

WHAT DO THE LEARNING DIARIES TELL US ABOUT THE LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE BASED ON PEER-TEACHING?

Maarika Teral, & Raili Pool

Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, University of Tartu (Estonia)

Abstract

This paper focuses on two language courses developed for learning Estonian: “Tandem Language Learning” and “Estonian Conversation Course”. Compared to a traditional instructor-led activity-based course, these are based on peer-teaching of students and provide significant support for learner autonomy. The courses are part of the University of Tartu's humanities curricula, with the possibility of online participation for learners from universities outside Estonia. In both subjects, student pairs of Estonian language native and non-native speakers are formed, who plan and conduct their meetings related to the study of Estonian and, in the case of a tandem course, study of one other foreign language throughout the course. Both courses are based on a collaborative learning partnership: participants take control and responsibility for their own and their partner's language learning process. Participants complete a learning diary in which they analyse their work and receive feedback from their instructors. Analysis of the learning diaries shows that students value the opportunity to create the content of the language course based on their own and their partner's needs. According to the students, the use of a web environment for tandem work increases the flexibility of the study arrangements. In the teacher's role students feel responsibility with respect to their partners and emphasise that during the course their understanding of their native language increased. In the student's role participants point to the positive influence of partnership on the increase of their communication skills and vocabulary development in the language they are studying.

Keywords: *CALL, tandem language learning, autonomy of the learner, learning diaries, Estonian as a foreign language.*

1. Introduction

In this paper, we will analyse two university language courses developed for learning Estonian as a foreign language: “Tandem Language Learning” and “Estonian Conversation Course”. The courses are part of the University of Tartu's humanities curricula, and students can study these on an optional or elective subject basis, with the possibility of online participation for learners from universities outside Estonia.

Compared to traditional instructor-led activity-based language learning courses, these courses are based on peer-teaching of students and provide significant support for learner autonomy. Usually learning autonomy is treated as the student's ability to take responsibility for their own learning; in language study this is inseparable from development of communication skills in the target language (Little, 2007). Schwienhorst (2003) foregrounds individual-cognitive, social-interactive, experimental-participatory perspectives in learner autonomy and tandem learning as an implementation of these principles.

In addition to learners' autonomy, both of these courses also support the reciprocity principle of language study. In both courses the intercultural, discursive ja semantic dimensions of reciprocity are expressed; in collaborative learning the focus is on both the language, the structure of a conversation as well as cultural specificities (Cappellini et al., 2020). In the tandem course the structure also follows the principle of organisational reciprocity: two languages are learned in tandem, while students can decide whether they will work with one language per meeting or two languages by turns. In the tandem course one of the languages studied is Estonian; the other can be any other foreign language. In the conversation course the language study partners only practice Estonian: the pairs consist of one native speaker and another for whom Estonian is a foreign language. In both courses students can choose how they will conduct their work: they can choose the topic of conversation, supplementary materials (e.g., webpages, dictionaries), the form of study (e.g shared activities in the language milieu, language study games, etc.).

The focus of this article is the learning diaries of language learners, which are a good starting point for qualitative research and provide a glimpse of the learning process and factors which influence it.

Previous research has used learning diaries to examine the experience of language learners primarily in instructor-led language study (e.g., Porto, 2007; Nešić & Spasić-Stojković, 2017). Less research has been conducted on learning diaries that reflect upon students' work in partnership (e.g., Leone et al., 2023).

2. Objectives

The objective of the research is to clarify the experience of students as language learners in university courses taught entirely in the peer-teaching format. Based on the analysis of entries in learning diaries answers are sought to the following research questions: 1) how participants experienced their roles as a language learner and their partner's teacher, and in what way peer-taught learning differed from their previous experiences, 2) what support was expected and received from the course instructor, 3) how work in a web environment influenced the learning experiences of participants in the course.

3. Methodology

Excerpts that connect with the research questions have been selected from the learning diaries of two courses (n = 87). The summary was composed which was illustrated with quotations. The learning diaries were filled out in the Moodle environment. Keeping a learning diary was a compulsory element for both courses. Since the students conducted their language learning meetings independently, the instructors could use the learning diaries to keep up and to communicate with them. During the course the students made entries about their meetings, posed questions to the instructor and reflected on their experience. The majority of the entries in the learning diaries were made in Estonian, though if they wished, learners could also write in other languages. Interaction between the students and the course instructors took place through the learning diaries; instructors provided ongoing feedback for the learning diaries throughout the course and answered the learners' questions. In this article only the students' entries are considered; the feedback provided by instructors is not included. The study follows the principles of qualitative research.

4. Findings

In the following we will give an overview of the experiences related in the learning diaries pertaining to foreign language learning in the peer teaching format.

1. Participants' roles in the two courses were partly similar and partly different. In the tandem course each participant was in two roles during the course (a reciprocal learner-teacher relationship). In the conversation course the participants' roles remained the same throughout. In both courses the partners got to know each other's culture and society, including everyday life and value judgments.

- There are topics that are current in both countries, and we would discuss them at length; as every country has their own problems, we would talk and ask questions about things that interested us.

For most students this was their first experience of this kind of collaborative learning experience and participants had to adjust to their partners. Those in the teacher's role mostly brought out their new experience of their mother tongue from a foreign language learning perspective; they had to keep their partner's language level in mind, slow down the pace of conversation, choose topics, answer questions, search for materials to better their own understanding of language structure.

- It was very interesting to see how people with different mother tongues speak and use Estonian. This made me think about the Estonian language differently, too.

- Teaching grammar was the hardest, for example, when to use the -ma and da endings.

According to the evaluation of the participants, courses based on peer teaching were mostly different from their previous experience with language learning. Individual learning together with one's partner makes it possible to focus on necessary topics for themselves; one can study what the learner desires and control over learning is completely in the hands of the students.

- .. here you create a complete language course for oneself.

- These are like individual lessons with a language teacher – you can learn exactly what you ask.

- I could devote myself to learning only what I considered to be the most important.

The learners valued the opportunity to practice the language they were learning with someone who spoke it as their mother tongue; what was considered particularly important was oral communication and growth in the courage to speak in the target language during the course.

- This course gave me the opportunity to speak on a range of topics with Estonians and I became more confident of my language ability.

2. For both courses the learning diaries functioned as an interactive platform through which participants could communicate with course instructors and ask them for advice. Despite the fact that course

instructors encouraged participants to pose questions to them in the learning diaries, participants in both courses made little use of this opportunity. The opportunity for asking questions was used primarily by students in the teacher's role and the questions touched upon the following topics: 1) carrying out language study; 2) advice on how to answer one's tandem partner's question on a topic of grammar or vocabulary; 3) soliciting recommendations on what materials to use while studying together with one's tandem partner. The instructors of both courses provided ongoing feedback on the learning diaries throughout the course and if there were questions, the answers were included in the feedback to the learning diary; specific language questions were explained and links and information on study materials were shared. The learners valued the opportunity to gain the instructor's support through the web diary.

- *I liked the feeling that I was taken care of. I liked getting feedback on my journal and feeling that my partners could get feedback from the teacher as well.*

- *It was good to know that someone was following our activities on Moodle all the time. It was motivating. Perhaps otherwise I would not have completed the course to the required extent.*

3. Because in these courses the participants themselves have to find a place for their language learning meeting, the web has become a comfortable alternative to meeting face to face. Students value the freedom to make choices themselves over when and where to meet and the partner work of students living abroad takes place entirely online. Learners can choose the web environment themselves; for example, Zoom, Skype and Google Meet have been used. Based on learning diaries one can say that from the perspective of language learning students consider web meetings equal to face-to-face meetings; it is emphasised that web learning particularly suits one-to-one collaboration, which is precisely what peer learning is.

- *We could share a screen and look up words.*

- *Web-based language learning makes it easier to agree on meeting times, because it is easier to meet through the internet than face to face. It also provides the opportunity to converse with someone who is in another city or country.*

5. Conclusions

The courses examined in this article are built upon the learners' collaborative learning partnership and support the principles of autonomy and reciprocity in language learning. Analysis of the learning diaries shows that the learners value the opportunity to create the content of the language course according to their own and their partners' needs; in collaborative learning the participants develop their knowledge of language and culture. As learners participants bring out the positive influence of tandem study on communication skills in the language and vocabulary development; the teacher's role offers the opportunity to regard one's mother tongue from the perspective of foreign language learning. Learning diaries function as an interactive communication platform between the learners and instructors. According to participants the use of the web environment increases the flexibility of tandem learning, and from the perspective of effectiveness it is not different from face-to-face learning. Courses with a peer-teaching format provide an exciting supplement to traditional university language learning courses.

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