

24 The “Bologna-München” Tandem – experiencing interculturality

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Abstract

This case study describes the “Bologna-München” Tandem, a cross-border collaboration² which began in 2011. The aim of the collaboration is to give students studying Italian at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich and students studying German at the University of Bologna the opportunity to experience interculturality through interaction with native speakers. The interaction takes place in the classroom through lessons via Skype and during study trips. The “Bologna-München” Tandem combines telecollaboration and student mobility in order to promote a language and cultural exchange as well as an awareness of interculturality.

Keywords: interculturality, telecollaboration, student mobility, interaction.

1. Context “Bologna-München” Tandem

If we agree with Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) that “interculturality is not simply a manifestation of awareness and knowledge, it also necessitates acting” (p. 50), it follows that you have to ask how and with whom students can interact in foreign language classes. The “Bologna-München” Tandem was created with the aim of giving foreign language students in Bologna and Munich the opportunity

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to experience interculturality through interaction with native speakers. The collaboration started in 2011 and is ongoing.

1.1. Participants

The “Bologna-München” Tandem is designed for students studying German in Bologna and Italian in Munich. The participants are both undergraduates and postgraduates and their language levels range from A1 to C1. The activities of the exchange project are integrated within our regular language courses³. It is important to point out that the attendance at the courses in Bologna and Munich is not mandatory. However, if students sign up for our courses, they are automatically involved in the exchange project.

Students have the same roles in the tandem: they are experts in their language as they are native speakers and at the same time they are foreign language learners. However, there is an important difference in the understanding and the perception of each other’s country, in that a lot of the German students know the north of Italy quite well because they often spend time there on holiday. For them, Italy is a place they feel familiar with. On the other hand, most of the Italian students have never been to Germany and consequently feel no familiarity with the country.

1.2. Objectives

The initial aim was to bring our students into contact in order to start a bilingual dialogue and to open up the classroom to new and stimulating learning experiences. The initial focus was not on the improvement of intercultural communicative competence but it quickly became clear that the intercultural aspect emerges automatically once learners come into contact with native speakers of the language.

For this reason, the principal objectives of the exchange are now twofold. The first is to give our students the opportunity to experience interculturality

3. Usually three courses with about 60 students in Bologna and seven or eight courses with about 60 students in Munich. In case of beginner classes the number of students is about 100 in Bologna and up to 150 in Munich.

inside and outside the classroom by putting them into contexts of authentic communication with native speakers. Secondly, we want to sensitise our students to interculturality and to promote cultural awareness.

1.3. Project development

The cooperation started with lessons via Skype and a blog called “e-tandem Bologna-München”. Six months after the start of the telecollaboration, ten students from Munich organised a private trip to Bologna in order to get to know their partners from the Skype sessions. The students from Munich took part in the German lessons in Bologna and the experience of the shared lessons of foreign language learners and native speakers gave a new dimension to the project.

The tandem was redesigned for the following year to integrate study trips into the project. So far eight study trips have been organised: four to Munich and four to Bologna. In 2013 we decided to focus only on the Skype sessions and student mobility and to abandon the blog. We wanted to focus on activities in the classroom as the blog activities were not integrated in our lessons and so were more difficult to monitor.

2. Experiencing interculturality

The “Bologna-München” Tandem provides the opportunity for acting through telecollaboration and during real-life encounters. As [Liddicoat and Scarino \(2013\)](#) argue, “exposure to interaction of itself does not necessarily equate with intercultural learning” (p. 111), reflective practice on the experience is an integral part of the learning process as well.

2.1. Telecollaboration

The Skype lessons are organised in one course in Bologna and Munich and take place in real time once a week. The telecollaborative activities are part of the curriculum of both courses. The students are paired randomly at the beginning

of the exchange and they normally speak with the same partner throughout the course. Usually, 8 to 12 students participate in the Skype lessons. Skype conversations last 60 minutes and are bilingual – students speak half of the time in one language and then switch to the other one.

Skype sessions aim at improving students' ability to interact in the foreign language as well as at sharing experiences and knowledge about contemporary questions and issues which young people can easily relate to. The personalisation of the given topics is important as students are seen not as representatives of a culture or broadcasters of knowledge, but as individual interlocutors. The students' conversations are guided through established tasks. Following the conversation, reflective practice takes place through guided classroom discussion and learner diaries.

2.2. Student mobility

The aim of the one-week study trips is full immersion in the language and culture of the target country. The participation is voluntary and usually the students who attend the Skype lessons take part in the study trips. Students experience interculturality through contact with their hosts. This kind of accommodation not only gives an insight into the daily life of a student of the same age, but also forms the basis for authentic communication. Students can also have contact in real-life situations with other people such as family members, flatmates and friends.

The shared lessons are organised in all our classes and are held in German in Bologna and in Italian in Munich. They are integrated into the curriculum and allow all our students to have an intercultural experience in their classroom. One important part of the shared lessons are presentations by the guest students on pre-determined topics, for example presentations about Munich, the Ludwig-Maximilians-University or specific topics of interest. Learning, or rather acting, takes place inside and outside the classroom. Examples of shared learning experiences are guided tours organised by the students, or visits to museums or monuments.

3. Project evaluation

Student feedback emerges from the student reports as well as end-of-course questionnaires. When it comes to the Skype sessions, for most of the students in Bologna the conversations are their first contact with German native speakers. Students consider the telecollaboration a stimulating and important experience which allows them to test their German. Students focus primarily on the content of the conversation and the interaction itself, not on the correct form. The tandem situation is normally perceived as informal and this reduces inhibitions or fear of speaking. From a pedagogical view we can state that the successful interaction with equals contributes to the learners' personal development by making them more confident in the use of the language and consequently more self-assured and autonomous.

Time spent abroad does not necessarily guarantee contact with local students and may not lead to real interaction. In contrast, in the tandem situation, interaction is facilitated because students stay with their partners and all guided activities are designed to make students interact with one another. Due to the participation in the exchange activities, students open up to intercultural issues, e.g. the role of culture in communication or the perceptions different countries can have of each other. These issues are often not the focus of students' interest when studying a foreign language. Reflective practice on the intercultural experience broadens not only their view of the foreign culture, but also their own. Student feedback is very positive both in Bologna and in Munich. As the participation in the exchange activities is voluntary, only motivated students participate and their engagement contributes positively to the outcomes of the project. Negative aspects mentioned in the reports concern mainly technical problems during the Skype sessions.

4. Conclusion

The "Bologna-München" Tandem lives on the initiative and the enthusiasm of all its participants and is continuously evolving. Proof of this is the private trip

which was organised by the students from Munich during the first year of the project. Due to this initiative, the project developed in a new direction.

The “Bologna-München” Tandem combines computer-mediated communication with student mobility and due to this concept it is different from many other telecollaboration projects⁴. Telecollaboration and student mobility complement each other because the online activities not only form the basis for the real-life encounter but also allow for the continuation of the contact after the study trip. On the basis of the experiences in Bologna and Munich, we can confirm that telecollaboration is effective in establishing relationships between learners. However, acting – as the basis for experiencing interculturality – requires not only interlocutors, but also freedom in terms of space and time to allow personal engagement. The real-life encounters give students space and time to interact and allow for a live intercultural experience.

The “Bologna-München” Tandem shows that language teaching can successfully overcome the challenges involved in going beyond national borders and in achieving authentic contact between language learners and native speakers, thereby allowing them to experience interculturality.

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4. See for example the case studies in Guth and Helm (2010) and Guth, Helm, and O’Dowd (2012).

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