 30 from Hubei University (abbreviated as HubeiU). The participants in the academic year 2011-2012 consisted of 81 students (38 UniGes and 43 HubeiUs), with 7 dropouts at the middle of the course for personal reasons. All the students filled the course evaluation questionnaire. The language partners were formed on a one-to-one or one-to-two basis for unbalanced participant numbers.

2.3. Data analysis

We made some interesting comparisons of students' course evaluation with one university as well as between two universities to see how they appreciated the course.

2.3.1. *Comparison of HubeiU students' course evaluation between 2010-2011 and 2011-2012*

Figure 1 showed that the HubeiU students' general satisfaction with the course of 2011-2012 was higher than that of the year 2010-2011, especially concerning the course organisation (with 0.96 over 0.48), knowledge integration in the curriculum (with 0.96 over 0.55) as well as theme complement (with 0.94 over 0.64).

2.3.2. *Comparison of UniGe students' course evaluation between 2010-2011 and 2011-2012*

Figure 2 showed that the UniGe students of year 2010-2011 appreciated the course more than those of year 2011-2012, especially regarding the exchange process (0.88 over 0.53), the course organisation (0.95 over 0.70), and knowledge integration (0.94 over 0.70). The satisfaction with teacher encouragement dropped down a bit however.

2.3.3. *Comparison of HubeiU and UniGe students' course evaluation for the academic year 2010-2011*

Figure 3 showed that the students from Hubei University appreciated more than the UniGe students how the course was organised and the way their learning materials were integrated in the course, with 0.95 and 0.94 from the HubeiU students over 0.48 and 0.55 from the UniGe students respectively. However, the UniGe students showed greater satisfaction with the theme complement (1.0) than the HubeiU students (0.64). Both expressed successful attainment of learning objectives. Technology was considered a big obstacle for the exchange by both sides. The exchange process was satisfying for both sides.

2.3.4. *Comparison of HubeiU and UniGe students' course evaluation for the academic year 2011-2012*

Figure 4 revealed that in general the UniGe students appreciated the course less than the HubeiU students. The UniGe students' evaluation of the preparation and the exchange process was much lower than their counterpart, with 0.42 and 0.53

from the UniGe students and 0.79 and 0.91 from the HubeiU students. The same difference could be found regarding how the course was organised (0.70 from the UniGe and 0.96 from the HubeiU). However, the HubeiU students showed lower satisfaction on the knowledge integration (0.70, while 0.96 from the UniGe).

Figure 1. HubeiU students’ course evaluation, year 2010-2011 and 2011-2012

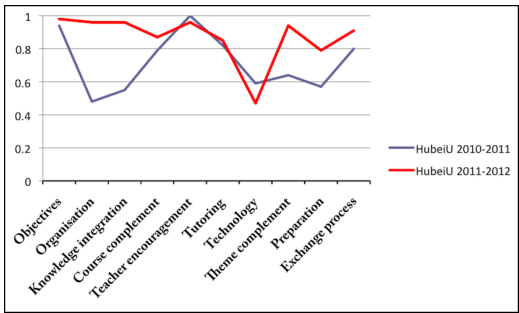


Figure 2. UniGe students’ course evaluation, year 2010-2011 and 2011-2012

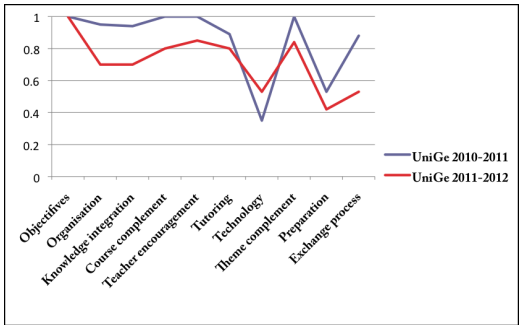


Figure 3. HubeiU and UniGe students’ course evaluation, 2010-2011

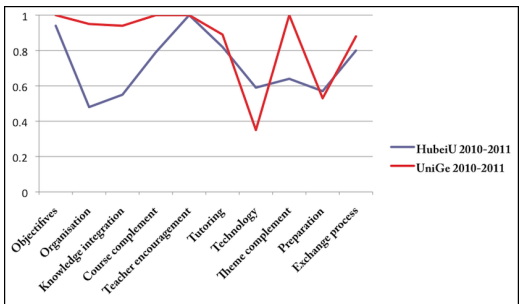
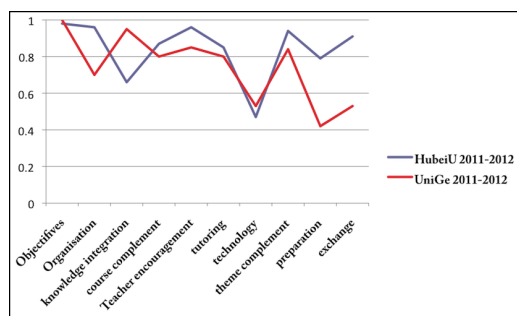


Figure 4. HubeiU and UniGe students' course evaluation, 2011-2012



3. Discussion

To answer the research questions, the students participating in the eTandem course shared some positive learning experiences regarding the attainment of their learning objectives, teacher encouragement, tutoring and theme complement, which was confirmed by the face-to-face interviews. As for the negative part of the course, both agreed that technological problems remained big obstacles for a smooth exchange.

The fact that the course was integrated in the curriculum of the University of Geneva had an impact on students' participation. The students from the University of Geneva evaluated the course much lower than when it was not credited, while the students from Hubei University appreciated the course more than when it was not credited. The HubeiU students' high satisfaction was mainly due to the course organisation, teacher encouragement, theme complement and exchange process, while the UniGe students' low satisfaction was due to the exchange process and course preparation. More information from the online self-evaluation questionnaire and the face-to-face interviews helped us to have better explanations.

The lack of respect of the reciprocity principle (Little & Brammerts, 1996) as well as the failed communication between language partners mainly explained the UniGe students' unsatisfaction with the exchange process. The UniGe students complained that the HubeiU students did not respect the time allocation for each language (30 minutes in Chinese, 30 minutes in French) during the online exchange session. They were also annoyed by the fact that the HubeiU students corrected their mistakes only when they "forced" them to do so. During the second semester, the students were requested to set online exchange times with their partners. The

UniGe students preferred using emails to communicate with their tandems, while HubeiU students preferred leaving messages on Skype or QQ (an instant messaging software in China), which brought a lot of communication problems.

After the course was credited in the year 2011-2012, the UniGe students found that they were obliged to better prepare the course before each exchange. The online self-evaluation questionnaire showed that most of them spent around 2 hours to prepare the exchange, which was regarded as a big workload for them.

The UniGes felt a bit restricted by the course organisation and they asked for a looser structure, while their partners thought that the course structure should be tightened.

4. Conclusions

The above case study revealed that the students of both universities shared the same learning experience in that the course helped them to communicate with “true” native speakers of their own age and to make friends with them. The integration of the course in the curriculum in one university had an impact on their learning experience, both positive and negative. These results, if confirmed by further studies, may have implications on the future pedagogical design for eTandem courses and can be served as guidance for future tutoring. In addition, it would be interesting to make a study on the perspectives of the teachers and the tutors involved in the project to study their perception.

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