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The Use of Learning Strategies in an E-tandem English Program

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Abstract

This qualitative research aimed at analyzing the use of learning strategies in strong students who participated in an e-tandem English program at Technical University of Cotopaxi. A survey of 33 questions was applied to 25 participants; questions were taken from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990) and adapted to the context of e-tandem. Data show that these students used a variety of learning strategies when they participated in the program. Most of the participants *usually* and *always* used 7 strategies under the category of cognitive, 5 from memory, 1 from compensatory, 2 metacognitive, 2 affective and 2 social strategies. These strategies are: finding speaking opportunities, planning, listening to music and videos in English, finding ways to interact better, use of previous knowledge, memorization of words and pronunciation, use of new words, setting goals, correcting their mistakes, relaxation, motivation, socialization, and listening in context. On the other hand, 3 cognitive, 2 memory, 3 compensatory, 1 metacognitive, 2 affective and 4 social strategies were *never* or *seldom* used by the majority of students. These strategies are: meeting native speakers, imitating accents, using mental images, guessing, using synonyms, gestures, reviewing content, learning about culture, and asking for learning tips. These results suggest training students in the effective use of learning strategies during the teaching process so that they can benefit more from the virtual interactions in e-tandem learning.

Keywords: e-tandem learning, learning strategies, second language learning

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1. Introduction

E-tandem is a virtual, collaborative and autonomous learning method in which two students from different languages help each other to learn a new language through reciprocal cooperation (Telles, 2006). Students interact with native speakers by video communication tools such as Zoom, Meet, Skype, Teams, etcetera, for about fifty minutes. One half hour in their native language and another half in their partner's language. The main principles of e-tandem learning are: languages must not be mixed, reciprocity, and autonomy (Vasallo & Telles, 2006). E-tandem helps students gain confidence to use the new language in real life situations, learn lexico-grammatical features of the language (Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Kabata, 2007; Kabata & Adasawa, 2011), and increase cultural awareness (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003).

Within this virtual context and under the supervision of a teacher mediator, partners collaborate online and make their own choices regarding the path, rhythm and content (Telles 2015). Thus, E-tandem learning needs students' autonomy, which requires think and act independently, make own decisions, use strategies to face new situations, and use study techniques and life experiences (Amaya, 2008). In Second language education, learning strategies have been attributed to the autonomy in learning. According to Shi (2017) they are "... steps taken by learners to enhance their learning ..." (p. 24). Several studies show that there is a positive correlation between the use of strategies and the effectiveness in the second language learning process. This studies also show that students use different strategies when learning a new language. For instance, Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) found that students often use strategies for their English language learning activities; participants of their study reported a medium frequency use of strategy on learning English. In addition, Ghufron (2018) reported that language learning strategies are used by EFL fluent speakers in speaking classes and revealed the fluent speakers' awareness of the benefits of the language learning strategies.

Even though there are many studies about learning strategies and e-andem learning separately, there are no publications that provide evidence on the use of learning strategies in e-tandem. Thus, this paper presents an attempt to provide insights into the use of such strategies when students participate in a pilot e-tandem project. Two questions guided the study: a) what strategies are more frequently used by the majority of students? and b) what strategies are less frequently used by the majority of students?

1.1 Learning strategies

Learning strategies are a set of activities, techniques and means designed according to students' needs to acquire new knowledge. Montaña (2017, p. 479) refers to learning strategies as "... a set of tactics that people use in order to gain control over their own learning process". "An active use of language learning strategies helps learners in control of their own learning by



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developing language skills, increasing confidence and motivation in the learning process (Shi, 2017, p. 24). Through the use of strategies students can achieve learning objectives in a better way because "...second language acquisition strongly suggests that good language learners use a variety of strategies to assist them in gaining command over new language skills" (O'Malley, 1987, p. 1).

1.2 Type of strategies

Oxford divided strategies in two main groups, direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies involve the manipulation of the target language, and they include memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. And indirect strategies help learners regulate the learning process; they are social, affective and metacognitive strategies (Hardan 2013).

1.3 Direct strategies

1.3.1 Cognitive strategy

Cognitive strategies are intellectual actions implemented essentially to reflect on one's own learning, analyze and synthesize what has been learned. Oxford (2005) says "The mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses". Besides, Di Carlo's (2017) findings remarks that "cognition refers to the mental processes and abilities involved in the processing and validation of information (such as perception, memory, imagination, intelligence and reasoning, among others), which are not emotional or affective" (p. 115).

1.3.2 Memory strategies

Corpas (2017) mentions that "memory strategies involve the mental processes for storing new information in the memory and for retrieving them when needed (p.231). Memorization refers to a method of recalling information (Özkan, 2009, p. 60). It is related with the memory or evocation of what has been learned. Oxford (cited in Gholamali 2014) claims that memory strategies help language learners to learn better. He presents "four subsets of strategies under this category: Creating mental linkages, applying images and sound, reviewing well, and employing action." (p. 193).

1.3.3 Compensation strategy

Ahmad & Ismail (2012) mention that "Compensation strategies consist of two main strategies: first, guessing intelligently and second, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. Specifically, under the strategy 'guessing intelligently' there are two sub strategies which are using linguistic clues, and using other clues." (p. 79). The gist of the matter is that compensation strategies make the use of the supposition, guess of the meaning of what is communicated in the foreign language through the use of clues or clues, anticipation of contents and meanings, look for alternative ways to express ideas and make use of synonyms. In other words,

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overcoming knowledge limitations in learning and producing a new language (Oxford 1990, p. 90).

1.4 Indirect strategies

1.4.1 *Metacognitive strategy*

Raofi et al. (2015) indicates that metacognitive strategy knowledge is closely related to success in second language learning due to it allows students to be aware of their learning process through understanding, monitoring and reflection. Learners who are equipped with these strategies are aware of their learning and they know how and when to employ the most relevant strategies to accomplish a given task. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2016, p.74) remark that "metacognitive strategies may be combined with instructional activities to promote learner autonomy." Students can be equipped with concrete tools and strategies to exercise autonomy in planning and monitoring their learning. "The ability to reflect on one's own thoughts and experiences is probably a unique human capability..." (Haukas et al., 2018, p.11). In short, metacognitive strategies help students become more in control of their language learning.

1.4.2 *Affective strategies*

Etxebarria & Garay (2012) indicate that affective strategies "... can be defined as those strategies which help to create and maintain emotional stability throughout learning. OXFORD relates them with emotions, attitudes, motivation and values."(p.20). On the whole, affective strategies refers to behavior actions, significant actions that become experiences. Another point of view is that the affective factors like emotion, attitude, motivation, and values influence learning a lot (Altay, 2017, p. 135). These strategies are not based on content learning, but on the effectiveness of learning through motivation, attitude and affection. Besides, affective strategies "... involved some variables and those are the reduction of anxiety, self-stimulation and monitoring of emotion" (Garay & Etxebarria, 2012, p. 14).

1.4.3 *Social strategy*

Oxford states that language is a form of social behavior; it is communication, and communication occurs between and among people. The use of social strategies is very important in this process (cited in Etxebarria et al., 2015) because language learning involves interaction with others. Social strategies, as social acts, help learning a second language in a better way. Students who are good at socializing have better opportunities to improve their communicative skills because they look for opportunities to interact in a new language. According to Oxford a good student uses more social strategies than a poor one.

In conclusion, these strategies benefit second language learning in different ways, and it is necessary to train students to use them better. Therefore, the main objective of this research was

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to identify whether or not strong students who participated in the E-tandem program used these strategies. Two research questions guided the study:

- a) Which strategies were used by the majority of students
- b) Which strategies were used by few students .

2. Method

This is a qualitative research that used a survey as data collection instrument. It was conducted at Technical University of Cotopaxi, which is a public university. 25 students participated in virtual conversation sessions with Spanish learners from Miami University through Skype during two academic terms—Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters. We invited strong students from different classes to participate voluntarily; 44% from third, 37% from second and 19% from first semester. Their ages were about 19 to 25 years old. The schedule for the sessions were established by the *Virtual Immersion Spanish-English Program* of Miami University. A short guide with instructions, guidelines and a planning topic format was given to students before the sessions. They had to choose a topic for each session and get prepared by themselves for interacting with an e-tandem partner for 50 minutes.

At the end of the program, students completed an online survey; 33 items were taken from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (henceforth SILL) questionnaire (Oxford, 1990). Items were translated to Spanish contextualizing to e-tandem learning and categorized according to the types of learning strategies (Ardasheva & Tretter, 2013). In addition, the survey was validated by two English teachers from Technical University of Cotopaxi with vast research experience. Both hold a master's degree in English Language Teaching, and one is currently developing his PhD thesis. Final changes to the survey were done after a pilot study to prove its validity.



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3. Results

Table 1: Cognitive Strategy

Statement	Statement #	Sample	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Somewhat	4 Usually	5 Always	Total
Leo información suficiente de un tema antes de participar en las conversaciones virtuales.	2	25	0%	24%	40%	24%	12%	100%
Planifico mis conversaciones para optimizar tiempo y aprovechar las conversaciones virtuales.	3	25	0%	28%	20%	32%	20%	100%
Me preocupo por mejorar mi competencia oral en inglés.	4	25	0%	16%	20%	32%	32%	100%
Intento descubrir cómo participar mejor en las conversaciones virtuales.	6	25	0%	16%	24%	40%	20%	100%
Escribo apuntes del tema que se va a tratar en inglés antes de iniciar una conversación virtual.	8	25	4%	12%	24%	36%	24%	100%
Trato de aplicar lo aprendido en la clase de inglés en las conversaciones virtuales.	11	25	0%	36%	12%	28%	24%	100%
Trato de utilizar aplicaciones tecnológicas para buscar amigos extranjeros con quien conversar en inglés.	16	25	4%	48%	24%	12%	12%	100%
Trato de encontrar tantas formas como pueda para conversar	20	25	4%	40%	36%	16%	4%	100%



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con nativo hablantes o
extranjeros que saben
inglés.

	33	25	0%	16%	32%	20%	32%	100%
Miro videos o películas en inglés para aprender de las interacciones de forma más natural y real.								

Source: Online survey

The results about the use of cognitive strategies showed that 32% and 20% of students planned their conversations to optimize their time *usually* and *always* respectively. Also, an equal percentage (32%) answered that they are *always* and *usually* worried about improving their oral competence. Likewise, 40% and 20% chose the options *usually* and *always* respectively in the question about ways to improve their participation in virtual conversations. 36% and 24% of the students answered *usually* and *always* respectively that they wrote notes on the topic that they were going to discuss before their participation. Moreover, 28% and 24% of respondents answered *usually* and *always* respectively that they put into practice what they had learned in the classrooms in virtual conversations. In the same way a percentage of 28% and 24% of students use videos and films to learn from the interactions in a natural way. However, very few students try to find ways or use technology to find native speakers or foreigners who they can speak English. All in all, cognitive strategies were the most used by the majority of students of English Major when they participated in virtual conversations.

Table 2: Memory Strategies

Statement	Statement #	Sample	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Somewhat	4 Usually	5 Always	Total
Practico la pronunciación de nuevas palabras antes y después de las conversaciones virtuales.	10	25	4%	20%	16%	40%	20%	100%
Digo o repito nuevas palabras aprendidas en las conversaciones virtuales para memorizarla.	14	25	4%	36%	20%	24%	16%	100%
Trato de imitar los acentos de los hablantes nativos de inglés en las	27	25	12%	12%	28%	36%	12%	100%



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Recuerdo una nueva palabra de inglés al hacer una imagen mental de una situación.	25	25	0%	28%	28%	32%	12%	100%
Utilizo las nuevas palabras aprendidas en las conversaciones virtuales en mi proceso de aprendizaje del idioma inglés.	32	25	0%	25%	20,8%	33,4%	20,8%	100%
Utilizo imágenes para recordar el significado de una palabra en inglés.	23	25	4%	28%	40%	20%	8%	100%
Hago tarjetas (palabras o imágenes) del nuevo vocabulario que aprendo en las conversaciones virtuales para recordarlas.	24	25	4%	56%	32%	8%	0%	100%

Source: Online survey

Regarding the use of memory strategies, the majority of students, 40% and 20% of respondents, used *usually* and *always* respectively the memorization strategies by means of practicing the pronunciation of new words before and after the virtual conversations. Furthermore, 33.40% and 20.80% practiced *usually* and *always* respectively this strategy by using new words learned in the virtual conversations. But learning strategies such as: repeating words to memorize them, trying to imitate accents, and using mental images and pictures to remember new words were used by fewer participants. And only 8% of students *usually* made cards (words or images) of the new vocabulary learned in virtual conversations to remember them.

Table 3: Compensatory Strategies

Statement	Statement #	Sample	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Somewhat	4 Usually	5 Always	Total
Intento no traducir palabra por palabra sino entender en contexto cuando estoy interactuando en las conversaciones virtuales.	15	25	0%	28%	20%	40%	12%	100%
Intento adivinar lo que dice la otra persona en las	17	25	4%	40%	28%	8%	20%	100%



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Si no puedo pensar en una palabra en inglés, uso una palabra o frase que significa lo mismo.	18	25	0%	20%	32%	28%	20%	100%
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Cuando no puedo pensar en una palabra durante una conversación virtual, uso gestos o imágenes.	22	25	4%	32%	28%	24%	12%	100%
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Source: Online survey

With respect to the use of compensatory strategies, 40% and 12% of respondents answered *usually* and *always* respectively that they tried not to translate word by word, but they tried to understand in context during the virtual conversations. On the contrary, fewer students said that they *usually* or *always* use synonyms, gestures and images to make themselves understand. Only 8% (usually) and 20% (always) of the participants tried to guess what the other person said during the virtual conversations.

Table 4: Metacognitive Strategies

Statement	Statement #	Sample	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Somewhat	4 Usually	5 Always	Total
Tengo metas claras para mejorar mi competencia oral en inglés.	5	25	0%	28%	12%	28%	32%	100%
Repaso lo aprendido en las conversas virtuales.	19	25	0%	40%	16%	32%	12%	100%
Me doy cuenta de los errores cometidos durante las conversaciones virtuales y trato de corregirlos posteriormente.	21	25	0%	16%	20%	32%	32%	100%

Source: Online survey



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Data show that 28% and 32% answered *usually* and *always* respectively about the fact that they have clear goals to improve their English oral competence. With the same percentage, 32 % of the participants answered *usually* and *always* that they realized their mistakes during virtual conversations and tried to correct them later. But, only 32% and 12% answered *usually* and *always* respectively that they checked later what they learned in virtual conversations. In general, these results show that these strategies were used by fewer students.

Table 5: Affective Strategies

Statement	Statement #	Sample	<u>1</u> Never	<u>2</u> Seldom	<u>3</u> Somewhat	<u>4</u> Usually	<u>5</u> Always	Total
Comienzo conversaciones en inglés cuando participó en las interacciones virtuales.	1	25	0%	36%	20%	28%	16%	100%
Estoy motivado por realizar conversaciones virtuales sin importar los errores que pueda cometer.	9	25	0%	12%	12%	40%	36%	100%
Intento relajarme cuando tengo miedo de participar en las conversaciones Virtuales.	26	25	4%	32%	16%	24%	24%	100%
Me doy una recompensa o buen trato cuando participo bien en las conversaciones virtuales.	28	25	16%	44%	8%	28%	4%	100%

Source: Online survey

Data show that 40% and 36% of students are *usually* and *always* respectively motivated to participate in virtual conversations. They don't care about the mistakes they may make. However, low percentages of participants, from 28% to 4% state that they *usually* or *always* use strategies such as starting conversations, relaxation and praising themselves when they do well in virtual conversations. In the same way, affective strategies were less commonly used when students participated in virtual conversations.

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Table 6: Social Strategies

Statement	Statement #	Sample	1 Never	2 Seldom	3 Somewhat	4 Usually	5 Always	Total
Pregunto a mi profesor tips para participar mejor en las conversaciones virtuales.	7	25	16%	28%	24%	24%	8%	100%
Leo temas de cultura americana para comunicarme mejor en las conversaciones virtuales.	12	25	12%	48%	32%	8%	0%	100%
Intento entablar conversación virtual tomando como tema la cultura de nuestro país.	13	25	0%	32%	16%	32%	20%	100%
Comparto mis experiencias (como me sentí) de las conversaciones virtuales con alguien.	29	25	4%	24%	12%	40%	20%	100%
Hago preguntas para mantener el hilo de la conversación.	31	25	0%	28%	28%	32%	12%	100%
Si no entiendo algo en las conversaciones virtuales, le pido a la otra persona que disminuya la velocidad o lo repita.	30	25	0%	32%	32%	24%	12%	100%

Source: Online survey

The results of this category of strategies show that 32% and 20% of respondents who answered *usually* and *always* respectively tried to initiate conversations with topics of American culture. 40% and 20% *usually* and *always* respectively said that they shared their experiences with others after virtual conversations. However, a low percentage of the students (8%) stated that they *usually* read about American Culture in order to participate more effectively in virtual conversations. In the same way, few students employed strategies such as: asking teachers for tips to interact better, asking questions to keep the flow of the conversation and understand better.

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4. Discussion

Results suggest that strong students who participated in virtual conversations used different learning strategies. This finding is closely related to what Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) Gani et al. (2015) and Ghufroon (2018) found in their research in which they demonstrated that language learners often use strategies for their English language learning activities. In addition, As Ghufroon's research, we found that most of the students used cognitive strategies. Students use previous knowledge to learn something new. They were worried about improving their speaking. They tried to do their best to participate better by planning, listening to music and videos, finding ways to interact better, and so on. They also tried to apply in their classes what they have learned in the virtual conversations. It can be said that virtual conversation encouraged autonomy and motivation which are principles of e-tandem learning (Telles 2006).

However, we do not want to neglect the use of other strategies of each category (memorization, metacognitive, affective, social and compensatory) that were used frequently by a high percentage of students. Memory strategies were used for vocabulary learning, pronunciation practice, and application of new words in the learning process. Fewer students use pictures or word cards. Perhaps students used this strategy just to memorize content that they were going to share with their e-tandem partner, thus, it will not have impact in their long life learning because Weinstein affirms that language learners are well versed at retaining content knowledge to take exams, but dreadfully, inept at maintaining it in long term memory (cited in Khamees, 2016, p. 254). A great number of students of the English Major state that they have clear goals to improve their oral competence in English. They said that they realize their mistakes and try to correct them. This is good because Raoofi et al. (2014, p. 37) indicates that students who use metacognitive strategies have more opportunities to succeed in their foreign language learning; they are able to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning. A considerable percentage of students used effective strategies; they tried to relax when they felt fear during virtual conversations and they were motivated to participate in spite of the mistakes they might make. It can be understood as an interest and willingness to interact with native speakers which help them decrease anxiety and increase motivation to overcome difficulties. Regarding the social strategies we could see that students were interested in socializing with native speakers. Finally, listening in context (compensatory strategy) was used by most of the students.

Nevertheless, some strategies were used by a low percentage of students. In cognitive strategies, finding ways and using technology to meet native speakers to practice English. In memory strategies, repeating words to memorize them, trying to imitate accents, and using mental images and pictures to remember new words. In compensatory strategies, the use of guessing, synonyms, gestures, and pictures to make understand themselves. In metacognitive strategies, not reviewing what they have learned. In affective strategies, starting conversations, relaxation and praising themselves when they do well in virtual conversations. And in social strategies, lack of interest in learning about American culture, and not asking for tips to interact better, ask questions to keep the flow of the conversation and understand better.

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5. Conclusion

In conclusion, language learning strategies benefit second language learning, and it is useful in e-tandem due to it helps students achieve better results. Even though many participants reported using different strategies frequently, there are strategies that were used less frequently by most of the students. Consequently, it is necessary to reflect on the importance of implicit instruction of learning strategies. Strategies must be taught in regular teaching and monitored in reflection sessions after the virtual interactions. If students use the strategies in a more conscious way during the interactions, they will benefit more. The scope of this research was limited to identify whether or not strong students used these strategies, and the percentage of them that used more and less frequently. New research needs to be done to identify how well students use the strategies and the teacher's level of knowledge and awareness on using and teaching strategies. Moreover, a similar study can be conducted with weak students.

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