

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Integrating telecollaborative language learning into Higher Education: a study on teletandem practice

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## ABSTRACT

Telecollaborative learning can be implemented at higher education institutions as an independent practice or as a blended setting integrated into classroom activities. Considering telecollaborative practices in European universities, some researchers proposed categories and levels of classroom and institutional integration. Teletandem, a model of telecollaboration implemented at UNESP (*Universidade Estadual Paulista*), involves two speakers of different languages who use the text, voice, and webcam image resources of VOIP technology to help each other learn their native language (or language of proficiency). This paper aims at describing and discussing the different teletandem learning set-ups implemented at the Brazilian university in relation to the levels of integration described by Brammerts (2002; 2003) and Lewis & O'Dowd (2016). The discussion is based on the data collected by means of a questionnaire answered by teletandem practitioners (teachers and researchers) at UNESP. Results revealed low levels of integration both into classroom and into institutional practices.

**KEYWORDS:** telecollaboration; teletandem; integration.

## *A integração da aprendizagem telecolaborativa de línguas no contexto universitário: um estudo com foco na prática de teletandem*

### RESUMO

A aprendizagem telecolaborativa pode ser implementada em instituições de educação superior como uma prática independente ou integrada ao contexto de sala de aula e estudos baseados no contexto europeu propuseram categorias e níveis de integração da prática telecolaborativa à sala de aula e às políticas institucionais. Teletandem, um modelo de projeto telecolaborativo implementado na UNESP, envolve dois falantes de línguas diferentes que usam os recursos de texto, voz e imagem da tecnologia VOIP com o propósito de se ajudarem a aprender a língua um do outro. Este trabalho tem como objetivos descrever e discutir as diferentes práticas de aprendizagem em teletandem implementadas na UNESP em relação aos níveis de integração descritos por Brammerts (2002; 2003) e Lewis & O'Dowd (2016). A discussão se baseia em dados coletados por meio de um questionário respondido por professores-pesquisadores envolvidos com o teletandem na referida universidade. Os resultados apontam para um baixo nível de integração da prática de teletandem tanto do ponto de vista pedagógico, quanto do ponto de vista institucional.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** telecolaboração; teletandem; integração.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Telecollaboration is an umbrella term<sup>1</sup> used to denominate different pedagogical projects that engage learners in regular communication and virtual exchanges with members of other cultures under the guidance of a teacher. Lewis and O'Dowd (2016, p. 02) remark that "in more recent years an increasing number of new exchange models have begun to emerge in universities across the globe which engage learners in online intercultural communication in a myriad of ways." As one of these exchange models, teletandem (TTD) (Telles, 2006) has been implemented at UNESP (*Universidade Estadual Paulista*) since 2006. It is a foreign language teaching-learning context, based on the tandem model (Little and Brammerts, 1996), in which two speakers of different languages use the text, voice, and webcam image resources of internet communication tools (Skype, for example) to help each other learn their native language (or language of proficiency). According to Telles and Vassallo (2006), language learning in this context is guided by three theoretical principles (Telles & Vassallo, 2006):

- autonomy: each participant is responsible for setting their own goals and managing their learning in the direction of those goals;
- reciprocity: both participants should benefit equally from the experience, what entails collaboration and support to the partner's learning;
- separation of languages: there must be egalitarian amount of time dedicated to the practice of each language involved.

Over the years, several studies (Santos, 2008; Telles, 2009; Benedetti et al., 2010; Luz, 2012; GARCIA, 2013; Aranha and Cavalari, 2014; Teles, 2015; Salomão, 2011; 2015; Funo et al., 2015; Carvalho et al., 2015; Zakir, 2015; Cavalari and Aranha, 2016; Toledo, 2017; Freschi, 2017; Campos, 2018<sup>2</sup>) investigated different pedagogical, linguistic and cultural aspects of teletandem learning. They offer convincing evidence that teletandem activities may contribute to intercultural language learning and have become highly valued by practitioners at the three UNESP institutes in which it is implemented: Assis, São José do Rio Preto (SJRP) and Araraquara<sup>3</sup>. These investigations, focusing on each institutional setting, also revealed that, even though the theoretical tenets have remained the same, teletandem implementation has been adjusted to the specificities of each institute and to the particularities of the partnerships established with different foreign universities. However, there has not been, to this moment, a study that aimed at describing teletandem practices within the three institutes. In this paper<sup>4</sup>, we intend to present such practices from the perspective of the teacher-researchers involved. Our theoretical discussion is based on pedagogical and

<sup>1</sup> See O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) for a discussion on the different terminology that has been used to designate the same type of activity, such as: telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange (OIE), collaborative online learning (COLL), (tele)tandem. In this paper, we use teletandem, telecollaboration and virtual exchanges interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> See teletandem website ([www.teletandembrasil.org](http://www.teletandembrasil.org)) for a detailed list of research studies.

<sup>3</sup> UNESP is a multicampus university, with 34 institutes spread in 24 cities within São Paulo state <<http://www.unesp.br/portal#!/apresentacao/perfil/>>.

<sup>4</sup> A first version of this paper was presented at 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Applied Linguistics (AILA), held in Rio de Janeiro, in July, 2017. That presentation was supported by FAPESP grant # 2017/12526-8

institutional aspects of integrating virtual exchanges into higher education. Our premise is that a description of different forms of teletandem practice may shed light to educational and political issues involved in the advancement of telecollaboration not only at UNESP but also at other higher education contexts.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on telecollaborative foreign language learning dates back to the 1990's (Warschauer, 1995; Brammerts, 1996; Little and Brammerts, 1996; Byram, 1997) and different models of telecollaboration have been investigated since then. Helm (2015), on a major survey with teachers and students who participated in virtual exchanges, explored practices and attitudes towards telecollaboration across European universities. The author found that the most common type of exchange is a bilateral, bilingual, bicultural exchange lasting no more than one semester, between students who are learning a foreign language (FL). These findings are corroborated by Lewis and O'Dowd (2016), who presented a review of empirical research findings related to the integration of virtual exchanges into higher education in Europe. According to the authors, because second language learning is a key driver, "traditional' bilateral exchanges are the dominant model" (p. 51) and only a few exchanges in their review used a lingua franca.

In terms of technology use, Helm (2015) and Lewis and O'Dowd (2016) also discovered that asynchronous text-based communication is still the most common form of online intercultural exchange (e-mail, online discussion forums), followed by (i) synchronous text-chat tools and social networks (Facebook), (ii) virtual learning environments (Moodle) and institutional-specific platforms, (iii) audio/videoconferencing (Skype) and Web 2.0 (wikis, blogs) tools, (iv) and virtual worlds (Second Life, MMOs – Massive Multiplayer Online games).

Another aspect that has been the focus of studies in this area concerns the characteristics of telecollaborative projects which are integrated into higher education programs. Investigating an integrated model of etandem within the European context, Calverts (1996), Little and Brammerts (1996), Lewis and Walker (2003) and O'Rourke (2007) mentioned three key features: (i) preparing learners for the exchanges; (ii) offering support (both pedagogical and technological) to participants, and (iii) finding ways to accreditation. In line with these findings, Cavalari and Aranha's (2016) study within the Brazilian context at UNESP-SJRP revealed that teletandem integration involves: (i) preparing learners for autonomous collaborative learning; (ii) blending teletandem practice into classroom activities by means of integrating tasks; and (iii) considering different assessment perspectives (the teacher's, the learner's, the peer's).

Brammerts (2002; 2003) also investigated the tandem model and proposed that it can be characterized in relation to institutional support and recognition and to course curriculum integration. According to the author, telecollaborative practice in tandem may be:

- non-institutional, when it is carried out by two learners without any support or accreditation by an educational institution;

- semi-institutional, when only one of the learners receives institutional support and credits;
- institutional, when both learners receive support and credits.

Within the institutional practice, telecollaboration may be carried out by learners as an individual complementary practice (non-integrated to a particular course) or it can be integrated into the foreign language curriculum for (a) only one of the learners that take part in the exchange (semi-integrated) or for both learners (integrated). The following table illustrates the modalities of tandem practice proposed by Brammerts:

**Table 1.** Tandem practice and levels of integration (own elaboration based on BRAMMERTS, 2002; 2003)

| Tandem Practice   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
| Institutional   |   | Semi-Institutional  |  |
| Integrated  | Semi-integrated   | Non-Institutional   |  |
| carried out within educational institutions (universities, elementary or high schools, language schools) which promote and recognize its practice |   | is supported and recognized by the educational institution only for one of the partners   |  |
| is recognized by both institutions and integrated into foreign language courses   | is integrated to a foreign language course in only one of the institutions involved | carried out by two language learners without any institutional involvement or recognition                                       |  |
|   |   | is supported by the institutions, which may offer some resources (means to find a partner, a laboratory for oral sessions etc.) |  |

Such categorization offers, at the same time, a thorough picture of tandem practices and a comprehensive theoretical framework to describe other telecollaborative exchanges. It also sheds light on both sides of the partnership and takes into consideration the fact that the learning process may depend on contextual factors that are related not only to one’s own educational setting, but also to one’s partner’s background.

Lewis and O’Dowd (2016) also proposed categories that reflect levels of telecollaborative practice integration into higher educational settings. According to the authors, telecollaboration can be:

- classroom independent: online collaborative exchanges are a supplementary activity that teachers do not integrate into their study programs;
- classroom integrated: telecollaborative activity is incorporated into course syllabuses, class time is dedicated to analyzing collaborative interactions and students receive course credit for their online work;
- institutional integrated: telecollaborative practice is fully recognized by the university institution as an important part of their internationalization activities, and consequently, the teacher and students involved receive the necessary support and recognition to carry out the exchange.

Still according to the authors, institutionally recognized initiatives include

‘facilitated’ models of OIE [online intercultural exchanges] where trained online facilitators are hired by universities to guide synchronous online discussions between learners in different universities (Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016, p. 28).

The levels of integration proposed by these authors have some key aspects in common to those proposed by Brammerts (2002; 2003), as both

proposals explicit two dimensions which are entangled in any integrated telecollaborative practice: the pedagogical dimension and the institutional one. The authors seem to agree that, in pedagogical terms, integrating telecollaboration into higher education involves a blended approach to learning, i.e., the combination of face-to-face interactions and technology mediated communication. As for the institutional dimension, their proposals acknowledge the need for financial, technological and political support (and recognition) to such an approach.

What distinguishes the proposals, however, is the role of institutional support: while for Brammerts, any tandem exchange that is classroom integrated is also inherently institutional, for Lewis and O'Dowd, exchanges may be classroom integrated, but not fully recognized from the institutional point of view. In fact, Lewis and O'Dowd (2016) remarked that most telecollaboration experiences are dependent on the energy and interest of an individual teacher, and only a few are supported by the university as part of their budget plans and internationalization policies. Guth (2016) also reveals that virtual exchanges are far from reaching a state of normalization in European higher education institutions despite the facts that they are highly valued by teachers and students and that there is a growing body of research proving they can promote virtual mobility and internationalization at home.

According to De Wit (2016, p. 76) the concept of internationalization at home involves "curriculum-oriented activities that help students develop international understanding and intercultural skills and that prepare students to be active in a much more globalized world." In this respect, the author proposes a comprehensive approach to internationalization that acknowledges the opportunities that online technology and communication may provide. He argues that virtual exchanges are a key element in internationalization because

they represent a collaborative international exercise on the part of teachers and students; they make use of online technology to foster interaction; they have the potential to lead to active intercultural and international learning and learning outcomes; and they can be actively integrated into the learning process (De Wit, 2016, p. 82).

In this scenario, it is crucial to acknowledge both the advantages and the challenges to successful integration of telecollaborative learning into higher education. According to Helm (2015) the most relevant challenges mentioned by practitioners concern:

- time issues (telecollaborative practice seems to be time consuming);
- lack of institutional interest, recognition and/or funding;
- technological problems related to teacher literacies;
- organization of groups (size of student groups, proficiency level of learners) and appropriate tasks;
- assessment and accreditation (what and how to assess telecollaborative learning).

The challenges that emerged out of Helm's study corroborated the categories that O'Dowd (2013) had already discovered. However, O'Dowd's investigation also showed the strategies adopted in some universities to overcome those barriers:

- building-up reliable and steady partnerships;
- raising awareness and prestige of the telecollaborative exchange in the local institution and beyond;
- using telecollaboration creatively to adapt to local institutions' needs;
- achieving credit or recognition for the students' telecollaborative work;
- linking telecollaboration to broader international activity at the institution.

The author remarks that integration of virtual exchanges is not a "black or white issue" and it depends on a series of contextual factors. He also proposes that, in order for telecollaboration to become a successful widespread practice in higher education, it is necessary for certain criteria to exist at both institutional and faculty (practitioner) level:

At institutional level, institutions need to ensure that both training and support (in the form of extra time or credit) are provided to practitioners who wish to engage in this activity. Management should also ensure that the activity is recognised as important and relevant, meaning that it is rewarded in internal promotion procedures and facilitated in institutional policies. They should also ensure that it is easily integrated into course syllabi and that it can be a credit-carrying activity for students. On the "bottom-up", practitioner level, successful integration requires that practitioners are willing and able to establish for themselves cross-institutional partnerships and that they have a realistic understanding of how telecollaboration can work and what it can achieve (O'Dowd, 2013, p. 49).

Based on the idea that such contextual factors appear to be inextricably connected and that the nature of such connections have an impact on how telecollaboration is put into practice, we turn our attention to teletandem implementation at three UNESP *campi*: Assis, São José do Rio Preto and Araraquara.

### 3. THIS STUDY

Teletandem exchanges are carried out in three UNESP institutes (Assis, São José do Rio Preto (SJRP) and Araraquara) by local groups of teachers (usually, but not necessarily researchers) who are responsible for establishing and maintaining partnerships with foreign universities so that bilingual telecollaborative learning practices can be offered to students every semester. In 2016 and 2017, there were eleven teachers involved in teletandem implementation at UNESP: two in SJRP, two in Araraquara, and seven in Assis. In order to investigate TTD practices in relation to pedagogical and institutional integration, we asked those teachers to answer a questionnaire on Google Forms®. Some of the reasons to use this online survey tool were: it is free, offers a wide range of question types, and is easy to share with respondents. Besides, the questionnaire results may be automatically collected in an Excel spreadsheet.

The questionnaire had eight (08) questions: three closed and five open ones. The closed questions were designed to establish what type of teletandem-related activities were carried out in each campus (according to descriptions found in research papers and to discussions within the teletandem group)

and how integrated they were (categories were created according to Brammerts' proposal, which was the one teachers were familiarized with). These questions concerned:

- 1) which campus/institute the teacher was from: Assis, SJRP, Araraquara;
- 2) which teletandem related-activities students were involved in: participating in preparation meetings, participating in teletandem oral sessions (videoconferencing conversations), participating in mediation sessions (meetings with teachers for teletandem learning support<sup>5</sup>), writing learning diaries, writing texts in English, revising texts in Portuguese, answering questionnaires, other (respondents could add a different activity);
- 3) the level of integration into the FL lessons: integrated, semi-integrated, or non-integrated, other (respondents could add a different type)<sup>6</sup>.

The open questions involved less predictable information about teletandem practice in each campus and were about:

- 1) the number of learners who participated in teletandem practice in 2016,
- 2) the support teletandem practice had in the institute,
- 3) the technologies used,
- 4) the languages involved,
- 5) the (possible) advantages and barriers of integrating teletandem into the curriculum (pedagogical) integration.

A link which gave access to the questionnaire was sent by email in November 2016 (and again one month later) to all (eleven) teacher-practitioners. Six of them answered: two from SJRP (the whole team of teachers involved in teletandem practice), two from Assis (out of seven), and two from Araraquara (the whole team).

The data collected by means of this questionnaire were used to describe the context, and to elicit interpretations of teletandem practice in each institute. Therefore, this study can be characterized as a descriptive survey research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and Kelley et al. (2003), smaller samples and focus groups can be used in qualitative survey researches, which are aimed at examining a situation by describing important factors associated with it.

Data analysis involved establishing descriptive categories. In the case of the closed questions, categories were based on the number of answers given to each item. In the case of some open questions (v, vi, viii), categories were established by means of content analysis of the answers. Preliminary findings were discussed with the respondents in informal conversations and/or during research group meetings.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected by means of eight questions were organized into six categories concerning: (i) languages and number of learners in relation

<sup>5</sup> Mediation sessions are what researchers (Vieira-Abrahão, 2010; Salomão, 2015; Funo et al., 2015) in the teletandem project call what European researchers (Stickler, 2003) have called "counselling" or "advising" meetings. Despite the differences in the theoretical perspectives adopted, they are meetings in which a teacher offers support to telecollaborative learning.

<sup>6</sup> After the items in closed questions, there was an area for respondents to explain their choice if they wanted.

to levels of integration into the curricula, (ii) activities and technologies; (iii) institutional support; (iv) perceived challenges and advantages to pedagogical integration.

#### 4.1 Levels of integration, languages and number of learners

The data showed that almost 700 learners participated in bilingual bicultural exchanges in 2016 at the three institutes, and the languages exchanged with Portuguese were English, Spanish, Italian and French. Most of the practice was semi-integrated, i. e., teletandem (TTD) was a complementary/extracurricular activity for Brazilians and integrated into the curriculum for foreign participants. The following table shows a more accurate picture of the numbers in each campus:

**Table 2.** Number of UNESP students who participated in teletandem in relation to levels of integration and languages exchanged

|   | Campus                   |                                   |                          |                     |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
|   | Assis                    | Araraquara                        | SJRP                     |                     |
| Number of UNESP learners who participated | 302                      | 279                               | 101                      | 183                 |
| Level of integration                      | Semi-integrated practice | Semi-integrated practice          | Semi-integrated practice | Integrated practice |
| Languages                                 | English, Spanish, French | English, Spanish, Italian, French | English                  |                     |

In terms of integration, the respondents from Araraquara and Assis reported carrying out TTD as a semi-integrated practice, according to Brammerts' (2002; 2003) levels. Teletandem in these two institutes is, therefore, a classroom independent activity if we consider Lewis and O'Dowd's (2016) proposal, what suggests low levels of institutional integration. In SJRP, the scenario is slightly different: TTD practice is semi-integrated for 56% of the participants and integrated into English language courses (within "Language and Literature"<sup>7</sup> and "Translation Studies"<sup>8</sup> majors) for 44% of the Brazilian students. For participants in the integrated practice, teletandem activities are graded by the teacher, which is a form accreditation. The classroom integrated practice in SJRP suggests a step in the direction of institutional recognition, from Lewis and O'Dowd's perspective. It can be inferred that, if course syllabi have been altered locally, UNESP's regulations and policies may be flexible enough to accommodate this innovative pedagogical practice. However, there is no evidence that the embedding of virtual exchanges into the foreign language curricula is recognized as a strategy for internationalization at home, as defined by De Wit (2016).

#### 4.2 Activities and technologies

According to the respondents, the activities that learners carry out while participating in teletandem practice are: preparation meeting (tutorial),

<sup>7</sup> Licenciatura em Letras

<sup>8</sup> Bacharelado em Letras com Habilitação de Tradutor

weekly teletandem oral sessions (TOS) of about 50 to 60 minutes each, mediation sessions, learning diaries<sup>9</sup>, questionnaires, and collaborative writing tasks. As for technology use, all respondents mentioned at least one videoconferencing tool (Skype and/or Zoom) and some other resources: Forum, Moodle<sup>10</sup> and Google Products (Drive, Docs, Forms). Such diversity of technological resources is in line with research findings within European Universities, and data revealed that the combination of the resources and the organization of the activities are quite different in each campus, as the table shows:

**Table 3.** Activities carried out and technologies used to implement teletandem at UNESP

| Activities                    | Assis   | Araraquara   | SJRP  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Preparation meeting           | face-to-face  | face-to-face   | face-to-face and by means of tutorial videos  |
| TOS (teletandem oral session) | one hour; weekly (Skype or Zoom)                            | one hour; weekly (Skype)                             | one hour; weekly (Skype)  |
| Mediation (support)           | face-to-face meetings after each TOS, or by means of forums | online feedback offered to learning diaries (Moodle) | online feedback offered to learning diaries (Google Docs and Drive) and face-to-face meetings                 |
| Questionnaire                 | —   | at the end of the experience (Moodle)                | pre- and post-questionnaires (Google Forms and Drive)   |
| Collaborative writing task    | —   | —  | students wrote texts in their mother language and revised texts written in Portuguese (Google Docs and Drive) |

The preparation meetings were mentioned by respondents from the three institutes. There was not further information on how they are carried out, except for the fact that, in SJRP, teletandem learners are expected to watch “tutorial videos”<sup>11</sup> before participating in the preparation meeting.

As to the TOS, 100% of interactions between learners are carried out by means of videoconferencing tools (Skype or Zoom), what suggests that teletandem practice at UNESP may have taken telecollaboration a step further if we consider Helm’s (2015) and Lewis and O’Dowd’s (2016) findings within the European context, which show that most online exchanges are asynchronous and text-based.

Concerning the mediation sessions, i.e., the pedagogical support given to participants, there are different approaches in each campus. Within the semi-integrated groups, which is a common practice found in all institutes, data indicated that:

- in Assis, mediation sessions are held in face-to-face meetings after each TOS. For some groups, mediation is carried out by means of forums;
- in Araraquara, support is offered by means of online feedback given to learners’ diaries, which are shared with teachers on Moodle;
- in SJRP, mediation is offered (a) weekly by means of online feedback given to learners’ diaries, which are written on Google Docs and shared with teachers through Google Drive, and (b) every fortnight during face-to-face meetings with teachers, after the TOS.

<sup>9</sup> Learning diaries are also called reflexive diaries (Aranha & Cavalari, 2014; Cavalari & Aranha, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Virtual Learning Environment used at UNESP <<https://moodle.unesp.br/ava/>>.

<sup>11</sup> The videos can be accessed on You Tube: <<https://goo.gl/15Qadu>>.

In classroom integrated groups in SJRP, mediation is carried out in the same way as in semi-integrated ones: by means of online feedback to learning diaries and face-to-face meetings. However, while in semi-integrated practice the teacher who offers support may be a graduate student (teletandem researcher) and the mediation is scheduled every other week, in the integrated practice, the teacher who is responsible for giving support is also the FL course professor and the mediation session occurs anytime during regular lessons (held twice a week). Using class time to analyze collaborative learning is another feature that characterizes pedagogical integration and corroborates what Lewis and O'Dowd (2016) define as "classroom integrated practice".

In SJRP, there is also a collaborative writing task that learners should fulfill while participating both in semi-integrated and integrated practice. Brazilian learners write texts in English and revise texts in Portuguese by means of Google Docs and Drive<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, there are questionnaires that participants should answer in SJRP and Araraquara. In Araraquara, students are required to answer a final questionnaire (available on Moodle), concerning different aspects of the learner's experience in teletandem. In SJRP, students answer two questionnaires by means of Google Forms:

- one before the first TOS, in order to foster diagnostic self-assessment (mainly learner's language level and goals, based on the CEFR self-assessment grid<sup>13</sup>);
- one after the last TOS, in order to promote assessment of the whole learning experience in teletandem.

Data on activities and technologies indicated that Forums, Moodle and Google Products are not used for the virtual intercultural exchanges between learners, which are always carried out synchronously by Zoom or Skype. These resources are mainly used for other teletandem-related activities, such as mediation sessions, learning diaries writing and sharing; collaborative writing tasks, and assessment.

### 4.3 Institutional support and recognition

According to the respondents, Assis and SJRP both have a Teletandem Laboratory<sup>14</sup> while, in Araraquara, the activities are carried out in a multi-user laboratory that may be prioritized for TTD activities according to the demands. This fact suggests that TTD is locally recognized and supported as far as the necessity of appropriate physical space.

In Araraquara and SJRP, a certificate is issued to participants by means of the registration of teletandem practice as an extension activity<sup>15</sup>. Since extension activities are approved by the institution's central administration office, this certificate indicates recognition beyond the local institute. In SJRP,

<sup>12</sup>For further description of the task, please see Aranha and Cavalari (2014), Aranha and Cavalari (2015).

<sup>13</sup>Available at <https://goo.gl/FBBycr9>

<sup>14</sup>The physical space was offered by the institution and the equipment was financed by FAPESP (a State Foundation for Research Support) when Teletandem was a "Projeto Temático" (grant# 2006/03204-2). In SJRP, the equipment is currently being renewed by means of a new research project funded by FAPESP (grant#16/18705-9)

<sup>15</sup>Extension programs are related to the "third mission" of universities, i.e., to serve community needs. For further information on the extension programs at UNESP: <https://www2.unesp.br/portal#!/proex/>

also because teletandem is recognized as an extension program in 2016, a student grant was offered to a monitor at the teletandem laboratory. In Assis, participants could get a certificate issued by the Language and Teacher Education Center, which was locally recognized<sup>16</sup>. Considering that in Assis teletandem practice is semi-integrated (complementary/extracurricular), this indicates that there is some degree of institutional support even when no curriculum integration is observed.

Despite some evidences of institutional recognition (offering of physical space; recognition as an extension activity, possibility to adjust syllabi) there is no indication that teletandem practice may award credits as far as internationalization policies, career and academic progression are concerned.

### 4.3 Barriers to and advantages of integration of teletandem into the curricula

All respondents mentioned logistics issues (group size and schedule, extra time needed) as a barrier to teletandem integration into the curriculum. Most of them also mentioned pedagogical and institutional concerns, such as the need for changes in course syllabi and teachers' practices, as well as accreditation system. Finally, (in)compatibility between pedagogical practices at UNESP and their partner universities and obsolete equipment in the laboratory were considered hindrances to integration. **Table 4** shows the details of what teachers mentioned in each campus:

**Table 4.** barriers to a more integrated practice

| Barriers   | Assis | Araraquara | SJRP |
|--|-------|------------|------|
| Logistics (group size, schedule, time zone, and extra time needed for implementation)                      | 2     | 2          | 2    |
| Pedagogical and institutional issues (changes in course syllabi and in teachers' practices, accreditation) | 2     | 2          | 1    |
| Incompatible pedagogical practices at UNESP and at the partner university                                  | –     | –          | 1    |
| Obsolete computers in the lab  | –     | 1          | –    |

All these factors were also found as possible barriers to integration in European universities, according to Helm (2015) and Lewis and O'Dowd (2016). However, there are certain specificities in the Brazilian context that must be addressed. Considering that teletandem practice depends on putting students in pairs to work synchronously on a weekly basis for a period of 6 to 8 weeks in each semester, it is understandable that all respondents reported issues concerning matching groups and organizing a schedule for the exchanges. As to adjustments in courses syllabi, we can infer that they are feasible, from the institutional point of view, considering the integrated practice in SJRP. However, there is no evidence that institutional policies support teachers' practice (in terms of career progress) or equipment upgrading.

<sup>16</sup>Language centers were recognized as one of UNESP's extension programs in 2017. For further information, please visit "Centro de línguas e desenvolvimento de professores" (<https://unespassiscentrodelinguas.weebly.com/>)

Concerning the advantages, all teacher-researchers believe that a teletandem integration into the curricula may represent qualitative gains in the FL teaching and learning process. Most of them also reckon that integrated models can represent a different source of data for research and more opportunities for institutional and learners' recognition. Respondents from Assis and Araraquara also mentioned better chances of partnership maintenance. **Table 5** shows a more precise picture of the advantages mentioned in each campus:

**Table 5.** Advantages of a higher level of integration

| Advantage   | Assis | Araraquara | SJRP |
|---|-------|------------|------|
| Innovative pedagogical practice and improved teaching-learning processes; | 2     | 2          | 2    |
| Research development  | 2     | 1          | 2    |
| Recognition of teletandem practice by learners and by the institution     | 2     | 1          | 2    |
| Partnership maintenance   | 2     | 2          | –    |

The fact that all respondents mentioned classroom integration as a form of improving or innovating FL teaching and learning processes may seem contradictory to the low levels of pedagogical integration observed. However, the reported barriers to integration may explain the scenario both from a pedagogical and from a political/institutional perspective.

## 5. FINAL REMARKS

The purposes of this study were to describe teletandem practices carried out in 2016 at three UNESP institutes (Assis, SJRP and Araraquara) and to discuss such practices as to their integration into the FL curriculum and into institutional policies.

The survey results showed that there is convergence in the practices implemented in the three *campi* concerning (i) the oral synchronous mode of communication between learners (via Skype or Zoom) during virtual exchanges, and (ii) the provision of pedagogical support for teletandem learning (preparation meeting and mediation sessions). There is, however, some differences in (i) the approach and the technologies used to offer support in mediation sessions, (ii) the levels of pedagogical integration, (iii) the types of teletandem-related tasks (questionnaires, collaborative writing tasks) that learners are expected to carry out.

Considering Lewis and O'Dowd's (2016) levels of integration, there is strong evidence that telecollaboration at UNESP is a peripheral activity carried out by enthusiastic teachers, with little or no recognition from the institution. Data revealed that TTD was mostly implemented as a classroom-independent practice in which exchanges are extracurricular in the Brazilian side of the partnership. A little over 10% of Brazilians took part in a classroom integrated model, and this practice was held only in SJRP. The provision of physical space and of some forms of certification (as an extension activity), and the possibility to adapt courses syllabi in order to incorporate virtual exchanges are evidences of institutional recognition which are certainly

legitimate. However, they do not seem congruent with the inherently international, intercultural and pedagogical nature of telecollaborative projects. In times of growing demands for innovative pedagogical practices and internationalization strategies in higher education, data suggested that TTD practices could play a crucial role as far as internationalization policies are concerned.

O'Dowd's (2013) criteria for successful integration of virtual exchanges into higher education posits responsibilities both on the institutional and on the faculty sides. Taking into account the number of students (nearly 700) who participated in teletandem practices, we can observe the prodigious work that was carried out by the eleven teachers at UNESP. This study indicated that faculty (professors involved and local management) are doing a great deal, but even more could be achieved if institutional recognition and support was offered in the form of academic credits, teacher training, rewards for internal promotion procedures, and virtual mobility accreditation. Based on these results, we believe that there is still a lot to be done so that telecollaboration is creatively adapted to UNESP's general policies.

We acknowledge that the multicampus nature of UNESP further complicates this scenario, since institutional policies should be general enough to regulate activities and practices in all 34 institutes and, at the same time, to accommodate local demands and specificities. In order to contribute to this debate, future studies could investigate (i) how (or if) telecollaboration has been (or could be) incorporated into institutional norms and regulations, (ii) what teletandem learners have to say about some of the issues addressed in this paper, (iii) the role of teachers' practice in integrating TTD into the FL curricula.

There is enough evidence that the struggle and the path to successful integration and recognition at institutional level seem to be similar at UNESP and other universities in the European context, what suggests that a more intense dialogue with fellow practitioners and researchers could lead to innovative and creative ways of dealing with the challenges of creating joint curriculum development and internationalization strategies.

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