Irene Scapin

e-Tandem at the University of Padova

This chapter will present the e-Tandem project promoted by the University of Padova Language Centre in collaboration with Boston University Padua Academic Centre. In the first chapter the Face-to-face Tandem Learning programme at the University of Padova was introduced and, as shown, during past years it has been a great success and now more and more students are likely to enroll. Moreover, there has been a great demand for English, as it is becoming a key requirement to study at university. For this reason, and because of the lack of English-speaking students who cannot meet all the Face-to-face Tandem Learning requests, in the First Semester 2011/12 the e-Tandem project was held for the first time.

It was developed from an idea of Daniela Griggio, staff member of the Language Centre students' office, in collaboration with Boston University Padua Academic Centre. In the organization of the project the following people were also involved: Francesca Helm, researcher at the Department of International Studies and English teacher at the Faculty of Political Science, Micol Altinier and Lisa Griggio, staff members of the Language Centre, and Charlotte Whigham, CEL (language collaborator and expert) at Language Centre. In addition, two students of Political Science were involved as forum moderators and me, Irene Scapin, as I was a National Civil Service volunteer at the Language Centre.

My role in the project was mainly to help the Language Centre staff with the organization. During my time there, I sent some e-mails to students to advertise the start of this new activity, I helped to put the information on the website, to collect the registration forms, to match the students and to organize the final meeting. At the end, I analysed the information gathered through the feedback forms and the students' diaries and I personally interviewed some e-Tandem participants to better understand what they thought about the project.

As mentioned before, the idea came in order to meet the needs of the high number of University of Padova students who asked for an English-speaking Tandem partner and who could not be paired. E-Tandem, therefore, was to allow Italian students to practise English

in a real context, as well as deepening their linguistic and cultural knowledge, at the same time promoting the internationalization of the university. Likewise, it was the planners' opinion that being in touch with students of their forthcoming host university would also be very useful for Second Semester 2011/12 incoming American students and, for this reason, it was decided to address the project to the students enrolled in the Padua Language and Liberal Arts Program run by Boston University. In this way, indeed, they could have the opportunity to get to know the environment they were about to face, by getting in touch with students who were familiar with Italian university system and culture and by benefitting from some language practice before their departure. It was also intended to increase their interest in Italy.

4.1 Planning

The first meeting to discuss the project was held in October 2011. On that occasion, the project aims, structure, length and modes of development were defined. E-Tandem was conceived as peer-to-peer learning at a distance and consisted of a linguistic exchange via Internet in Italian and English. In line with Face-to-face Tandem Learning, students were to get in touch with their Tandem partners autonomously and agree when, how often and with which tools to communicate. They had the possibility to choose between several online tools, such as e-mail, chat, videoconference, social networks etc, according to their and their partner's needs and aims. Nevertheless, participants had to respect Tandem Learning's fundamental principles: autonomy and reciprocity. For this reason, students were asked to guarantee the same commitment they would expect from their peers. Moreover, they were also asked to balance the time to dedicate to both languages so that both students could obtain equal benefits.

During the meeting it was also decided to give participants the opportunity to get in touch with all the students involved in the project and not only with their e-peers. This decision was made because an online project lacks physical presence and sometimes may cause students a sense of disorientation. Feeling part of a community, therefore, would have been very useful as students could always have someone to rely on and the experience could

be more enjoyable. For this reason, it was decided to create a specific section for them in Moodle.

Moodle was chosen as it was a safe environment which students could access only by username and password. Through this platform, learners' activity could be tracked and monitored by the staff members and their contents could be stored in the server of the University of Padova. In addition, according to Guth and Thomas (2010: 46), "in closed environments educators and/or technicians have total control over who accesses material and, therefore, issues of copyright are in many ways avoided". Another advantage of Moodle was its well-organized structure, as it is an e-learning platform and is designed to support a social constructionist framework of education[1]. Its space, indeed, can be divided into different sections, each of which can contain learning resources, forums and activities. Its layout includes a number of central sections where these materials are displayed, plus side blocks offering extra features such as links to external websites. Furthermore, since Moodle is widely used at the University of Padova, many Italian students might already know how it works. Finally, this space was multi-functional: on the one hand students could keep in touch with all participants through forums and its private chatrooms and, on the other hand, tutors could use it to forward notifications and news about the project.

The Moodle space for e-Tandem, therefore, was structured as follows:

- a section intended for news, where all general announcements by members of staff were posted;
- a forum-cafè which was content-free and where the whole e-Tandem community could contribute and meet to share information or discuss topics of interest;
- eight weekly forums with a specific topic where students could exchange ideas and opinions.

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[1] Source: http://docs.moodle.org/23/en/About_Moodle

Finally, in the side blocks learners could find several tools as a support for their learning: links to online dictionaries, grammar exercises, online resources for language learning and some evaluation questionnaires to help them understand their goals and what they want to get from the e-Tandem experience. Some tips on how to behave in an online environment, with reference to *netiquette*, were also included. Figure 4.1 shows the e-Tandem homepage while figure 4.2 displays a forum example.
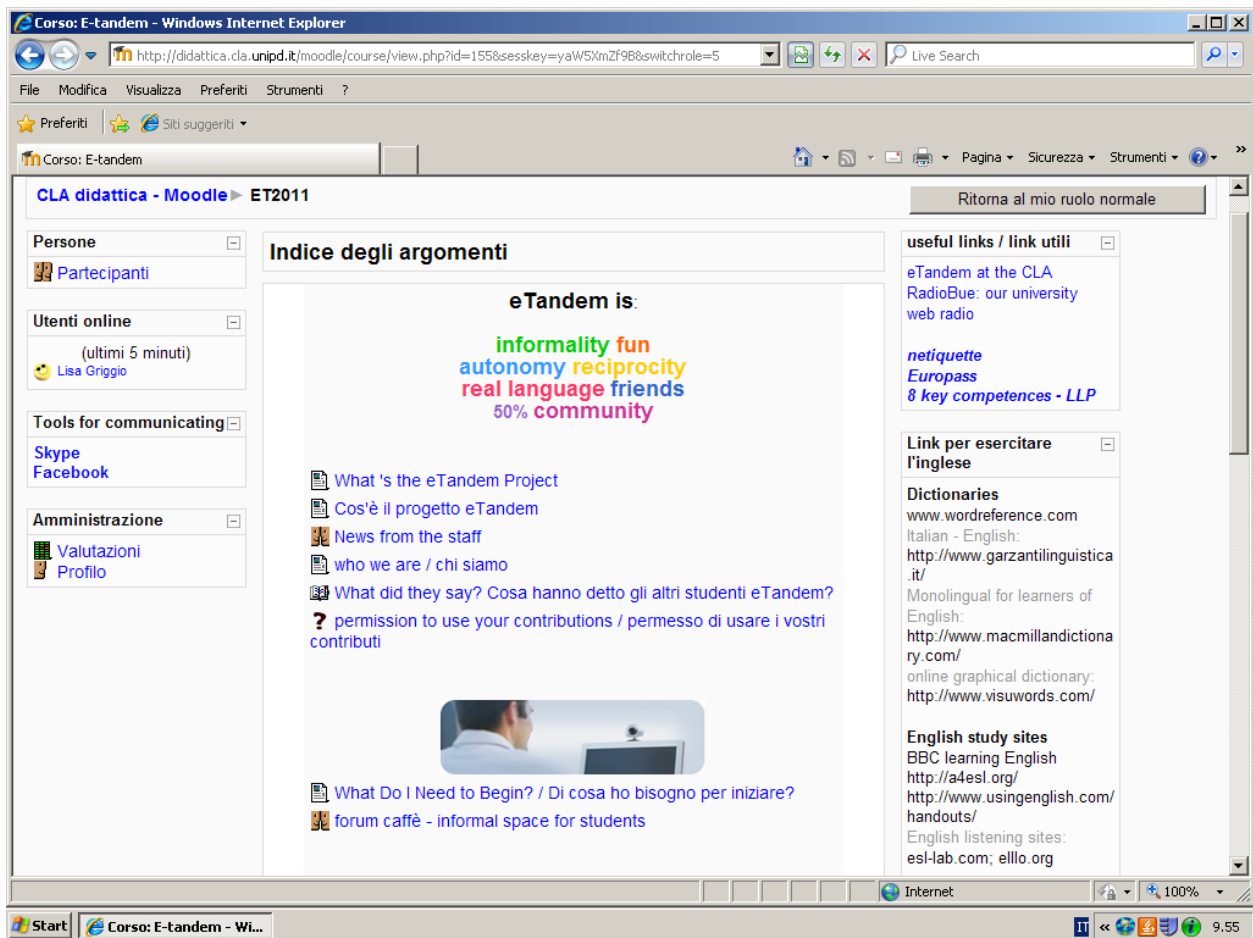

Figure 4.1: Moodle homepage.

Figure 4.2: Example of Moodle forum.

According to the Tandem Learning principle of autonomy, it was decided that Moodle should be an optional tool which students could choose to use or not. Indeed, Moodle was meant to provide an additional instrument for those students who needed support and suggestions, for example in the approach with their e-Tandem partner or in finding topics of conversation, as well as extending the exchange to a wider community.

It was decided that a certificate of attendance would be given to students who demonstrated an active involvement in the project. Since e-Tandem was conceived as a project autonomously run by students and which gave them wide decision-making, a way to somehow monitor their commitment was needed. For this purpose, students were asked to keep a learning diary and to hand it in through a specific private section created in Moodle. At the beginning, it was thought to ask students to fill out two diary entries, one in the middle and one at the end of the project, but then it was decided that a shorter and weekly diary entry was better. Besides monitoring the effective participation of the students, this diary was also to be a useful tool for them to develop learning autonomy and critical thinking on their progress. Students were therefore asked to write their diary and to use it to

keep track of what they discussed with their partner or with the community, to highlight positive aspects or problems, to record new words and expressions, to keep account of what they have learnt from the exchange or to note down what they have been most fascinated by, both on a linguistic and cultural basis. Some guidelines to suggest students how to write their own diary were published on Moodle.

Finally, a feedback form was to be given to each participant at the end of the project, through which students were to be asked to evaluate the overall activity. Those punctual in returning the feedback form and at least five of the eight diaries scheduled to the Language Centre, were eligible for a certificate of attendance.

The e-Tandem start date was fixed for November 28, 2011 and the end for January 20, 2012, as the arrival of US students in Padova was scheduled for January 26, 2012. Once in Italy, then, American students would finally have the opportunity to meet their e-Tandem partners and would choose whether to continue with the same person for the Face-to-face Tandem Learning which would last for the whole semester. If not, they would have the chance to be paired with new Italian students.

Information about the project was published online on the Language Centre website[2] and, at the same time, e-mails were sent to all potentially interested students. These were the students of the University of Padova who enrolled in the Face-to-face Tandem Learning for the First Semester 2011/12 and who applied for English language but who could not be paired, about thirty students. The staff of the Boston University Study Abroad Padua, instead, worked on informing American students participating in their exchange programme in the Spring term 2011/12. The e-mail explained the project and, if interested, students were told to send the attached application form back to the Language Centre within two weeks.

Once the applications were received, the Language Centre was in charge of pairing the students and finally it was possible to match 10 e-Tandem couples. Eventually, on November 28, 2011 the staff of the Language Centre e-mailed each participant their partner's contact information and the instructions to log in Moodle.

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[2] http://www.cla.unipd.it/cetest-firstpage/autoapprendimento/tandem-learning/e-tandem/
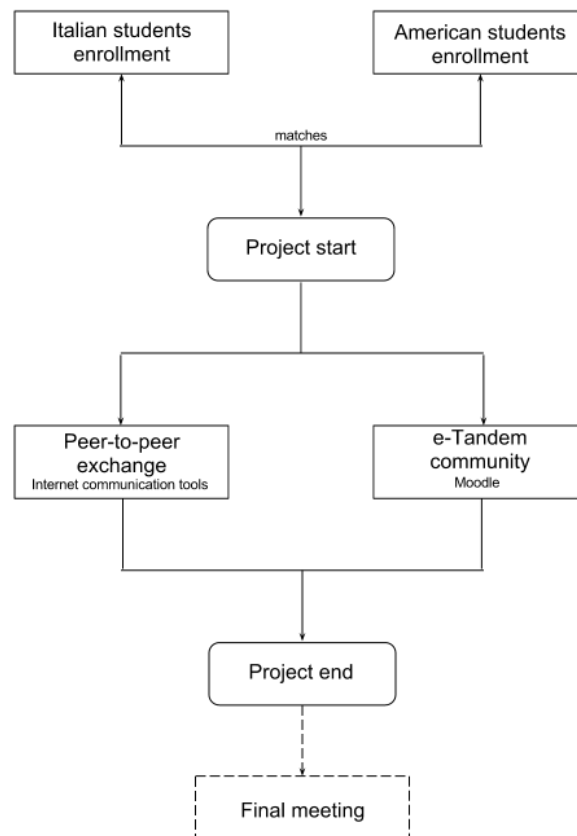
Figure 4.3: Project organization flow chart.

4.2 Development

The first weeks of e-Tandem were invested to give participants the opportunity to "break the ice" and get to know each other, as well as becoming confident with the platform for those who were using it for the first time. For this reason, the first week's forum was entitled "Present yourself" and was a space where students could write freely something about themselves. The second week's forum, instead, dealt with stereotypes and linked to a funny short video by Bozzetto, thus making the topic a bit lighter. Finally, the third week's discussion forum was about the major events which had happened during the year and about what students thought about them, as it was opened in December towards the end of the year.

However, during these first weeks of the project, some difficulties arose. Indeed, there was a lack of students' participation in the community. Although some initiatives were made in order to boost students' attention to the suggested topics, weekly discussion forums remained inactive, with only few posts.

For this reason, in January staff met to take stock of the situation and it was decided to reduce the Moodle weekly forums from 8 to 5. Therefore two new forums were added: one contained a link to some topics for discussion and the other was entitled "Culture forum", with five short questions asking how students would respond to a given situation they may well find themselves in but to which they might react differently. These short but challenging questions would therefore become a stimulus for discussions in the forum and/or tandem sessions. Due to the above mentioned reasons, during the meeting it was also decided to give the certificate of attendance to those who returned the final feedback form and at least three diaries instead of five.
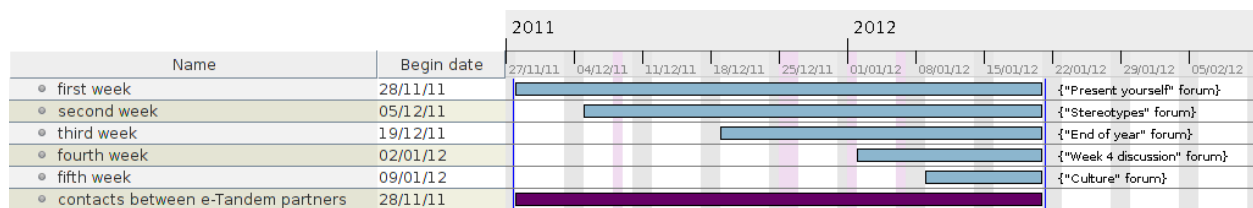
Name	Begin date	2011					2012					
		27/11/11	04/12/11	11/12/11	18/12/11	25/12/11	01/01/12	08/01/12	15/01/12	22/01/12	29/01/12	05/02/12
first week	28/11/11									{"Present yourself" forum}		
second week	05/12/11									{"Stereotypes" forum}		
third week	19/12/11									{"End of year" forum}		
fourth week	02/01/12									{"Week 4 discussion" forum}		
fifth week	09/01/12									{"Culture" forum}		
contacts between e-Tandem partners	28/11/11											

Figure 4.4: The gantt chart shows the conduct of the project.

Finally, it was decided to organize a meeting between students who participated in the project as a conclusion of e-Tandem. It was scheduled to be held during the meeting on Face-to-face Tandem Learning which has been organized by Language Centre every semester for students of Boston University Study Abroad Program and this year it was set for February 15, 2012. It was therefore open to all US students just arrived in Italy and to Italian students who took part in the e-Tandem, in order to give e-Tandem partners the opportunity to meet face-to-face if they had not already done so. The meeting consisted of three parts:

- a presentation of the Tandem Learning in general and a presentation of the e-Tandem project which had just ended, to make those students who did not take part in it to understand what it was about and to give them the possibility, now that they were in Italy, to be involved in the Face-to-face Tandem Learning which was about to start;

○ a debate between students, in order to get to know their opinions and what they thought were the positive and negative aspects of the project. This would also be an opportunity for staff to understand whether students found e-Tandem useful and to get ideas for future proposals;

○ a Tandem party as conclusion, during which everyone could bring something to eat or drink to share and students could chat personally with their e-Tandem partners in a free and easy context. At the end of the meeting, Face-to-face Tandem Learning application forms would also be collected.

The invitation to the meeting was sent both via Moodle and e-mail to all participants. American students turnout was high, while unfortunately none of Italian students was able to come, probably due to the fact that the day of the meeting was during the examination session. After the presentations, as programmed, there was a moment dedicated to students' opinions, in which they were asked some questions in order to break the ice and start a discussion. After an initial shyness, the debate turned to be very useful and interesting. It was a good chance to speak with US students about e-Tandem and their stay in Italy, to ask for their opinion and to investigate the reasons why some of them did not participate in the project.

4.3 Data analysis and methodology

In order to evaluate the outcomes of the project various type of qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and analysed. As previously said, Moodle forums, diaries and final feedback forms were not compulsory activities, but additional tools available to students to ensure that they could take full advantage of e-Tandem, which was primarily intended as a peer-to-peer telecollaboration. These instruments, nonetheless, allowed me to understand some project outcomes, but in order to have a clearer evaluation, I also personally conducted short interviews with some participants. Finally, the discussion among the US students during the final meeting also highlighted other important aspects of the project.

Overall, the qualitative data collected were:

○ 8 feedback forms (FF), 4 handed in by Padova students and 4 by US students;

- 20 e-Tandem diaries (TD) filled out by 8 students, 5 of whom are Italian and 3 American;
- 6 interviews (INT), 4 to Italian students and 2 to US students;
- a video recording of the final meeting organized with US students.

Table 4.5 shows in detail the first three types of data collected.

	Feedback Form (FF)	Tandem Diaries (TD)	Interview (INT)
Padova Student 1 (PD1)	FFPD1	TDPD1_w1 TDPD1_w2 TDPD1_w3 TDPD1_w5	
Padova Student 2 (PD2)		TDPD2_w1	INTPD2
Padova Student 3 (PD3)	FFPD3		INTPD3
Padova Student 4 (PD4)	FFPD4	TDPD4_w1 TDPD4_w2 TDPD4_w3	INTPD4
Padova Student 5 (PD5)	FFPD5	TDPD5_w1 TDPD5_w3 TDPD5_w5	INTPD5
Padova Student 6 (PD6)		TDPD6_w1	
Padova Student 7 (PD7)			
Padova Student 8 (PD8)			
Padova Student 9 (PD9)			
Padova Student 10 (PD10)			
American Student 1 (US1)	FFUS1	TDUS1_w1 TDUS1_w2 TDUS1_w3 TDUS1_w4	
American Student 2 (US2)	FFUS2		INTUS2
American Student 3 (US3)	FFUS3		INTUS3
American Student 4 (US4)		TDUS4_w1	
American Student 5 (US5)			

American Student 6 (US6)	FFUS6	TDUS6_w1 TDUS6_w2 TDUS6_w3	
American Student 7 (US7)			
American Student 8 (US8)			
American Student 9 (US9)			
American Student 10 (US10)			

Table 4.5: Data collected.

Finally, my research questions were:

- Did the Tandem Learning relationship work well in terms of language learning and reciprocity? Which online communication tools did students mostly use? Which differences did they find between a face-to-face and an online environment?

- Did e-Tandem help intercultural communication? Did it help US students to understand better the environment they were about to face? Did it foster their integration with University of Padova students?

- Why was there a lack of students' participation in the e-Tandem community in Moodle? Would another kind of online environment such as a social networking website have been more attractive?

In order to answer these questions, I read through all the different types of data in my possession and found common categories. Then I highlighted references made to language, culture, online environment and the forthcoming presence of US students in Italy.

Did the Tandem Learning relationship work well in terms of language learning and reciprocity? Which online communication tools did students mostly use? Which differences did they find between a face-to-face and an online environment?

The final feedback forms revealed that for most of the students it was the first time they took part in an e-Tandem project. As planned from the beginning, for communicating students were free to choose the online tools they thought were most suitable for their needs and, according to the feedback forms, during the exchange the most used communication modes were e-mail and Facebook, by which students usually contacted each other once a week, but in some cases twice or three times a week.
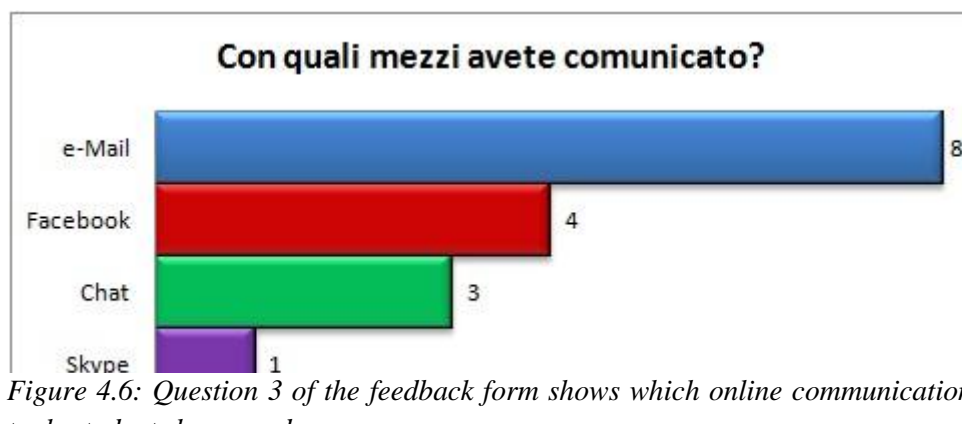

Figure 4.6: Question 3 of the feedback form shows which online communication tools students have used.

Three students, in particular, stated that they communicated only through e-mail (FFPD1, FFPD4, FFUS1). E-mail is generally a very widely used communication tool as it is asynchronous and thus both partners do not necessarily need to be online at the same time in order to interact. It can be, therefore, a good solutions for those students who find it difficult to arrange a virtual meeting because of personal commitments or time zone. Indeed, four students (FFPD4, FFPD5, FFUS2, FFUS6) affirmed they encountered some problems during e-Tandem and the main one was the difficulty of conciliating partners commitments. This, as also shown in a diary, was mainly due to time zone:

> *"Penso che il problema maggiore sarà trovare un orario che possa andare bene per entrambe, dato che ci sono 6 ore di fuso orario tra Boston e Padova."* (TDPD6_w1)

Furthermore, e-mail is considered by students a good means to improve their writing skills, as we can see from another diary:

> "During this week I could refresh a little bit my writing and to do it, me and my e-Tandem have written each other using e-mail and Facebook but unfortunately we couldn't chat." (TDPD5_w1)

Nevertheless students were aware of the importance of conversation in language learning. For this reason a girl affirmed to have used the e-mail only initially, with the purpose of arranging the virtual meetings with her e-peer in order to communicate through Skype:

> *"Io e il mio e-Tandem partner A. ci siamo scambiate tre e-mail iniziali per metterci d'accordo circa i modi in cui comunicare. Abbiamo deciso di comunicare via Skype per migliorare le nostre abilità nella conversazione".* (TDPD6_w1)

Another girl also commented in her diary about the importance of using communication tools such as Skype since she considers real time conversation fundamental in a language learning environment:

> *"Quello che mi dispiace è non aver potuto sentire il mio Tandem partner tramite Skype, poichè ritengo la conversazione qualcosa di fondamentale per apprendere una lingua. Infatti preferivo fare qualcosa più 'dal vivo' fin da subito, ma non ci sono riuscita".* (TDPD4_w1)

Finally, in the feedback forms all eight students affirmed they already knew how to use these online communication tools and they also reported they had already used them for university and personal purposes.

As concerns language learning, in the feedback form students were asked to reflect on their progress and those of their partners. Most of the responses were positive, but Figure 4.7 shows that 3 students pointed out that they "wished they had made more progresses in language learning". This feeling was probably due to the fact that, as we have seen, most participants used only written online tools to communicate and therefore did not improve their oral skills.
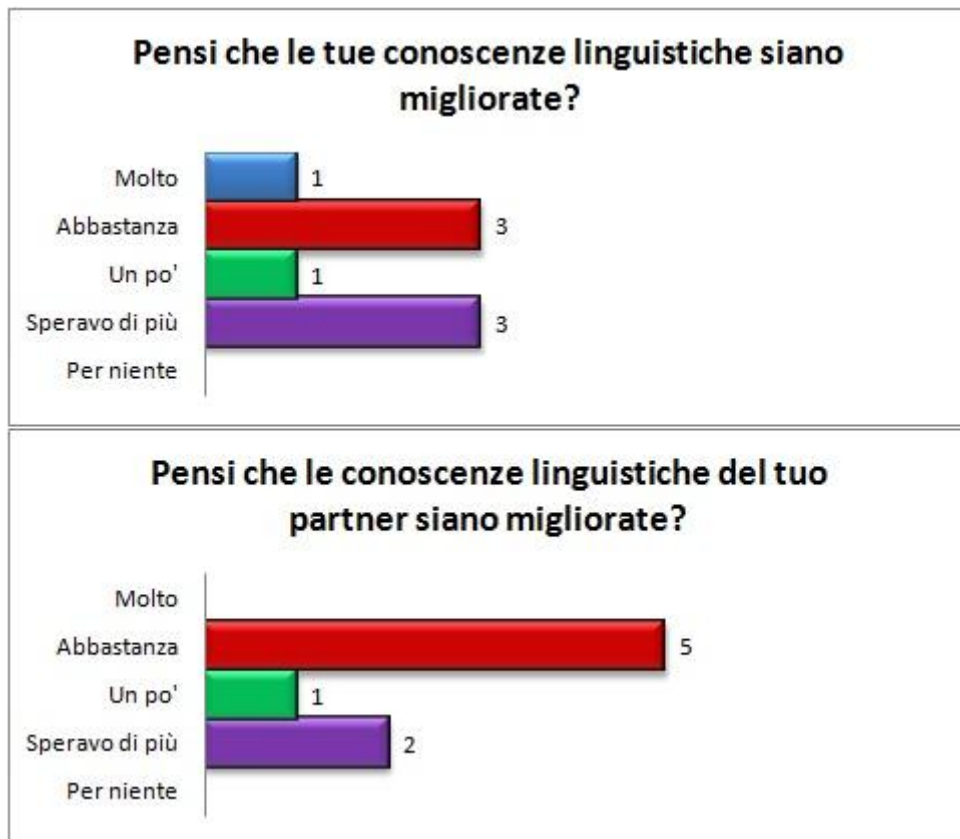
Figure 4.7: Questions 10 and 11 of the feedback form show how much students think their language skills and their partner's have improved

Moreover, as can be noticed from the chart, students think their partners have on average made more progress, but overall the answers are positive and they think this kind of experience is useful for language learning. In particular, Figure 4.8 shows which skills students think to have more developed during e-Tandem.

Figure 4.8: Question 13 of the feedback form shows which skills students feel they have more improved.

This chart also reveals that students feel they have mainly improved written skills, as the majority of them used written online communication tools and only some of them improved oral skills by using tools such as Skype. In addition, the majority of the students think this experience was useful in order to better understand another culture, as will be seen in next section's questions.

Furthermore, from the linguistic point of view, the Tandem principle of reciprocity has been observed. According to the feedback forms, almost all students spent more or less the same time speaking both languages and only one student mostly used English. In order to do this, every e-Tandem couple negotiated how often and with which tools they contacted each other, establishing their own method and taking into account their linguistic aims, as can be seen from some diaries' extracts below:

> *"Le ho scritto io la prima volta [...] metà in inglese e metà in italiano. Lei mi ha risposto solo in italiano, così io ho scritto la mail successiva solo in inglese. le chiederò di fare metà e metà le prossime volte, così mi esercito anche a leggere."* (TDPD1_w1)

> *"Abbiamo parlato maggiormente in inglese perché per ora è la lingua meglio conosciuta da entrambi, nelle prossime chiacchierate cercheremo di aumentare la percentuale dei discorsi in italiano [...]"* (TDPD2_w1)

> *"Le e-mail erano in doppia lingua, lo stesso messaggio è stato scritto prima in inglese e poi in italiano."* (TDPD6_w1)

"Abbiamo sistemato il dialogo via e-mail in cui scriviamo sia in inglese sia in italiano, e R. fa delle correzioni del mio italiano mentre io correggo il suo inglese. Funziona bene." (TDUS1_w4)

"We decided to do such a thing: she wrote me in italian and I wrote her in English and I asked her if we can correct each other to understand better the mistakes we made." (TDPD5_w1)

As can be observed, students negotiated the language of communication reflecting on their personal goals. The last two extracts, in particular, prove that the partners also spent time on language corrections. Indeed, in the feedback forms six students claimed they took time for helping their partners when he/she was not able to express something or rewriting his/her wrong sentences, while only two responded negatively.

Regarding the students who have been interviewed, none of them found any problems in using online communication tools, but some think that an online environment is more dispersive than a face-to-face one. Padova Student 4 and her e-Tandem partner, for example, communicated only through e-mail, but she was available to use also other tools. Nevertheless, she felt that her e-Tandem was less committed than her and, for this reason, thinks that a face-to-face relationship is easier, because you feel more involved by the possibility of meeting your partner. Furthermore, she encountered some difficulties with the time zone and for this reason she was never online at the same time as her e-peer. As a consequence, she suggested checking if people enrolled in e-Tandem are really motivated in exploiting the experience. US Student 3 and Padova Student 3 Tandem relation, on the contrary, worked well. US Student 3 said that in first semester she took part in a face-to-face programme organized in Venice[3] but that her partner was not as participative as her, while with e-Tandem she found a more committed peer:

"Se lui diceva che era online ad una certa ora, a quell'ora era là. Così, quando c'era un accordo tra di noi, era perfetto. Veramente, la nostra è una relazione alla pari." (INTUS3)

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[3] Before the interview, US student 3 explained to me that while participating in e-Tandem she was already in Italy with another exchange programme at the Art Academy in Venice.

The experience of Padova Student 4 and the one of US Student 3 with their e-Tandems, therefore, demonstrate that if both partners do not put the same effort in the project, the Tandem relationship does not work.

On the other hand, many of the students I interviewed think that an intercultural experience is more real when it takes place face-to-face and an online exchange is very useful in order to set the stage for a future face-to-face programme:

> *"Il progetto l'ho usato come metodo per conoscere una persona che adesso sto incontrando a Padova. L'ho incontrata la settimana scorsa, la incontrerò domani..."*
> (INTPD3)

Indeed, almost all students I spoke with intended to continue the programme face-to-face with their e-Tandem partner and some of them had already met. However, they recognize the positive aspects of an online environment: Padova Student 5, for instance, highlighted the fact that partners do not necessarily have to be online at the same time and that they have the possibility of contributing throughout the day, creating a great advantage for those students who cannot meet face-to-face with Tandem partners. US Student 3 also underlined that through the Internet a cross-border exchange is possible. Furthermore, she was happy about the fact that thanks to online communication tools she could learn Italian written online language such as abbreviations and slang.

Finally, according to the feedback forms, the majority of students felt comfortable with their partners and had a good time with them:
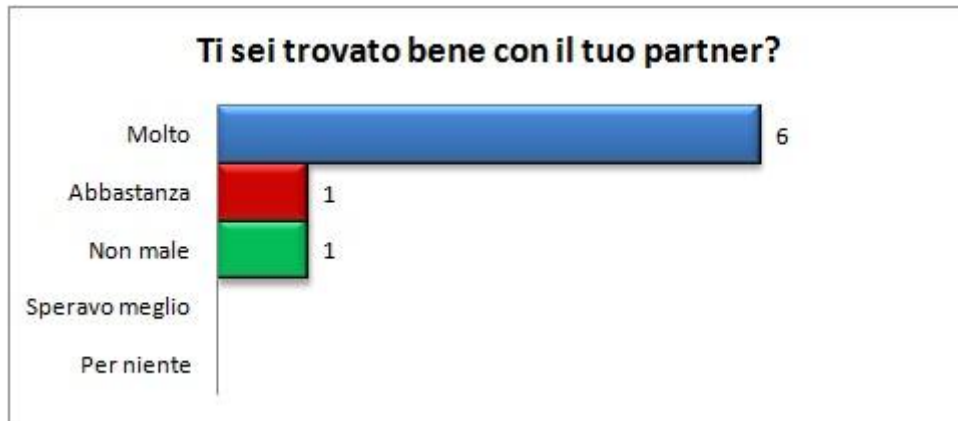
Figure 4.9: Question 14 of the feedback form shows whether students felt comfortable with their e-Tandem partners.

The questionnaires also showed that overall students considered the whole experience of e-Tandem useful (Figure 4.10), with no negative comments about it. Furthermore, all of the students interviewed would suggest e-Tandem to their friends or other students.

Did e-Tandem help intercultural communication? Did it help US students to understand better the environment they were about to face? Did it foster their integration with University of Padova students?

Figure 4.10: Question 23 of the feedback form shows how students evaluated the whole e-Tandem experience.

Students really enjoyed the cultural aspect of the project. As previously shown by figure 4.8, the skill students felt to have mostly improved was cultural knowledge. Figure 4.11, moreover, highlights the grade of usefulness students who responded to the feedback

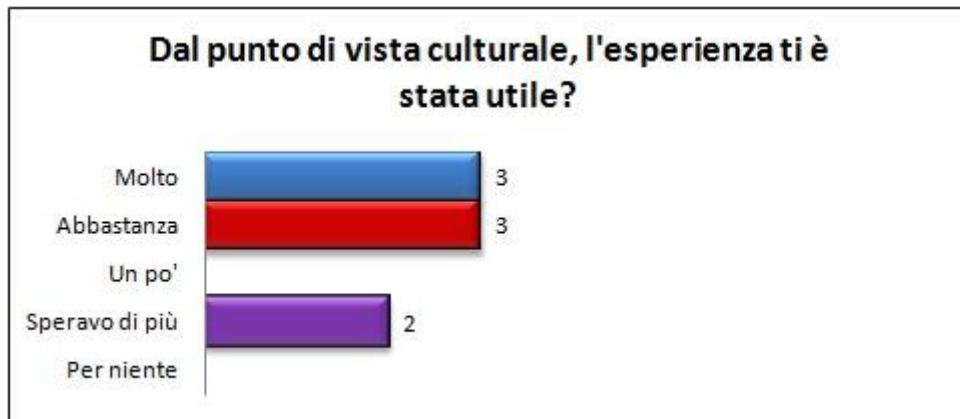form think e-Tandem had from the cultural point of view.

Figure 4.11: Question 12 of the feedback form shows if students think e-Tandem was culturally useful.

Finally, from the diaries it can be observed that the main topics students chatted about with their e-peers were on cultural differences between Italy and USA: they mainly talked about the differences of Italian and American university systems, about their own cities and the different holiday traditions, since Christmas time occurred in the middle of the project:

> *"Questa settimana ho imparato della tradizione italiana per il Natale. E' molto interessante! Non ho saputo che gli italiani hanno una tradizione della Befana, negli Stati Uniti non celebrano questa festa."* (TDUS4_w1)

> *"Ho imparato qualche modo di dire e qualche aspetto dell'università americana, spero di approfondire sempre di più la mia conoscenza della vita negli USA e della lingua inglese."* (TDPD2_w1)

> "W. and I have talked about many thing: differences between USA and Italy, steorotypes, Italian features that can be strange for Americans and Americans features that can be particular for Italians, celebrations during Christmas time (I spoke her about Befana…), our families, Italian canteens." (TDPD1_w5)

Students were interested in discussing their daily life and, therefore, discover in this way a different culture. Time after time, the relationship between e-Tandem partners became much informal, close to a friendship, and they started to share some personal aspects of their life, as revealed by some diaries:

"During this week we can talk about friends, boyfriend and about what we usually do with them. Then we continue talking about music, Italian and American, and about our favourite groups. She told me that she is doing a CD for me, I think it's such a great idea to learn more about each other and to have a gift for thinking about this wonderful experience." (TDPD5_w5)

American students, in particular, were excited for their arrival in Italy and wanted to know as much as possible about Padova and the environment that they were about to face:

"E' stato interessante imparare della vita italiana! Inoltre mi piace parlare con V. perché è una studentessa di Padova e sa molte cose pertinente per me. Quando parla della sua settimana, parla delle cose che voglio vedere e fare la prossima semestre. Inoltre è interessante imparare della sua vita, perché ho letto molto di questo nelle lezioni italiane all'università, ma le sue esperienze sono reale!" (TDUS6_w2)

At the same time, the diaries show that US students were reassured and happy of having established friendly ties with someone in Padova before leaving for Italy:

"[...] e sono molto emozionata andare in Italia! Non conosco delle altre persone che vada a Padova, così sarà un'esperienza incredibile! Allo stesso tempo, sono sollevata perché adesso conosco V.!" (TDUS6_w2)

Also the two American girls interviewed liked the fact of knowing someone in Padova before their coming. US Student 2 said it was really useful as she could learn something not only about the city but also about Italian culture, such as the different dinner time between the two countries. US Student 3, instead, talked about Padova's graduation parties, a cultural aspect of the University of Padova that you cannot get to know without getting in touch with a local:

"[...]specialmente qui a Padova, anche a Venezia ma di più qui a Padova mi sembra, ci sono le lauree e questo è una parte della cultura che non conoscevo prima e così il mio partner e-Tandem mi ha spiegato tutto. E' un buon esempio della cultura, qualcosa di molto diverso, e non sarebbe possibile conoscere queste cose senza qualcuno della zona." (INTUS3)

Both of them, furthermore, attended lectures at Boston University Padua Academic Centre and did not know any other students of University of Padova besides their e-Tandems. For

this reason, the programme was a really good chance for them to get in touch with host students.

The importance of the American students previous contacts with host country students also emerged in the data from the Padova students. Padova Student 5 indeed wrote in her diary:

"I think that this has been a great experience and I hope to continue to hear from M. in the future. We are going to meet next week in Padova so I can show her some good shops, restaurants, we will talk and know each other well and go out and have some fun." (TDPD5_w5)

During the interview, in particular, she said that this project is very useful as US students had the chance to get in touch with the university reality and thus be more prepared at the arrival:

"Quando gli americani sono arrivati qua, ad esempio, sapevano già bene o male dove andare a mangiare, dove andare alla sera, dov'era l'università... ad esempio io gli ho spiegato i quartieri che erano un po' pericolosi, dove non era meglio andare alla sera... Cosa si fa di sera, che noi abbiamo il mercoledì universitario, insomma tutte queste cose che magari possono essere utili perché quando uno arriva qua è un po' più spaesato." (INTPD5)

Moreover, she told that once she went out in group with her e-Tandem and other US students, demonstrating that this kind of programme can creates opportunities for extending students' contacts.

Why was there a lack of students' participation in the e-Tandem community in Moodle? Would another kind of online environment such as a social networking website have been more attractive?

Since the beginning of the project there has been a lack of students' participation in the community. The forums in Moodle were indeed not much visited and for this reason staff decided to reduce the weekly discussion topics to five instead of eight. However, students' comments on their diaries revealed that they did not fully grasp the original reason Moodle

was intended for. Indeed, they wrote that participating in the forums demanded too much commitment and some of them stated they preferred spending the little time at their disposal with their e-Tandem partner rather than with the community:

> *"Non ho partecipato a nessuno dei forum proposti poichè tra lo studio, i corsi da seguire, nel poco tempo libero preferivo scrivere, se ci riuscivo, al mio Tandem Partner".* (TDPD4_w1)

Also Padova Student 4 during her interview told me that she did not take part in discussion forums because she did not have time, but she found them interesting. Padova Student 5, instead, stated she was embarrassed in using English among many people and for this reason preferred to chat only with her e-Tandem partner. However, she followed the suggested topics and thinks they were useful as a starting point for the conversation. Padova Student 1 also wrote in the diary:

> "I wrote something on forum. We haven't used it very much, and I'm afraid because I think that someone worked hard at this project. But it is a bit embarrassing write something that many people can read. And in English!" (TDPD1_w5)

Another possible cause of students' limited presence in the forums can be the choice of the platform. Moodle indeed is generally used for e-learning and maybe students thought that it was a too formal environment. Some students considered participation in the forum as a demanding task which diverted from the Tandem activity with their own partner, as shown by the extract below:

> *"Alcune volte è difficile rispondere alle domande che hanno risposte più lunghe e non mi piacerebbe pensare che questo è una lezione con i compiti".* (TDUS6_w3)

In addition, some students, indeed, had never used Moodle before and maybe they did not feel very confident with it. A girl in her diary affirmed that she did not know how Moodle worked:

> *"Non so se cliccando su salva verrà consegnato automaticamente, non so come funziona questo forum."* (TDPD1_w1)

and complained that her partner could not log in probably due to technical problems:

"I don't know how to continue the project if W. doesn't use the Moodle. Perhaps CLA could control her username and password." (TDPD1_w2)

US Student 3 also did not understand how Moodle worked and for this reason she did not use it:

"Il forum... non l'ho mai usato ad essere onesta, perché non ho capito subito come utilizzarlo. Così non ho provato. [...] Si forse un gruppo su Facebook sarebbe stato meglio, perché per me era difficile capire come utilizzare il forum perché il sito non mi era familiare." (INTUS3)

Indeed, to the question in the feedback form whether the use of a social network such as Facebook instead of Moodle would have facilitated the involvement in the community, five students out of eight answered positively. Figure 4.6 on online communication tools employed by students also showed that Facebook was very much used. Regarding this issue, instead, the opinions of the students interviewed were quite contrasting: some thought that an environment specially created for the project was better, while other students believed that a social network such as Facebook could have been more effective, since it is widely used among people, is more appealing and more convenient as you do not need to check many different online contexts.

Nevertheless, even if the students actually did not take part in the discussions in Moodle, they liked the suggested topics and they used the weekly forums in order to have a starting point for private conversation with their e-Tandem partner as, according to a comment in the feedback form, they were "*utili per cominciare la discussione*" (FFUS6). In the feedback forms, indeed, five respondents stated they have debated the subjects with their partners and, as we can notice from Figure 4.12, they found the suggested topics quite interesting.
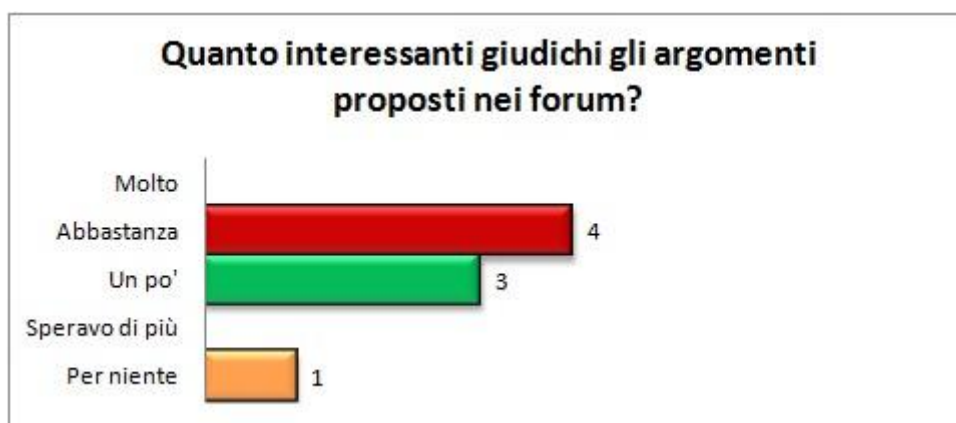
The diaries below also prove that students talked about the topics proposed in the forums:

"Prendendo spunto dall'argomento proposto dal forum per questa settimana abbiamo scritto anche un'ulteriore e-mail di presentazione in cui abbiamo parlato dei nostri studi ed interessi." (TDPD6_w1)

"Questa settimana abbiamo cominciato una discussione sugli stereotipi italiani ed americani. Nella TV americana l'immagine primaria dell'italia è una di caffè, pasta,

Figure 4.12: Question 20 of the feedback form shows how much interesting students think the topics suggested in the forums were.

vino e bei ragazzi, sempre in Roma o Venezia. Penso che si sviluppi dalle pubblicità in TV [...]. L'ho trovato culturalmente ironico che in Italia invece l'idea dell'America (in particolare la città americana) è cosi conosciuto." (TDUS1_w2)

"As was asked in the Web we talked about the most important event of the year." (TDPD5_w3)

Finally, regarding the final meeting organized at the end of e-Tandem, students who talked during the debate were generally happy with the project and highlighted only some minor problems. These were, as also emerged before from the diaries, the little time that students could dedicate to the project due to their university commitments and holiday break. For this reason, most of them preferred to spend their time with the e-Tandem partner rather than participate in the forums. Moreover, a girl observed that discussion forums are old-fashioned and she would have preferred a more updated instrument to communicate with the e-Tandem community. Another one stated that Moodle was "a bit confusing" because you could see who was enrolled but you actually did not know who was Italian, who was American, who was a professor and who was a student. In addition, during the debate a girl said that from the e-mail of e-Tandem introduction she thought it was for credits or something similar and did not realize the actual purpose of the project. For this reason, she did not take part in it. Another girl, instead, did not enroll because she was unsure to be able to handle a conversation in Italian and also remarked that she thought it was "a little more a serious thing that it ended to be". Therefore an orientation before the start of the programme, with an explanation of how to use the platform, why it was introduced and what e-Tandem aims to, would be the ideal solution to this issue. As we can

see, there were different factors which have contributed to the lack of students' participation in the community, varying from student to student.

Conclusion

The first round of e-Tandem at the University of Padova Language Centre can be considered quite successful. As emerged from the analysis of the findings, the main goals it proposed have been achieved: overall, students who participated felt comfortable with their partners and think that the project has been useful both linguistically and culturally. Feedback forms showed that not all participants fulfilled their personal targets, but many of them feel they made progress.

American students, in particular, had the chance to get in contact with students of their forthcoming university before leaving for their experience abroad, thus facilitating their future integration with the host society. Once they arrived in Padova, indeed, almost all of them wished to carry on the programme face-to-face with their e-Tandem partner and some of them also signed up for an additional new partner. Since US students did not have many opportunities of meeting Italian students as they usually attend lectures together at the Boston University Padua Academic Centre, e-Tandem has been a great way of interacting with University of Padova students.

Regarding the aim of creating an e-Tandem community, however, the project has failed. There has been a lack of participation in the forums and according to the feedback forms and the interviews this was due to different reasons. On the one hand, many students were busy with their academic commitments and therefore preferred to concentrate their time on their Tandem partners rather than take part in the activities of the forum. On the other hand, the platform employed had an impact on students' participation. Although the choice of Moodle was mainly influenced by technical reasons, since it was a safe environment through which learners' activities could be monitored and stored in the server of University of Padova, maybe it was not so attractive to students. Many participants, indeed, pointed out that if the community had been created in Facebook, it would have facilitated their contribution. They highlighted Facebook would have been more convenient as it is widely used among people and it would be difficult to find someone who do not have

an account in it. Moreover they thought that since most of them already used it, checking less online contexts would have been more practical.

Another organizational aspect that influenced the project outcomes has been the choice of the carrying out period. Indeed, e-Tandem started short time before Christmas' holidays and this had a negative implication on it, as it entailed an interruption. Moreover, students were approaching the end of the term and the exams and this fact had also a negative influence on the commitment that they could devote to an extracurricular project. Nevertheless, we have to take into account the fact that university semesters in Italy and in the USA do not coincide and this obviously brings some difficulties. Despite this, we have to focus on the positive aspects of the creation of a specific context for e-Tandem participants. Indeed the research has shown that, even if there was a lack of contributions in the forums, having a weekly topic helped students to get ideas for their own conversations. In addition, students who were less autonomous and needed more structured activities could benefit from it.

This research, therefore, aimed to highlight the positive and negative aspects of this first time of e-Tandem, suggesting what can be done to improve it. A new project with a group on Facebook where information and useful links, such as videos, news, articles, photos, etc. can be shared, may boost students' participation. Instead of a weekly forum in an e-learning platform where students feel their contribution is almost compulsory, the e-Tandem community could be structured as a social networking group where each member feels at ease to exchange ideas or opinions in the language he/she prefers. One or two staff members could be available with suggestions and new material to encourage interactions and this task could be given to students doing an internship at the Language Centre as I did. Furthermore, students should indicate in the application form whether they have a Facebook account or whether they are willing to create one for this project. As we have seen, an introductory session, at least with Italian students if with both it is not possible, would also be very important in order to explain to them the purposes of e-Tandem and of the community. Finally, the beginning of a new e-Tandem project should be advanced at least by the end of October, to give students the opportunity to get to know each other and to have more time to interact before Christmas holidays. Indeed, since enrollments to Face-to-face Tandem Learning usually close by mid-October, by then both the names of those who were not matched and the names of the forthcoming US students can be accessible.

This research, finally, has demonstrated in concrete terms how e-Tandem can positively affect future exchange students' integration with host country students, as well as give those who are not participating in a study abroad programme the opportunity of actually interacting with a context different from their own through an online environment. For this reason, expanding the project to other groups of visiting students, such as those participating in the LLP/Erasmus programme, would be very useful. The Language Centre, indeed, organizes language courses for University of Padova students who are going abroad with the LLP/Erasmus programme and, thanks also to the European project INTENT which aims to create an online network between universities to facilitate contacts and the development of telecollaboration projects, parallel to these courses other e-Tandem collaborations among students of future host universities could be developed.