5 Peer group mediation sessions as an assessment tool in teletandem

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to present peer group mediation as one of the assessment practices within Teletandem Brasil, a Virtual Exchange (VE) project which uses tandem practice between university students of different countries for foreign language learning, carried out through videoconferencing tools. Peer group mediation sessions are regular meetings, in addition to the teletandem practice, and aim at promoting reflection on telecollaborative, intercultural, and language learning, and individual learning processes. Assessment is seen here as a practice by students, mediators, and peers that seeks to reflect upon and respond to information from dialogue, demonstration, and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning.

Keywords: peer group mediation, teletandem, assessment.

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the VE project *Teletandem Brasil* and one of the forms of assessment used to evaluate language learning of the participants of the project. Teletandem is a learning context based on mutual language exchange between learning partners where each learner is a native

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or proficient speaker in the language the other wants to learn. One of the assessment forms used in this VE project is called 'peer group mediation'. Peer group mediation consists of regular peer meetings in which learners discuss and reflect on their learning of foreign languages and cultures. This form of assessment departs from what assessment is commonly thought of, i.e. summative assessment, ranking, tests, or grades, etc. For this reason, I prefer to use a broader parameter of assessment, the so called *assessment FOR learning* and *assessment OF learning.* Broadfoot et al. (2002) defined assessment FOR learning as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" (pp. 2-3). Assessment for learning is any assessment whose first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. Thus, it differs from assessment OF learning designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, ranking, or certifying competence (Wiliam, 2011). Assessment for learning, therefore, is part of everyday practice by students, teachers, and peers who aim to seek, reflect upon, and respond to information from dialogue, demonstration, and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning (Klenowski, 2009).

In the teletandem context, thus, assessment is not testing for summative purposes. Assessment in teletandem is a practice that faces all the challenges of providing a learning awareness tool which can also be useful for research purposes. These peculiarities are intrinsic to the teletandem context in the view of the fact that teletandem participants are immersed in an autonomous, telecollaborative, and intercultural learning environment fuelled by constant research activities. Therefore, project coordinators and mediators use peer group mediation sessions to promote reflection on and discussion about language learning and, simultaneously, to gain a little insight into where the learners are in their learning processes. The learning and improvement of a foreign language is not the only aspect emphasised in teletandem. Participants are also introduced to means for improving their attitudinal skills for autonomous learning, learning strategies, and their intercultural competence; all topics addressed during peer group mediation.

The term 'mediation' as a form of learner support in teletandem draws upon Vygotsky's (1991) work, in particular his concepts of mediation: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding (Elstermann, 2017)[2].

> "The basis of Vygotsky's theory is that culture has a profound influence on how humans think; the relation between human beings and their world around them is not direct [rather it is] mediated by culture and society" (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011, p. 11, cited in Elstermann, 2017, p. 104).

The ZPD is understood as the distance between the actual level of development of a learner and their potential level of development. This potential level of development is identified by the learner's problem solving capacity under guidance of (or mediated by) an adult or in collaboration with a more capable peer (Vygotsky, 1991). That is why the mediator in teletandem plays an important role in the learning process as s/he selects and sets the experiences that lead to learning (providing the guidance or scaffolding adequate for the ZPD). For Salomão (2011, p. 659), the mediation sessions in teletandem help participants reflect on their own practice as language learners and teachers of their own language. According to her, the mediator in teletandem is closely linked to the conceptualisation of knowledge construction in Vygotsky's social theory of knowledge, which places emphasis on its development through social interaction, which inevitably includes language use.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will present in more detail the *Teletandem Brasil* project and the concept of peer group mediation as a form of assessment for foreign language and intercultural learning within this VE project.

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2. Many works on learner support in language learning use the terms 'advising' or 'counselling' which derive from theories like Carl Rogers's approach of person-centred counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (cf. Brammerts & Kleppin, 2001; Carson & Mynard, 2012; Claußen, 2009).

2.   Overview of the project *Teletandem Brasil*

The VE project *Teletandem Brasil – Línguas Estrangeiras para todos* at the Brazilian public university *Universidade Estadual Paulista* (UNESP) offers tandem[3] language exchange via videoconferencing tools such as *Skype*, *Google Meet*, or *Zoom* for Brazilian L2 students with partner universities around the world. It is based on the principles of autonomy, reciprocity, and separation of languages (Vassallo & Telles, 2009).

The project was created by Telles and Vassallo in 2006/2007 as a response to the necessity to offer authentic communication situations with native or competent speakers of different foreign languages for their students enrolled in language teacher training courses. Due to geographical reasons, tandem had not been popular in Brazil. However, with the advent of new communication technologies and broadband internet, Brazilian L2 students had the possibility to work collaboratively with native speakers around the world. At that time, this was a significant innovation in the field of teaching and learning of foreign languages in Brazil (Elstermann, 2017).

The *Teletandem Brasil* project started with four partner universities from the USA, Germany, France, and Italy. Today, the project is established on three campuses with specific teletandem computer labs hosting up to 150 hours of teletandem activities and 15 university partnerships per semester. Each semester, the coordinating teams of the teletandem project on each campus organise the activities for the current semester. This involves opening the enrollment for each teletandem group, accompanying the ongoing teletandem activities, guiding the mediation sessions, and supervising the final evaluation of each group. One teletandem group has a semester-long exchange with another group of learners of a foreign university. They conduct between four to ten sessions per semester.

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3. "The tandem learning context consists of several main characteristics including: (a) the collaboration of two learners (with individual learning goals but one goal in common: to help each other in the learning process), (b) the use of two different languages, (c) reciprocity, and (d) autonomy" (Elstermann, 2017, p. 30). As defined by Little (1991), "tandem language learning is a form of open learning in which two people with different mother tongues work together in order to learn one another's language" (p. 1). "This pair of learners usually agrees on meeting at regular intervals with at least the common goal of learning each other's language, exchanging personal, cultural and linguistic information and sometimes even information about academic or professional activities" (Elstermann, 2017, p. 28).

One session usually has a duration of 60 minutes, 25 minutes for each language and ten minutes for peer feedback. The teletandem sessions are followed by mediation sessions of about 30 minutes, which focus on linguistic and cultural aspects, the student's learning process, and issues that emerge from teletandem interactions (Telles, 2015).

The main group of participants of this VE project are university students enrolled in foreign language teacher training courses. Exceptionally, students from other university courses as well as the academic staff can also participate.

The main objectives of the VE project are the promotion of autonomous foreign language learning, with the focus on training and gaining more oral and intercultural competences. Since teletandem is a learner autonomy promoting context, the creation and execution of specific learning tasks are not the focus of the project, i.e. there is no creation or compilation of specific exercises for the teletandem project. Nevertheless, many of the participating language teachers opt to give a task for each teletandem session in order to help their students find a conversation topic or even to prepare homework for the respective language course in which the students are participating. Those tasks usually aim to get information about cultural themes such as a specific holiday, festivities, regional food and drink, etc. Some teachers, in fact, prepare a list of conversation topics.

3. Peer group mediation as assessment for learning

Besides the actual teletandem sessions, the mediation sessions, as briefly mentioned in the previous section, have become an integral part of the *Teletandem Brasil* project. In this section, the peer group mediation sessions are described in more detail, however, depending on the partner university and individual arrangements between teachers, coordinators, and mediators, the forms of assessment can vary (see the chapter of Cavalari & Aranha, 2022, on learners' diaries in teletandem, this volume).

With one exception, the teletandem project has not been included in the curricula of foreign language studies; it continues to be considered an extracurricular activity with neither credits nor grades given for performance or participation in the project. Thus, participants only receive a certificate of participation if they attend regularly. Since no grades or credits are required institutionally, there is no need for testing specific learning outcomes. Nevertheless, different forms of assessment have been used since the beginning of the project to collect data for research projects and for the purposes of internal evaluations. In addition to mediation sessions, reflective diaries or journals (see Cavalari & Aranha, 2022, this volume; Evangelista & Salomão, 2019), discussion forums on Moodle, Teleduc, closed Facebook groups (Garcia & Souza, 2018), most recently, Whatsapp groups (Campos, Kami, & Salomão, 2021), and text productions with peer feedback and teacher feedback (Aranha & Cavalari, 2014) have been used. In this section, the focus will be on peer group mediation sessions (Elstermann, 2017).

Within the *Teletandem Brasil* project, mediation became an essential part of the process of teaching and learning languages, since the learners alone may not be able to explore the whole potential of their learning context. Evangelista and Salomão (2019) argue that the mediation sessions help learners to better understand the teletandem sessions, to understand that it is more than just an act of talking. Through the mediation sessions, learners have access to guided reflection about the learning context that opens up possibilities to enhance their linguistic, intercultural, and autonomous learning. The mediator, thus, has the role of guiding the learners to reflect on language, culture, strategies, and approaches to teaching and learning and support them in their difficulties encountered during the learning process (Garcia, 2015; Salomão, 2011; Souza, Zakir, & Garcia, 2021).

In a previous study (Elstermann, 2017), I tried to compile the characteristics of peer group mediation for language learning in telecollaborative projects such as teletandem. According to the research findings, the **main objective** of peer group mediation is the promotion of reflection on issues concerning intercultural and language learning, given that they are the main pillars of the learning

context in teletandem. Other **specific objectives** include reflection on learning strategies and tactics, on evaluation of the learning process, on the principles of tandem learning (autonomy, reciprocity, and language use), and especially on the exchange of ideas, difficulties, questions, and experiences between the participating peers (Elstermann, 2017, p. 336).

Peer group mediation can be realised in face-to-face **settings**, at university. In this case, only one side of the learners take part in the mediation session. When peer group mediation is held virtually via videoconferencing tools, one or both sides can participate. In terms of the **frequency** of the mediation sessions, they occur on a regular basis, usually once a week or biweekly. There are two possibilities for the realisation of the peer group mediation sessions:

- if the teletandem is carried out through the autonomous modality and learners are doing their teletandem sessions from home at individually set dates and hours, meetings are held regularly (biweekly or with even longer intervals) for approximately one hour; and

- if teletandem is done institutionally in a semi or fully integrated modality (i.e. in group settings in the computer lab of the university at specific dates and hours in a weekly rhythm), the peer group mediation sessions are held directly after the interactions are finished, for approximately 30 minutes.

The use of **different communication or data collection tools** for the mediation sessions is possible. Mediator's notes and some online platforms such as Moodle or Google Classroom for asynchronous discussion between the peers and the mediator and for information-giving are the tools which are mostly commonly used (Elstermann, 2017, p. 337). Other options are learner biographies, learner diaries, questionnaires, and videos or transcripts of recorded teletandem sessions in order to discuss examples of practice in the mediation session.

Concerning **the use of language** for discussion and reflection in the mediation session, there are different approaches (Funo, 2015), and it is usually the

mediator who decides on the use of the language. If the mediator wishes to use the mediation sessions for extra foreign language training, s/he may choose the foreign language that was used throughout the teletandem practice. If the main objective of the mediation session is to reflect upon individual learning processes and strategies, the first language (L1) of the teletandem participants may be a better choice. Data showed that discussions on meta-language, culture, and learning processes were difficult when the foreign language competencies were B1 or below (Elstermann, 2017).

Regarding the actual **procedure** of a regular in-class mediation session, the process is as below.

- All participants sit in a circle. An open and friendly atmosphere is important for learners' participation.

- The mediator initiates the mediation session with a more general and open question about the teletandem sessions in order to help the students begin their reflection on their experience during the teletandem session. The usual initial questions/ice breakers are: *What moment do you remember most from your teletandem session today?*, *What topic was most on your minds in your session today?*, and *Who would like to share a funny moment from his/her today's session?*.

- Participants respond to the initial question and usually a conversation and exchange spins out of it.

- The mediator continuously analyses the comments and responses from the learners to subsequently underline or reinforce one of the topics mentioned. Usually the participants have numerous experiences to share and appreciate the exchange of information and learning experiences.

- We suggest that the mediator be prepared for initiating reflection upon topics such as (1) cultural stereotypes, (2) cultural prejudices, (3) the other and I (foreign culture versus the own culture), (4) transculturality,

interculturality, and cross/multiculturality, and (5) awareness of sensitive topics such as politics, religion, race, and sexuality.

- The mediator should take notes on the topics addressed in the mediation session as well on the comments of the learners that seem important to him/her.

- When the end of the mediation session approaches, the mediator guides the discussion to an end. Eventually s/he gives suggestions for 'homework reflection' until the next meeting. The mediator should reflect again on the contents of the mediation session and prepare future discussions and reflections based on what was mentioned or commented on by the participants.

Through joint and partly guided reflection and discussion on learning foreign languages, aspects of their own and the other culture and, if necessary, linguistic difficulties, the peers give each other feedback and assistance, which in turn promotes and expands the linguistic, intercultural, and learning competencies of all participants. The mediator gains an overview of where the participants stand, what their beliefs are about language, culture, and their learning processes, and can return to aspects that s/she feels need further deepening in subsequent mediation sessions by further addressing specific topics and questions.

4.   Conclusions and lessons learnt

In this chapter I presented peer group mediation sessions as a form of assessment aimed at accompanying learners in their autonomous learning process of foreign languages and cultures in teletandem. The importance here is to observe and evaluate learners' reflections upon their own learning and upon their own conversations with their foreign learning partners.

Several studies on mediation sessions proved that the discussions and reflections between the peers are enriching, can promote intercultural awareness and

learner autonomy, and even provide chances to enhance language competences (Elstermann, 2017; Evangelista & Salomão, 2019; Funo, 2015; Garcia & Souza, 2018, to mention a few). The sharing and exchange of the learning experiences of their teletandem partnerships help the peers to reflect on their own learning in a deeper way and to get more ideas for their own teletandem practice. Furthermore, the discussions on intercultural aspects proved to be crucial for the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices in relation to the foreign culture. The latter aspect is also one of the challenges in the project. International telecollaboration projects seem to be perfect contexts for promoting intercultural competence. However, Telles (2015) and Messias and Telles (2020) observed that the conversations held during the teletandem practice can often reinforce stereotypes and prejudices in terms of linguistic and cultural aspects. Therefore, it is one of the tasks of the mediator to guide the discussion in mediation sessions in a way that learners become more sensitive and open to intercultural aspects and begin the process of reflecting on language and culture in a less traditional, dichotomous way.

The role of the mediator cannot be underestimated, as it is a multi-faceted and complex role (Elstermann, 2017). The mediator should have experience in the processes of foreign language learning and teaching, inter/transcultural issues, and counselling skills such as active listening, focusing, and summarising for instance, and in the case of the teletandem project, should also be acquainted with the project itself. To assure a minimum of mediation competence, it is advisable to offer a mediator training for those who are interested in becoming one. In projects with the focus on language learning, mediators often are language teachers, graduate students, or more experienced undergraduate students. Within the *Teletandem Brasil* project, the coordinators launched the first mediator training in 2012 due to the increasing number of teletandem interactions and the need for more mediators to attend the interactions. The mediator training consisted in four meetings to present and discuss topics, including concepts of learner autonomy, language learning in teletandem, learning strategies, and a practical part in which the participating students had to shadow a teacher-mediator at a mediation session (Funo & Elstermann, 2012). The training structure and contents have been regularly adapted to meet new demands, especially since

the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Campos et al., 2021; Souza et al., 2021). A more extensive research about mediator training in VE projects such as *Teletandem Brasil* and the development of an asynchronous training course for mediators is currently being created by Camila Kami (in progress).

Peer group mediation sessions as a form of assessment certainly may be used in other contexts and for other VE projects. The main characteristics of peer group mediation such as the setting, frequency, tools, and procedure can be easily adapted to other target groups. As the main idea of the mediation sessions is to share experiences and jointly reflect and discuss, there are no restrictions regarding the content, i.e. it need not be a language exchange project; it could have any focus whatsoever. The most important and interesting aspect behind this kind of assessment is that it promotes ongoing learning, it does not merely test or grade a learning outcome.

Recommended readings

www.teletandembrasil.org

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Edited by Anna Czura and Melinda Dooly

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