

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Technology

May 5, 2014

Technology Provides Foreign-Language Immersion at a Distance

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In an Internet-era version of pen pals, some foreign-language professors at American colleges are using free or low-cost technology to match their students with partners in classes in other countries and to provide authentic language-immersion experiences.

Teletandem, or telecollaboration, as the practice is known, uses videoconferencing—whether Skype, Google Hangouts, or Adobe Connect—to complement both in-person and online language courses. For example, students in a Spanish class here are paired with students in an English course abroad. To minimize intimidation, professors try to pair students of the same proficiency level. The idea is a simple one—I teach you my language, you teach me yours.

"It gave our students a sense of purpose, not only a sense of need—they were there to also help," says Anton T. Brinckwirth, director of the World Studies Media Center here at Virginia Commonwealth University. In his Spanish courses, he has used teletandem since 2010.

At the beginning of a 50-minute introductory-Spanish class, for example, VCU students are instructed which language to use in the first half of a conversation and which in the second. Some prepare notes with topics and vocabulary, while others just start talking.

"I like Skittles. Do you know what Skittles are?" can be heard at one end of the room. "I have a dog. *Sabes que es un dog?*"—Do you know what a dog is?, asks another student, mixing the languages.

Students rely on notes, hand gestures, and facial expressions, and occasionally they share pictures to communicate words or phrases they don't know.

When Lizzett D. Uria, a senior at Virginia Commonwealth, enrolled in Portuguese 101, she expected to learn the basics—maybe by the end of the semester she would know how to introduce herself. She didn't expect to carry on a 25-minute conversation with a native speaker.

"It basically forces you to learn," she says. "It pushes you to practice the language to make sure you are ready for the next meeting."

Ms. Uria is now taking Portuguese 102 and engaging in two teletandem sessions per week with her partner, Ghuilherme Boleta, in Assis, Brazil. Thanks to the lessons, she says, her perspective on the language and on Brazilian culture has changed, and she is more interested in continuing to practice.

Beyond Language Learning

While technology can't offer the full-immersion experience of living abroad, for some students it is the closest they can get.

João Antonio Telles, an associate professor of linguistics at São Paulo State University, in Assis, is coordinator of Teletandem Brasil and an originator of the term "teletandem." The method existed previously, as one-on-one interactions conducted either in person or over the phone. But by 2004, when he and his colleagues began developing the current system, videoconferencing had made long-distance interaction easier.

"In Brazil there is very little immigration, so being able to speak another language with someone else is almost impossible without technology," Mr. Telles says. He considers the system a form of virtual immersion: The students not only get to talk to one another but also can see how their partners react to questions, how they look, and how they live.

"It's not knowing only a language," he says, "but also knowing how to behave and acknowledge differences—cultural differences, behavioral differences."

Mr. Brinckwirth recalls a class in which Taiwanese students complained about their American partners as disrespectful. The American students would show up late, yawn, and slouch while having teletandem conversations.

They didn't understand what was wrong with their behavior until the professor explained that, in Chinese culture, such body language reflects boredom and indifference. And in China, being even a few minutes late is considered disrespectful.

An idea similar to teletandem originated among language professors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who in 1997 created the Cultura project. Using online blog forums built in WordPress or similar platforms, students learning French at MIT have conversations, organized by topics, with French students studying English.

"The idea is for them to learn about themselves as much as they learn about the others," says Sabine Levet, a senior lecturer in French at MIT, who is a creator of the project.

Early on, tandem learning gave participants autonomy in deciding when to meet, what to talk about, and for how long. During his research, Mr. Telles realized that, in order to take the method into the classroom, one aspect had to change: "There has to be structure," he says.

He and the other professors involved with Teletandem Brasil hold "mediation sessions" after every teletandem conversation to deliver lessons on vocabulary, grammar, and culture.

The combination of conversational autonomy and pedagogical structure is key, says Fernando Rubio, co-director of the Second Language Teaching and Research Center at the University of Utah.

"If you have a relatively high level of interaction with the instructor through a more-traditional instructor classroom," he says, "and then you have a high level of interaction with native speakers through teletandem, then you have the right ingredients for a successful learning experience."

Mr. Rubio does not use teletandem in his Spanish classroom, but he is interested in it for massive open online courses, or MOOCs.

Laura L. Franklin, a professor of French at Northern Virginia Community College, has been using teletandem in online courses. She didn't begin teaching language courses fully online until she felt that the technology would allow students a full listening, speaking, reading, and writing experience.

"The listening and speaking was a challenge. And over the years technology kept getting better and better," she says. "Now it's an equivalent experience. If you use Google Hangouts, if you use Skype, it's really possible."

Benefits and Challenges

For most language professors, having every student participate in a 25-minute conversation during a classroom course is almost impossible—in group discussions, some students generally dominate while others hold back.

Michael J. Ferreira, an associate professor in Georgetown University's department of Spanish and Portuguese, says that a student speaks the target language for an average of three minutes in a traditional 50-minute class. That includes advanced courses, which he chose as the first in his department to hold teletandem sessions.

"Advanced conversation should be real experience, where you feel that you are communicating at a native level," he says.

Mr. Ferreira is trying to introduce teletandem in other courses and has worked closely since 2009 with Mr. Telles, in Brazil, to develop the system at Georgetown. But it can be hard for colleges to change traditional teaching methods, Mr. Ferreira says.

Mr. Brinckwirth says teletandem learning requires big initial investments in time spent trying to coordinate sessions and match students, as well as in technology—computers, video equipment, and broadband connections. And all of those must be compatible with their equivalents at the partner institution.

Since 2010, professors at Virginia Commonwealth have managed to join with colleagues at 11 institutions, including São Paulo State; the Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, in Taiwan; and Cairo University. Virginia Commonwealth now offers teletandem sessions in seven languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Mr. Brinckwirth finds the return on the investment substantial.

Seeing students react enthusiastically in the classes still amazes professors here. At the end of the introductory-Spanish course, Mr. Brinckwirth pointed at the clock—it was 2:50 p.m.—and then looked back at students so deeply engaged in conversation that they were making no effort to leave.

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