

How to build effective virtual exchanges: the case of UQAM, ULB, and other European Universities

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Presentation Outline

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Twinning conditions

Essential conditions to make twinnings successful.

All participants must:

- 1) be considered on an equal footing;
- 2) endorse collaborative work to achieve a common goal;
- 3) receive institutional support (Allport, 1954; Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005);
- 4) intergroup friendship;
- 5) intergroup contacts must involve multiple members of the outgroup, not few token individuals from the minority.

Genesis of the Teletandem project

2020-2022: Three universities - ULB, UQÀM, AMU (Université d'Aix-Marseille)

Participants: Groups of 4 to 6 students learning Spanish or French

2023-2025: Five universities - ULB, UQÀM, UCA, and USAL (Spain), Université d'Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)

Participants: Groups of 4 students learning Spanish or French

Students from: Belgium, Côte d'Ivoire, France, Québec, Colombia, Chile, Spain, Venezuela

Fields of study: Languages and Literature, and Educational Sciences

Project objectives

Allow students to:

- Expand their intercultural experiences through contact with students from different countries.
- Become aware of linguistic variations that characterize languages depending on the country - French from France, Belgium, Québec and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as Spanish from Spain and Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas.

Stages of the activity

1. Meeting with all participants and teachers for the project presentation
2. Three virtual meetings of at least one hour on the platform of their choice
3. A written production: a logbook in the target language to be submitted after the three meetings
4. Evaluation interview + certificate

Discussion topics

Meeting 1: "Getting to know each other" - Introductions, discussions about family, personal and/or family habits, typical food from respective countries, etc.

Meeting 2: "University life" - Comparing university experiences in the host and home countries: daily university life, studies, relationships with professors, university traditions, student-organized events, and cultural or activist celebrations held by different institutions.

Meeting 3: Other topics (civilization/current affairs/arts) - Traditional celebrations, travel, education, arts, communication media, sports, sciences, environment, media, gastronomy, famous personalities from different countries, feminism, secularism, etc.

Logbook

- Initial perceptions and expectations
- Progress in the target language and linguistic variations
- Intercultural understanding
- Personal benefits and lessons learned
- (Self-)evaluation and suggestions for the project

Project strengths (I)

- ☐ Availability and openness of other participants
- ☐ Opportunity to break from routine and meet new people
- ☐ Friendliness (enriching and enjoyable exchanges)
- ☐ Mutual support and corrections

- ☐ Linguistic diversity
- ☐ (Inter)cultural richness of the exchange

Project strengths (II)

- ☐ Oral language practice
- ☐ Opportunity to improve pronunciation and intonation
- ☐ Flexible scheduling for virtual meetings
- ☐ Possibility to connect from home

Project strengths (III)

« J' aime la liberté que le projet nous a donné, parce que nous avons beaucoup de choses à faire, et les organisateurs nous ont donné la possibilité de nous réunir lorsque nous le pouvons, de nous rencontrer pour le bénéfice de tous, donc ce projet n'est pas perçu comme un travail obligatoire ».
(étudiant USAL)

« I love the freedom that this project gave us because we have many things to do, and the organizers allowed us to meet whenever we could, to connect for everyone's benefit, so this project does not feel like an obligatory task ».

Points for consideration

- ☐ Organizational difficulties
- ☐ Technical difficulties with connection
- ☐ Time management between the two languages

Reviewing testimonials

Attitude	Feelings	Learning	Challenges
Volunteering	Nervousness	Strengthened language skills	Different expectations among participants
Determination to open up to the world and others	Enthusiasm	Strategies to make oneself understood	Different proficiency levels
	Concern	Understanding of cultural traits	Age differences
	Emotion		Time zone differences

Conclusion: advantages and benefits of the project

- Familiarizing our students with a diversity of cultural contexts and linguistic variations
- Acquisition and development of intercultural competence (existential competence in the CEFR)
- Understanding subjective cultures (both others' and one's own)
- Peer teaching/learning - telecollaboration and autonomy
- Personalized feedback
- Metalinguistic reflection in the exchange
- Authentic and meaningful interaction between individuals from different cultural systems
- Personal, linguistic, and cultural enrichment

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Thank you for your attention

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Testimonials

Concerns

- " The Intertandem experience was something I had never gone through before, so it was new to me, and I was a bit nervous because I had never spoken with so many strangers. But at the same time, we had one thing in common: learning a language."

Emotion

- "At first, I didn't know how we were going to organize everything; I thought it would be difficult. Also, on the first day, I was very nervous—I didn't want to make mistakes in French. However, everyone was very kind, and I realized that we were all participating in the 'Tandem' to learn, so I spoke a lot, even though I sometimes made linguistic errors."

Testimonials – Enthusiasm

- "Moreover, it was a perfect opportunity not only to practice my French but also to hear the Québécois accent 'live' and learn new ways of expressing myself in different countries. It was also a chance to make French friends."
- "In my opinion, participating in the French-Spanish tandem project is an opportunity that allows me to practice the language I am currently studying, learn about the different dialects spoken in French-speaking countries, share experiences and cultural habits with other students, and help those learning my native language improve their pronunciation and comprehension through practice."
- "It was a very fun meeting because they are lovely people with values that they appreciate as much as I do."

Linguistic / Cultural expectations

- "Communication was a bit difficult at first because we are very different, and I think we didn't have the same expectations."

Linguistic outcomes

- "Diane and I were determined to do it from the very beginning because it seemed like the perfect opportunity to get to know different types of Spanish- and French-speaking accents and cultures. »
- "From the very first moment, the international tandem seemed like an excellent idea to me. It was a way to meet new peers from so many different regions of the world. »
- "The pairing was a new way to discover other nationalities and different ways of life."

Cultural outcomes

- "I was also able to learn about cultural traits and interesting facts about it."
- "I learned a lot from the tandem, not only about the French language but also about different cultures."
- "The second session covered university life in our countries. I realized that there are fewer differences between European and American countries than I expected. It is also worth noting that in Europe, there is a strong culture around languages that does not exist in Canada, even though it is a bilingual country. In Europe, we learn the languages of our neighboring countries from childhood, and being bilingual or multilingual is highly encouraged across the continent. In Canada, however, people typically learn only French or English depending on whether they live in a francophone or anglophone province, and most people are monolingual. Some schools do offer programs to learn other languages."

Stereotypes

- "I had always heard that it was more difficult to understand, that it sounded 'strange.'"
- "The Spaniards spoke quickly among themselves."

Difficulties (communication, age difference, technology, time zone differences, lifestyle)

- "I found it a bit difficult to follow the conversation in the target language. The fact that some people are very fluent when speaking in the target language makes it so that others do not often take the floor during conversations. I didn't feel at ease during the conversations. Being naturally shy and quite reserved, I struggled a lot to speak."
- "Forming French sentences to respond was not very easy, and I felt a little ashamed of myself for not pronouncing or conveying exactly what I wanted to say."
- "To some extent, I don't really like speaking in front of people I don't know well, so sometimes I didn't participate much; I preferred to just listen. I felt more comfortable when speaking one-on-one with Justine. Also, there were six of us at the same time, so I think that's a lot for a conference where there were already some technical difficulties."

Topics covered

- "We talked about history, politics, conflicts, food, and leisure. One thing that greatly enriched the conversations was the variety of traditions and cultures we all brought together. We talked a lot about Latin America, the Catalan conflict in Spain, etc."
- "About the differences we noticed between our countries."
- "We also talked about everyday matters, comparing our daily lives (meal schedules, ways of studying in school, politics, sports, etc.)."
- "This time, the topics discussed were related to traditions, culture, and typical customs of each country. We also talked about the role of women in society."
- "Her religion and how she represents it through her hairstyles and clothing. We also talked about our future plans, both personal and professional."

Organization of the tandems

- "For this first meeting, I went to Diane's place so that we could make the video call together and make it more fun. After the call, we prepared a pizza and had dinner together. I must say that at first, we were all a bit shy, we had barely spoken before, and everything was very new, but after a few minutes, we started talking, and each of us introduced ourselves by describing our interests, the languages we spoke, our age, and what we were studying."
- "This time, it was Diane who came to my place, and instead of pizza, we prepared burgers and fries for dinner after the video call."

At the end ...?

- "We said goodbye with a big smile, even though it was a bit sad."
- "Overall, I think it was a very good experience, and I feel lucky to have been able to participate in it because, at my home university, we don't have these kinds of opportunities to practice a language with people from all over the world. Obviously, it is essential to be consistent and flexible when committing to this tandem, but in the end, it is very satisfying and worth it. Highly recommended!"
- "The experience was very good. I talked with people from different parts of the world and different regions of France. I learned about their customs, traditions, and how life is in their countries. Despite speaking the same language, I noticed cultural differences. I also observed some differences between the French and Belgian accents, although personally, I didn't find many."

At the end ...?

- "I felt very comfortable in all the meetings."
- "We tried to make everyone feel confident so that everyone would be at ease."
- "In Quebec, this is called 'jumelage.' We reflected on this word and found that it is a tender way to describe this project because it aligns with the idea of family."
- "After these meetings, I conclude that all cultures are very interesting and very different. I realized that even if two or more countries share the 'same' language, it is 'modified' according to culture. In other words, each language is a reflection of a culture."

At the end ...?

- "It is very interesting and enriching, not only because of the improvement and learning of languages but also due to the knowledge of other cultures and people with a different mindset."
- "It is undoubtedly a project that should continue so that people have the opportunity to open up to others and different cultures."