

INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATED TELETANDEM: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT COLLABORATIVE WRITING

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- **ABSTRACT:** Institutional integrated teletandem (iiTTD) is characterized “as a series of teletandem sessions that are embedded in regular FL lessons (thus mandatory) so that such lessons both feed and are fed by teletandem practice” (CAVALARI; ARANHA, [2016]). Collaborative writing is conceived as an activity in which learners work together throughout the process of planning, generating ideas, structuring, editing and revising a text in the foreign language (STORCH, 2013). This paper aims at (i) describing a collaborative writing task that was implemented within iiTTD at UNESP – São José do Rio Preto, and (ii) discussing Brazilian learners’ perceptions as they carried out such task in 2015. Data were collected by means of learning diaries written by thirteen students of English as a foreign language who were taking a Translation Studies major.
- **KEYWORDS:** Collaborative writing. Institutional integrated teletandem. Learner’s perceptions.

Introduction

Teletandem is defined by Telles (2015, p. 604) as “[...] a mode of telecollaboration - a virtual, collaborative and autonomous context for learning foreign languages in which two students help each other to learn their own languages (or language of proficiency).” The author remarks that learning in this context is made possible by the use of text, voice, and webcam image resources of VOIP technology (®) and is guided by the three principles of tandem: autonomy, reciprocity and separation of languages (BRAMMERTS, 2003; TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006).

Although these theoretical principles have remained the same over the years, teletandem context has suffered some adjustments due to the specificities of new partnerships established with different universities around the world. Consequently, new learning settings have emerged since Telles (2006) first proposed and defined teletandem.

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One of these emergent settings is the institutional integrated teletandem (iiTTD), characterized by Aranha and Cavalari (2014), and Cavalari and Aranha ([2016]), as a modality that arose from the necessity of incorporating teletandem practice into the regular foreign language (FL) programs offered at universities. According to Cavalari and Aranha ([2016]), institutional integrated teletandem (iiTTD) can be defined as a series of teletandem sessions that are integrated into the syllabus so that teletandem practice can both feed and be fed by regular FL lessons. The authors propose that such modality, as implemented at UNESP – São José do Rio Preto (SJRJ), comprises the following procedures and tasks (i) preparing learners for iiTTD learning; (ii) designing integrating tasks, which blend teletandem oral sessions into the FL syllabus, and (iii) integrating assessment practices, which include self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment. One of the integrating tasks described by these authors is characterized by text exchanges and peer review. The task involves learners writing a text in their foreign language (on a topic that is related to the contents of their FL course) and sending it to their iiTTD partners so that the partner can revise it. Participants exchange texts by email, and each week they focus on the text written in one of the languages, taking turns in writing and offering feedback. The text revision, as well as the text topic, can be discussed during the oral session¹.

In this paper, we present a different integrating task that has been designed within iiTTD at UNESP – SJRP. It is characterized as a collaborative writing practice in which teletandem partners should jointly produce a text, working together through all the phases involved in the writing process, i.e., gathering ideas and planning, structuring, drafting and revising the text. Our goal is actually two-fold: to describe the collaborative writing task carried out by using two Google Apps® (Google Drive and Google docs) within iiTTD, and to investigate Brazilian learners' perceptions in carrying out such task, so that we can have insights on the possible challenges and opportunities that this kind of collaborative practice may bring to FL learning in teletandem.

Collaborative writing

In foreign language pedagogy, collaborative writing is theoretically grounded on the sociocultural perspective of learning, which draws on the works of Vygotsky (1978). In this perspective, learning (and human cognitive development) is socially situated and mediated by physical e psychological tools. By means of these tools, humans transform both their cognitive functions and their sociocultural conditions. The use of language (a key psychological tool) in social interactions is considered fundamental in learning, for it enables the emergence of what Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) called the zone of proximal development (ZDP) - “[...] the distance between the actual developmental level as

¹ See Cavalari and Aranha ([2016]) for a detailed characterization of this integrating task. See also Brocco (2014) and Aranha and Cavalari (2015) for a discussion on peer assessment practice in iiTTD.

determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” The activity within the ZDP evidences the importance of interaction for learning and development, and represents a legitimate locus for emerging capacities and for meaningful scaffolding, i.e., the appropriate level of assistance, as defined by Lantolf and Thorne (2007).

Those theoretical tenets have oriented a pedagogical practice in the FL classroom that encourages learners to work in pairs (or groups) and to interact in the language they are learning. As to writing practice, group or pair work has been investigated by some researchers (LEE, 1997; FIGUEIREDO, 2005a; 2005b; BITCHENER; YOUNG; CAMERON, 2005; ARANHA; CAVALARI, 2015) as peer feedback - a collaborative activity in which learners exchange writing drafts and offer feedback to help their fellow student improve their text. According to Storch (2013), in this kind of writing activity, collaboration is limited to the final phase of the writing practice (text revision) and the focus is on the product.

On the other hand, Storch (2001, 2005, 2013), Elola and Ozkoz (2010), Wigglesworth and Storch (2012) investigate the characteristics of collaborative work from a processual point of view, as opposed to the idea of a final draft submitted to peer (or teacher) feedback. Storch (2013) proposes that process oriented collaborative writing presupposes that learners interact and work together in all phases of the writing practice: planning, generation of ideas (content), deliberations about text structure, edition and revision. According to the author, based on Stahl (2006), this kind of practice enables co-construction of knowledge and collective cognition that emerge from interpersonal interactions and that cannot be tracked back in terms of individual contribution.

Within this process perspective to writing practice, Storch (2005) conducted a comparative study of texts written by foreign language learners who could choose to work in pairs or individually. The results showed that (i) pairs produced “shorter texts, but the texts had greater grammatical accuracy and linguistic complexity” (p. 168), and (ii) most students considered the experience of writing collaboratively very positive while only a few expressed reservations about it, especially for fear of losing face.

This study draws on the results of Storch’s (2005) investigation and on the premise that learners working collaboratively can write more complex and accurate texts. However, it is important to acknowledge some of specificities of the context focused in this paper in relation to that in which Storch’s research was carried out. The first is the fact that, in iiTTD, learners interact and write collaboratively by using technological resources. Besides, differently from the participants in other studies, in teletandem context, the students are speakers of different languages, and take turns in the role of foreign language learners and experts (more experienced users) of their mother tongue. We believe that these specificities may bring relevant implications for the collaborative work carried out and we intend to address them from the point of view of the Brazilian participants.

The Collaborative writing task in iiTTD

Considering a process oriented perspective to writing, in 2015, an integrating task based on collaborative writing via Google Drive and Google Docs was implemented within iiTTD carried out between UNESP- SJRP and the University of Georgia (UGA). The description herein presented is based on the details of the task development on the Brazilian side of the partnership, in which the students were taking a major in Translation Studies.

The collaboration actually started with a negotiation between the responsible teachers at UNESP and at UGA about (i) what types of text each group would work with, according to their FL programs, (ii) what technological resources would be used and (iii) how to organize the collaborative writing within the iiTTD calendar. Based on such negotiation, it was agreed that both Brazilian and American learners would write movie reviews collaboratively, using Google Drive and Google Docs, during oral interactions (via Skype). They would have two sessions dedicated to the written production in Portuguese and other two dedicated to English. The calendar of activities related to this iiTTD experience is the one that follows:

Chart 1 – iittd between UNESP- SJRP and UGA: calendar of activities (2015)

Week/ Month	1	2	3	4	5
Sept.	02 Tutorial sending e-mails to iiTTD partner	09 session I getting to know each other	16 session II discussion of email revision (optional)	23 session III collaborative writing (movie review) in Portuguese	30 session IV collaborative writing (movie review) in Portuguese
Oct.	07 session V collaborative writing (movie review) in English	14 session VI collaborative writing (movie review) in English	21 break: Translation Studies Academic Week at UNESP	28 session VII experience assessment	

Source: Own elaboration.

The teachers also agreed that the writing task presented to the learners would be based on Bragagnollo's (2016) dissertation, which investigates FL teaching-learning process of writing movie reviews and synopsis within iiTTD.

At UNESP, learners had two lessons focusing on issues related to the general characteristics of movie reviews published in sites like *Rotten Tomatoes*². They also watched the movie “Crash” (2004), directed by Paul Haggis, and discussed their ideas about it in class. After that, the Brazilian participants were oriented to outline the most important ideas to be addressed in the movie review that they would write in English, in collaboration with their American partner, within two iiTTD sessions (October 07 and 14). They were also informed that writing collaboratively should include activities such as: planning and gathering ideas, structuring, drafting, and editing the text.

The American participants knew which movie would be focused on during the two sessions in which they would write in English. However, they did not have to watch the movie, which meant that Brazilians should be prepared to tell their partners all the necessary details before they could start the actual writing.

Finally, learners were oriented to have a Gmail account because that makes the use of Google Apps® (Drive and Docs) more friendly. As they started the collaborative writing task, they were supposed to share the file with their partner and with both the Brazilian and the American teachers so that they could follow the progress of the task. This procedure may offer the teachers, if they reckon it is important, the opportunity to have a broader view of the writing process as they grade their learners’ written production in iiTTD.

Collaborative writing by means of Google Drive® (for file storage and sharing) and Google Docs® (for synchronous writing and editing) was investigated by Slavkov (2015), who presents those apps as an effective tool for meaningful and cost-effective technology-enriched pedagogical practice. The author describes these apps features as follows:

Google Drive is an integrated sharing and synchronization service available as a free Google app with 15 gigabytes of cloud storage. [...] With regard to writing, Google Drive’s features are accessed through the Google Docs (sub)app and include document creation, storage, synchronous and asynchronous sharing, editing and commenting, revision histories (i.e., view of previous versions of a document owned by a single user or shared among users), document-specific real-time chat, and various distribution options across audiences and platforms. (SLAVKOV, 2015, p.83).

Based on Van Lier’s concept of affordance (VAN LIER, 2000), which involves “the relationship between properties of the environment and the active learner”, Slavkov (2015) argues that these apps features may become affordances in FL pedagogy. According to the author, the use of the “[...] existing general properties of the app with specific goals and purposes, grounded in sociocultural theory and a process approach

² Available in: <<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/>>. Access in: 27 Sept. 2016.

to writing, affords the emergence of new pedagogical benefits.” (SLAVKOV, 2015, p. 83). Based on this Slavkov’s proposition, we expect that learners’ experience with the collaborative writing task via Google apps carried out within iiTTD may cause the emergence of new pedagogical benefits for their FL learning.

This study

This investigation, of a qualitative interpretative nature, is based on the data generated in the second semester of 2015 within the iiTTD modality carried out between UNESP-SJRP and UGA. The Brazilian participants were taking their first year of the Translation Studies major and teletandem practice was integrated into the EFL course³, which involved three weekly lessons of two hours each. The data collection instrument used was a learning diary⁴ that iiTTD Brazilian participants were expected to write after each oral session. All the diaries were shared with the teacher (and with the teletandem team of researchers) by means of a folder created on Goolge Drive and, later, organized in the teletandem data bank by means of the procedures and criteria described in Aranha, Luvizari-Murad and Moreno (2015)⁵.

For the purpose of this article, we briefly describe the procedures used to collect and organize the data related to the Brazilians’ learning diaries: the diaries are written in Google Docs by the participants and, by the end of the iiTTD experience, the project monitor is responsible for downloading and saving them in a Word file format in the data bank – the project external hard disk (HD). Each file is named by means of a shared code that indicates (i) the number of the diary; (ii) the number of participant (that corresponds to the number of the computer he/she used in the teletandem laboratory); (iii) the group specifications. For instance, the code 4D12UGA corresponds to the fourth diary written by participant 12 of the group that worked with the University of Georgia (UGA).

In order to investigate the Brazilians’ perceptions about writing collaboratively in iiTTD, we used the learning diaries that seventeen students produced after the two sessions in which they had to work with their American partner to write a movie review in English: sessions V and VI, which occurred on October 07 and 14. This study focuses

³ Língua Inglesa I

⁴ Cavalari and Aranha ([2016]) call these diaries “reflexive diaries”. The authors propose that writing diaries is another integrating task in iiTTD and the purpose such task is to give iiTTD participants opportunities to reflect on their own learning process while taking part of a FL learning setting that allows for autonomy and collaboration.

⁵ Aranha, Luvizari-Murad and Moreno (2015) describe the process of collecting and organizing the data when teletandem practitioners used Teleduc platform for file sharing and storage. Although we now use Google Drive for this purpose, all the files are still collected and organized within a Hard Disk by following certain procedures and criteria that ensure (i) participants’ anonymity; (ii) ethical treatment of data; (iii) coherence to the process of organization of the bank.

specifically on the diaries of thirteen participants (01, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 09, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19) since three Brazilians (11, 02, 08) did not sign the letter of consent and one (13) did not write his/her diaries. The analysis of those thirteen learners' diaries was based on the search for problems and difficulties (challenges) they faced, and strategies (opportunities) they used as they wrote a movie review in English in a collaborative way in iiTTD.

Students' perceptions on the collaborative task

The analysis of the Brazilian learners' diaries yielded some interesting insights about the Brazilians' views on collaborative writing. All the students had a positive remark about the experience, especially concerning the different linguistic elements (accuracy, vocabulary, text cohesion) they learned in collaboration with their partner during the writing practice:

This activity has helped me learn new vocabulary; expressions and appropriate connectors for a good text⁶. (diary 6, participant 01).

I had no problems with sharing the writing, at all. It was helpful, and, even though I haven't finished it yet, I know what to do now, and she really helped me with vocabulary and phrases formation, and also a lot of problems I didn't even know I had. It was a great opportunity. (diary 5, participant 04).

It is interesting to observe that the writing activity seems to be the key element for the learning opportunities these learners mentioned. Also the opportunity to exchange ideas about the movie was pointed out as a positive aspect of the writing process:

[...] the thing that helped me the most was to talk about the movie with my partner, and to try to explain what I wanted to say before I wrote it, because saying it makes it more concrete than just thinking of it. (diary 5, participant 12).

Apparently, trying to explain what they had in mind helped these learners organize the contents, i.e., what they wanted to write about. Similarly, four other learners remarked the possibility to discuss the forms, i.e., how to write what they wanted:

Anyway, she was perfectly polite and always tried to offer a range of synonyms I could choose. This is the best part: it's something like a dictionary, except that you bring

⁶ My translation to what participant 01 wrote in Portuguese (Brazilians could write their diaries in Portuguese if they wanted to): *essa atividade tem me ajudado a aprender novos vocabulários, expressões e conectivos adequados para um bom texto*. All the other participants wrote their diaries in English and I decided not to edit their texts in any way.

the definition for the words you seek and then she tries to find the entries. (diary 6, participant 19).

He suggested better expressions and constructions, asking my intention in each part he had a doubt [...]. (diary 6, participant 12).

Finally, another reason why collaborative writing was considered positive by some students (04) is related to an impression that the final text has an improved quality, which would not be reached if they were working by themselves:

In the end, I had a very good beginning, so [...] I think my text was probably better than it would be if I had written it by myself. (diary 5, participant 12)

With no doubts, my text is much better after her help [...]. (diary 6, participant 17).

Despite those positive remarks about collaborative writing, many (10) participants also expressed some difficulties in carrying out the activity. One of these challenges is related to a possible lack of confidence in their own language skills in relation to issues of saving face:

In my opinion, this interaction was the most difficult one I've had to face it because it seemed that all I had learned in English was gone. I couldn't build complex sentences and my partner almost wrote the beginning of the movie review to me. (diary 05, participant 12).

This writing process is way slower than a non-collaborative one, and it's not the most comfortable way to write, since there's this slight fear of making mistakes in front of 'perfect speakers', which I think is natural. (diary 5, participant 19).

We may infer a relationship between the learners' lack of confidence to use the foreign language and the fact they felt uneasy due to the presence of another person while they were writing in English. Apparently, even though their partners were willing to collaborate ("my partner almost wrote the beginning of the movie review to me") these learners were feeling pressured by the fact that they were working with more linguistically competent peers ("perfect speakers").

Another challenge cited by five participants is the complexity of the movie plot⁷:

I found it hard to express what I was thinking because the movie is really complicated and I felt that I wasn't ready for it, I felt that my English level wasn't enough. (diary 5, participant 06).

⁷ Crash has eight main (and many others supporting) characters whose stories intertwine as they deal with racial issues and prejudice in Los Angeles, USA.

I tried to explain the story, which was really hard, as the film has a complex plot. She helped me with some specific words. We began to write my review of the film, but we didn't have much time for it, because explaining the film took too long. All we could do was the first paragraph, the introduction and description of the drama. (diary 5, participant 14).

It may be inferred by those two fragments that the cognitive demand to explain a complicated movie plot, which deals with complex cultural issues, seemed to push their ability to use the foreign language to the limit ("I felt my English level wasn't enough"), and caused some time management problems ("we didn't have much time for it").

Finally, the majority of learners (eight) mentioned an issue that is related to the separation of languages principle:

We only spoke in English because I think we both forgot to change languages, I believe that in the following interaction we should speak only in Portuguese but I don't know if that's going to work. (diary 5, participant 06)

As we spoke only in Portuguese when my partner was writing her text, this last interaction we spoke in English. (diary 5, participant 17).

As in iiTTD, participants are oriented to dedicate half the time of an oral session to each language, these students seem to be concerned about the fact that they did not change languages in the fifth interaction, and spoke only English. This may be a problem if the partners do not try to balance the amount of time they dedicate to the other language. However, we can notice that they are considering changing languages according to the language used to write the text ("As we spoke only in Portuguese when my partner was writing her text, this last interaction we spoke in English").

Discussion and Final Remarks

The analysis of the Brazilians' learning diaries shows that students have "mixed feelings" about the experience of jointly producing a text in English within iiTTD. Although all of the thirteen participants mentioned at least one reason why they had a positive view of the collaborative writing activity in iiTTD, almost all of them (11) also mentioned a challenge or difficulty they faced.

It is interesting to notice that the same event, i.e., writing with a native – or more proficient – speaker can be deemed both positively and negatively by learners. Some believe it is challenging and suggest a strong fear of losing face. For these learners, it seems that the experience of writing collaboratively evidenced an asymmetrical relationship instead of promoting joint productive activity. Also, it may be inferred by these Brazilians' perceptions that planning and revising seem a more organic and

natural activity to be carried out collaboratively while the text drafting might bring some uneasiness.

Other participants, however, acknowledge that it is an opportunity to learn linguistic elements in different levels (syntax, semantics, pragmatics). This data may suggest that the oral synchronous interaction throughout the collaborative drafting of the text may actually bring about the kind of learning that can be characterized within the ZDP, for the oral interaction with a focus on the jointly written production seems to evidence the linguistic gap in which the most proficient speaker can act upon, promoting meaningful opportunities for scaffolding.

The participants' perceptions that their final text was improved by the collaborative activity is coherent with the results of studies (STORCH, 2005), which concluded that jointly produced texts tend to be more complex and more accurate.

These learners' views on the experience still suggest some implications of the collaborative writing task to the separation of languages principle in iiTTD collaborative writing task. The analysis shows that most participants felt more comfortable when speaking and writing the same language, what should be taken in consideration when implementing the task.

Finally, we reckon these issues require further investigation, but we believe that both the challenges and the opportunities revealed by this study may be considered evidences of the emergence of affordances, or pedagogical benefits that arise within the relationship between active learners and the distinguishing characteristics of the collaborative writing task implemented in iiTTD.

TELETANDEM INSTITUCIONAL INTEGRADO: PERCEPÇÕES DE ALUNOS SOBRE ESCRITA COLABORATIVA

- **RESUMO:** *O teletandem institucional integrado (TTDii) é caracterizado como “uma série de sessões de teletandem que são incorporadas às aulas regulares de língua estrangeira (portanto obrigatórias) a fim de que tais aulas, ao mesmo tempo, beneficiem e sejam beneficiadas pela prática de teletandem” (CAVALARI; ARANHA, [2016]). A escrita colaborativa é definida como uma atividade em que os aprendizes trabalham juntos por todo o processo de planejamento, geração de ideias, estruturação, edição e revisão de um texto em língua estrangeira (STORCH, 2013). Este artigo tem os objetivos de (i) descrever uma tarefa de escrita colaborativa que foi implementada no TTDii na UNESP – São José do Rio Preto, e (ii) discutir a percepção dos participantes brasileiros ao desenvolverem tal atividade em 2015. Os dados foram coletados por meio de diários de aprendizagem escritos por treze aprendizes de inglês como língua estrangeira que cursavam o curso de Bacharelado em Letras com Habilitação de Tradutor.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Escrita colaborativa. Teletandem institucional integrado. Percepção dos aprendizes.*

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