Authenticity in the Language Classroom: A Case Study

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Abstract

Task-based learning and the communicative approach prevalent in teaching languages in higher education reach their apex when incorporating authentic activities, material, and experiences in their teaching repertoire. Yet authenticity in the classroom is hard to design, and often simply reduced to the use of so-called authentic material, without engaging students as a whole person with their own feelings, interests, and cultures. In 2015 in French Studies at the University of Western Australia together with Lille III University, France, we implemented Teletandem, a series of language tasks where learners are paired. Based on the participants' blogs and reflective reports, Teletandem appears to be relatively authentic and sit halfway between absolute authenticity and in authenticity. This paper will show that relative authenticity improves students' communicative and cultural competence, as well as their intrinsic motivation. Students feel empowered as long as they don' have to stray too far from their linguistic and cultural comfort zone.

Keywords: Teletandem, language learning, authenticity, communicative approach, task-based learning, cultural competence

In his 2007 review of language textbooks, Alex Gilmore lists the three criteria needed to assess authenticity: "[it] can be situated in either the text itself, in the participants, in the social or cultural situation and purposes of the communicative act, or some combination of these." (Gilmore, 2007, 98) The experiment called Teletandem ran by the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Lille III-Charles de Gaulle, France, was designed to be authentic in all three aspects of material, tasks and setting, something rarely achieved in curriculum design, according to Gilmore. This is due to teachers-designers not having a working definition of authenticity. In our case study, we started with a superficial view of what authenticity in language teaching is. Our main object was to instigate successful pairings of Australian students learning French with learners of English in France. Despite our limited view of authenticity our experiment brought excellent outcomes, like a noticeable increase in communicative and cultural competencies in the participants, and renewed motivation in learning the languages.[1] Teletandem revealed that without being totally authentic, its relative authenticity proved sufficiently challenging for the participants, and contributed positively to the unit outcomes.

1. Teletandem[2]

In Teletandem students of intermediate and advanced French had to 'meet' on Skype their partners studying English at Lille III University. They had to do six Skype sessions, of one-hour duration, at the day and time of their choosing, within an eight-week period. During their one-on-one meetings, students were required to carry out set linguistic and cultural tasks, first in French, then in English, or vice-versa.

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[1] Although the activity involved learners of English in France too, this paper is based solely on findings from learners of French in Australia.

[2] This and the following comments are from blog or diary entries produced by the Australian students.

The tasks were duly scuffled, starting with getting to know each other as individuals ("Do you prefer city or country?" "Are you a cat or a dog lover?"), then as representatives of a city (Perth, Lille), a country (France, Australia or other), and one or more culture(s). The language activities tackled national stereotypes ("What do you know about French/Australian people?"), opinions ("Everyone lies once in a while", "Loud music is bad for you"), and values to be applied in hypothetical situations ("Someone jumps the queue in front of you", "You're sitting next to a student who is cheating at an exam"). Linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural competences were thus all built into the Skype conversations. During the Skype sessions, after half an hour, partners were to switch to the other language, and continue with the set activities. If learners started in French, then switched to English, the following session had to start with English, and then switch to French. This was to ensure that no language or partner would dominate the conversations, and that there would be both language use and language learning: learning from the partner, who might well play the role of the teacher for the half of the session in their language; then the roles would be reversed, so that learners became teachers. "Learning by teaching" is typical of the communicative approach to language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, 153). Grounded in reciprocity and autonomy (Cappellini & Pescheux, 2015, 172), these alternating roles, and foregrounding of native-speaking competencies, were an important element in the success of Teletandem. Depending on proficiency levels, personalities, age groups, skills, some partners were more or less interventionists but they reported a general spirit of collaboration:

il faut souligner que lors des premières rencontres, je me serais sentie impolie si j'avais insisté pour rester dans le sujet. J'aurais eu l'air désintéressée et Mathilde était très respectueuse envers moi. (Penelope) [I must stress that during our first meetings, I would have felt rude to insist to remain within the set topics. I would have sounded indifferent [to my partner], whereas Mathilde showed me great respect.][3] To complement the Skype conversations students had to contribute to a blog, write short diary entries and at the end of the eight weeks, a self-reflective report. The blog entries would highlight note-worthy parts of the sessions, and could be accompanied by pictures or recordings. The blog was the first point of contact between participants where they had to upload their profiles. Subsequent entries would help create a sense of community and keep in touch between Skype sessions. Language-wise the blog would contribute to developing a sense of the appropriate written style required for public communication between peers in contrast with the diary and the reflective report. And indeed students managed to find their 'casual', friendly voice, and even try their hand at humour:

J'adore nos sessions de Skype parce que nous passons des sujets sensibles et pensifs puis cinq minutes plus tard nous parlons de la télé réalité pendant l'heure qui suit! [I love our skype sessions because we discuss important and thought provoking topics, then five minutes later, we would be talking about reality TV for the next hour !]

Although the word diary suggests students would write a private text, it was not the case as their diary entries would be read and assessed by the teachers. It is not the authentic, intimate diary one writes for one's own eyes only. It would nonetheless be expected to be in a style less formal than the end-of-semester report. All three assessments therefore covered a range of registers from informal to formal, and a range of document types from blog entries, through a pseudo-diary to an analytical report.

Eight intermediate and advanced students of French and eight students of English, all volunteers, participated. Teletandem was incorporated into two third year units at UWA, and at Lille, some students were third year undergraduates, others Master Students. For their participation to Teletandem, UWA students would be exempt from some classes, and their Teletandem assignments were worth 30% of their final grade. UWA and Lille didn't quite align their written requirements and marks. This gave rise to a few panicky blog entries: "Have you submitted your report yet?" "What report?" This was an added bonus to the communicative experience: students were problem-solving in a foreign language. The differences in the university systems in France and Australia became subjects of conversations. Australian students, who have been brought up on a diet of continuous assessment with few examinations, realised the pre-eminence of examinations over continuous assessment in France. Likewise, since some French students from Lille were first year Masters students, the fact that they had to get good marks to be accepted into their second year was also news to Australian students, as this is rarely the case at Australian universities.

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[3] This and the following comments are from blog or diary entries produced by the Australian students.

1.1 Authenticity in the language material

The set activities were adaptable to the varying level of proficiency of the pairs, so that intermediate and advanced students could complete them at their levels, staying with "Do you prefer Pepsi or Coke", or progressing to "How do you see your future". Very advanced students did comment on some questions being "boring":

On trouvait que les questions prévues pour les activités, surtout du genre « Pepsi ou Coca ? » était assez ennuyeuses, donc on préférait choisir une ou deux questions et les explorer plus en profondeur. (Adam) [We thought that the set questions, like 'Pepsi or Coca-Cola' were fairly boring, so we preferred to choose one or two questions and explore them in more depth.]

Triggered by succinct prompts, the language material was created by the learners themselves – so they could "impose their own authenticity" on the tasks (Taylor, ibid). For instance when asked about their opinions, they may be insincere, inventive, reserved; they had agency and could show initiative (Tamás Péter Szabó, 2015), such as deviating from the set tasks. One pair of students, Penelope and Mathilde, spent two hours singing their favourite songs, dancing their favourite moves, and quite forgetting time and activities. This was authenticity in action and the proof that what matters in language tasks is the way you exploit the material, rather than the material itself.

1.2 Authenticity from the point of view of participants

The language use was authentic in that a genuine interaction between 'real' people occurred. Even though prepared and not entirely spontaneous, such language use involved learners' selves and values. In Teletandem French became a real means of interaction, not a language learned just for the beauty and challenges of learning a language:

Peu d'étudiants australiens ont la chance de parler face à face à un autre étudiant étranger qu'on n'a jamais rencontré. (Andie) [Few Australian students have the opportunity to speak face to face with another foreign student and a total stranger.]

The participants were acting naturally enough, the only contrivance being they were all students, and not any foreigner met by chance when immersed in a foreign country: the raison d'être of the Teletandem interaction is the learning of a language (Cappellini & Pescheux, 2015, 173). In fact, far from being random, matching the students was done on the basis of the proficiency levels and the profiles posted earlier on the blog. Students commented on how compatible their partners were:

je m'attendais à un écart énorme entre les compétences de nos partenaires en Lille et les nôtres (ou au moins les miennes) à Perth. Cependant, il me semble que les supérieures aient veillé à choisir les partenaires tout en tenant compte de nos aptitudes. Je ne sais pas à quel point c'était l'effet du hasard, mais je serai éternellement reconnaissante d'avoir été jumelée avec Mathilde ☺. (Penelope) [I was expecting a huge gap between the Lille partners' skills and ours (or at least mine) in Perth. Yet it seems that our 'bosses' chose our partners with great care, whilst matching our abilities. I don't know whether chance came into it, but I will be forever grateful that I was paired up with Mathilde.]

1.3 Authenticity of setting

The setting was authentic as the activity consisted in conversations taking place by way of synchronous encounters via Skype, away from teachers and classrooms. Authenticity of setting is also about the limited teacher's role in Teletandem. Ahead of the one-on-one Skype sessions, a videoconference was organised with all sixteen students and the teaching team (a lecturer and teaching assistant for each institution) from both universities, during which the group engaged in various ice-breakers in both languages. Apart from this videoconference and a final one at the end of the eight weeks, teachers took a backstage role. Past the initial instructions, instructors were not there to control turn-taking, ask questions, nor correct or give feedback during the actual interactions. The burden of language accuracy was shared by participants, but took second place to the communicative needs (Cappellini & Pescheux, 2015, 173):

je ne me souciais pas des erreurs de Morgane, elle n'était pas concernée avec les miennes. Après avoir pris conscience de cette notion, j'étais libre de découvrir à qui je parlais de l'autre côté de la planète. (Oscar) [I didn't mind Morgane's mistakes, and she didn't mind mine. Once I realised that, I was free to discover whom I was talking to at the other end of the globe.]

Teletandem is clearly not a "transmission-oriented" task (Cummins 2006, 54), as in the 'sage on the stage' approach. This is again a tenet of task-based learning grounded on a "discursively reconstructed agency of teachers and students" (Tamás Péter Szabó, 2015). Gilmore reports that the conservatism in teaching material design might be explained in part by teachers being reluctant to relinquish control over the learning (Gilmore, 2007, 112). Teletandem greatly contributed to learners' autonomy and therefore their improved confidence.

2. Authenticity in Language Teaching

In his 1994 article "Authentic in authenticity or Inauthentic Authenticity", David Taylor argues that the typical divide between the artificiality of the language classroom and the authenticity of the outside world lacks rigour. Firstly, there is no absolute notion of authenticity. Being 'a social construct' authenticity is a matter of interpretation: it is through our social use of language that "we create our own sense of authenticity" (Tatsuki, 2006, 3). Authentic material is usually the code word for material not produced for teaching purposes. But such teaching material in itself doesn't guarantee that the activity will be authentic. Authentic material can be used in an inauthentic fashion, for instance doing grammar parsing of a 'real' newspaper article, instead of discussing the ideas contained in the article. The quality of the teaching material is predicated on the quality of the teacher's use of it, the 'authority' of material becoming secondary to the 'authority' of the teacher. As Teletandem proved, learners can also become teachers of their own language and skills. Language use might be inauthentic because it takes place between learners of the same language, or learners and teachers; but even when reaching out to native speakers, the scope of the language use is often so limited that neither the learners' selves nor their values are truly engaged.

What seems to matter is the task's "communicative and cognitive goals" (Kramsch, cited by Taylor, 1994, n.p.), not whether the task is authentic. Most communicative methods are thus based on artificial dialogues, artificial question/answer interactions where the questioner, usually the teacher, knows the answer. The Teletandem tasks too were mostly based on questions and answers, but the partner would provide the answer they wanted trusting that there was a genuine interest in knowing the other person's tastes and ideas. Authentic tasks are more likely to fulfill communicative and cognitive goals than textbook ones. Moreover, owing to a genuine appetite for discovering the other, such tasks develop skills necessary for spontaneous re-use, and promote retention. Turning to setting, Gilmore's third criteria for authenticity, it would seem at first glance that classrooms are inauthentic settings, yet they provide an authentic setting of sorts because for learners it feels real to use their macro- and micro-skills in a face-to-face situation involving a foreign language. So authenticity is a relativistic concept, maybe even an ambiguous one (Gilmore, 2007, 97).

Yet students have a craving for authenticity even though they might not express it in so many words. If we are to believe contemporary philosophers, our current students belong to the "age of authenticity [...] one distinctive feature of recent Western intellectual developments" (Taylor 2007; Ferrara 1998, cited in Verga & Guignon, 2014, n.p.). Such scholars are mostly talking about authenticity of the self. They wish to criticise trivialized notions of authenticity made fashionable by a pop-psychology of self-indulgence as in 'my wishes are society's command'. The take-home message from these thinkers is a warning against "meaninglessness, which is one of the 'malaises of modernity'" (Taylor, 1991, ibid).

To avoid meaninglessness in language teaching, Christian Ollivier, French lecturer at the Université de la Réunion, devised what he calls an "approche interactionnelle" (interaction-oriented approach). Mindful of setting meaningful assignments, he designs language activities around three precepts: "learning to do", "interacting to learn", and "doing to learn". Instead of isolated and decontextualized competencies, interaction-oriented tasks allow learners to embrace the tasks because of their meaning and usefulness. Learners act in the foreign language "for real", not like learners, but like a fully-fledged person. Finally, the tasks matter not only to the learners, but also to the teachers who are truly interested in the outcome (Ollivier, 2015, n.p.). As one Teletandem participant said:

c'était un vrai blog que mes camarades pouvaient lire (au lieu d'un exercice qui aboutit dès que le stylo quitte la page et qui n'a vraiment pas de but). (Penelope) [it was a true blog my classmates could read (instead of an exercise completed the minute the pen leaves the page, and without no real purpose.] Teletandem can claim to be a perfect example of the interaction-oriented approach. In such a setting, our students' moral values – integrity, sincerity – combine with the central tenet of interconnectedness and efficiency. Teletandem works well because it engages both savoir-faire (know-how) and savoir-être (know-to-be, or existential competence).

So, how do we reconcile this 'craving for authenticity' with the fact that only eight students volunteered to join the scheme at UWA? At Lille, the program is compulsory, and students are also paired with UK and US universities. The eight volunteers from UWA represented a small fraction of the potential cohort of sixty, that is the number of students taking a third year French unit.

The low uptake can be attributed to students being naturally shy and apprehensive about 'real-life' interaction, and conversation in particular and to the fact; this was a pilot program with no prior student's testimonies to promote it. Students also had to commit to it at the end of their second year, for a start in March the following year. It seems students are ill-equipped for this degree of advanced planning.

In fact, one of the advantages mentioned repeatedly by participants is Teletandem's flexibility, the opposite of advanced planning – so there was a commitment to the unknown, but once committed learners were afforded some flexibility. In contrast with set conversation classes – optional at UWA -, Teletandem afforded self-management of time, this is highly prized by digital natives:

Un autre avantage du Teletandem est la souplesse d'horaire. Ce n'est pas une classe de conversation à une heure et durée fixe. On peut, avec son partenaire, décider de l'heure qui convient le mieux et parler la langue qu'on veut pour le temps qu'on veut. (Adam) [the other good point about Teletandem is the flexible scheduling. It is not a conversation class offered at a set time and for a set duration. One can decide with their partner on the most suitable time, and speak the language we want for the length of time we want.]

Flexibility is about choice. In the words of Jane Arnold, a well-known researcher in the area of affects in language learning: "Choice is inherently motivating. When we are forced to do something, our feeling of autonomy is limited and we are not going to be intrinsically motivated." (Arnold, 2011, 15)

3. Conclusion

Teletandem's main objective was to break down the artificiality of the classroom setting which can lead to loss of motivation particularly in seasoned learners, like third-year students. It aimed at addressing the challenge of improving their communicative and cultural competencies of an already fairly high proficiency level (B2-C1 in the European Framework for Languages). This presents a real challenge in a conventional classroom setting. Keeping in mind the above reservations about myths surrounding absolute authenticity, it was felt that an activity like Teletandem would rekindle or increase students' motivation. One student commented on the importance of matching level of motivation of each partner:

je dois revenir sur l'importance d'avoir un partenaire motivé et prêt à consacrer son temps à l'activité. (Adam) [I insist on the importance of having a partner who is motivated and ready to devote time to the activity]. According to Alex Gilmore, this is the main reason why authenticity is introduced in language, and yet he couldn't find any conclusive empirical evidence of the connection between authentic material and motivation (Gilmore, 2007, 106). Interestingly when we move away from authentic material and consider authentic tasks like conversations – which is what Teletandem was mostly about -, the correlation between authenticity and motivation becomes very strong: Most conversations are appallingly boring. It is the participation in conversations which makes us such avid talkers, the 'need to know' or 'the need to tell' or 'the need to be friendly' (Brown & Yule 1983, 82, quoted Gilmore, 2007, 107)

And increased motivation is what most students concluded their reports with:

Grâce au programme de Télétandem ce semestre, j'ai retrouvé confiance en moi, [et connu] un avis plus ouvert et des horizons plus élargis, toutes qualités importantes dans la poursuite des langues étrangères. (Andie) [Thanks to Teletandem this semester, I regained by confidence and [got to know] other opinions and expanded my horizons, all things important in sticking with learning foreign languages].

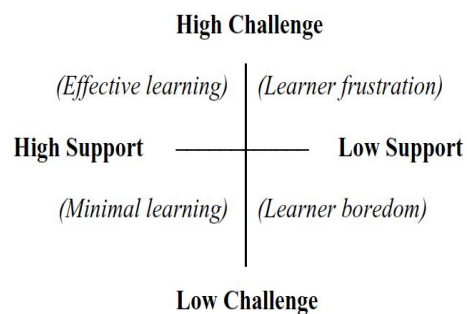**This remark is supported by Jane Arnold's research:**

There is a direct and reciprocal relationship in language learning between competence and confidence. Developing greater competence leads to more confidence but also, having confidence makes it easier to acquire greater competence. (Arnold, 2011, 16) Teletandem participants wanted to do well not for external rewards (a mark, a step towards acquiring a university degree) but for intrinsic rewards, such as adding to their understanding of the language and the world, and strengthening their relationships with other people. One measure for success, although not assessed, is the friendships that resulted from Teletandem with some students visiting each other's cities, and others planning to come on an exchange in Australia.

Whether a cause for participation or a result of that participation, (re) motivation played an integral part in Teletandem judging from the eight pairs completing all the set tasks and Skype sessions, with no discernable diminishing involvement, and all commenting on a language journey going from apprehension to enthusiasm:

J'imaginais que les exercices de Télétandem seraient un baptême du feu pour mes compétences d'expression orale. Et comme les exercices m'ont fait surmonter ma peur de parler, ma prédiction était correcte. Cependant, je n'avais pas prévu que cette peur serait diminuée si tôt. (Oscar) [I thought Teletandem would be a baptism of fire for my oral skills. In addition, since these exercises allowed me to overcome my fear of speaking, I was accurate in my prediction. However, I didn't anticipate that my fear would decrease so early on.]

Relative authenticity is more than just authentic material

What remained in Teletandem from the realm of the classroom – the in authenticity? - was the institutional mandate that all tasks be clearly aligned to outcomes, and above all assessed: even though such tasks were about genuine interactions, and were imbued with meaning and efficacy, they were still contrived. Teletandem being different from more conventional classroom activities it required a high level of teachers' support in the setting up stages. This is true of all well-designed challenging language tasks if we are to believe Gilmore's chart (2007, 112):

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High Challenge

(Effective learning) | *(Learner frustration)*

High Support ——————————|—————————— **Low Support**

(Minimal learning) | *(Learner boredom)*

Low Challenge

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So Teletandem was neither classroom, nor real life; Skype sessions were not natural, spontaneous interactions. But such contrivance is what teaching is all about, and it's not intrinsically 'bad' (see Widdowson, 2003). Anything likely to improve learners' communicative competence is 'good' and anything informing teachers too about such opportunities for improvement are good. Teletandem indeed offers invaluable opportunities for language learning research to find out what really improves learners' competency and what really happens in exolingual[4] interfaces. Cappellini and Pescheux recorded fifteen Skype sessions of Teletandem between French and Chinese students. Their analysis of over twenty hours of such bilingual "communicative contracts" (2015, 173) enlightens educators about the manner of "normative evaluations" by students correcting their partners' errors. The gentle and indirect style of error corrections speaks volume about the worth of such exchanges for learners. The two researchers also drill into the conversations to spot hesitations and false starts which may be discreet cries for help, and detect the variety of interactions such as moments of potential knowledge acquisition or explanatory exchanges. Such authentic exchanges in short are valuable sources of information for the teachers to improve their own communication with learners.

Material for Teletandem was prepared in advance, but was meant to be used in a natural way. Tasks were incremental and scuffled by levels of difficulty and engagement avoiding the risk posed by authenticity requiring a quantum leap in learners' skills or, in Vytgotsky's constructivist terms, the danger of authenticity not working inside learners' "Zone of Proximal Development" (quoted Gilmore, 2007, 112). Oscar, one of the students we cited all along this paper, concluded that "Teletandem m'a sorti de ma zone de confort linguistique, il a ouvert la porte de ma zone de confort culturel" [Teletandem got me out of my linguistic comfort zone, and opened up the door to my zone of cultural comfort]. Teletandem allowed him to remain just within a stone throw of his comfort zone, yet still stand in the proximate zone where he could experiment safely, and grow. This is the reason why the program was offered to intermediate and advanced students, not beginners, whose competence would be too low to overcome their feelings of inadequacy and frustration instead of nurturing their passion.[5]

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[4] Exolingual interactions occur between people with different mother tongues.

[5] See Arnold quoting Reasoner, the founder of the International Council of Self-Esteem, for the five measures of self-esteem, 2011, p. 17.

So authenticity needs to remain safely pitched just above the learner's proficiency level. The way to do this is to introduce it 'by degree', in the words of Donna Tatsuki (Tatsuki, 2006, n.p.). Finally, the setting – the six Skype sessions – was not rigid and imposed, but organised nonetheless. All this made *Teletandem* very different from real-life conversations, but much closer to authenticity than the classroom setting. It engaged the learner as a whole person with affects, values, and desires. In David Taylor's words, 'inauthentic authenticity' – which we prefer to call 'relative authenticity' – is sufficiently challenging for students to achieve cognitive and communicative goals of language learning at university, and feel empowered in the process.

We can only encourage language teachers-designers in higher education institutions to use free and easily accessible communication technologies to offer effective and exciting relatively authentic tasks to their students.

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