STUDENTS’ VOICES ON LEARNING IN TELETANDEM: EXPECTATIONS AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: In the past decades, many studies have investigated the effects of computer-mediated language learning and teaching (Kern, Ware and Warschauer, 2004) and the new contexts afforded by digital technologies, such as telecollaboration (O’Dowd, 2007; 2018). There is, however, a scarcity of research that examines the roles of setting expectations and performing self-assessment in tandem language exchange, specially reporting on both sides of these bilateral projects. It is proposed that this study contributes to fill this gap by presenting an analysis of the expectations of seventy English and Portuguese dyads for learning through teletandem practice, as well as their self-perceived achievements through self-assessment. The data collected by means of online questionnaires are analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results showed that English and Portuguese learners’ expectations and self-assessments may be affected by their beliefs on language learning derived from previous learning experiences as well as by the collaborative learning experience. This has implications for the assistance provided to learners in both integrated and non-integrated modalities of teletandem.

1. Introduction
In recent years, synchronous and asynchronous communication resources on the internet have gained space in foreign language teaching and been used systematically or unsystematically both inside and outside the classroom. Kern, Ware and Warschauer (2004) suggest that the current moment of computer-mediated language teaching would be a "second wave", consisting

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mainly of telecollaboration at a distance oriented by intercultural relations.

The first reports of online collaborative projects between learners from different places started when language teachers and learners had access to the internet more regularly in the 1990’s (O’Dowd, 2007). Currently, telecollaboration is understood as the engaging of a group of learners in intercultural online interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or other geographical spaces as an integral component of educational programs (O’Dowd, 2018).

Our research context lies on the teletandem modality, which is a telecollaboration mode for learning foreign languages by pairing speakers of different languages to work collaboratively in order to learn each other’s language, via synchronous communication tools on the Internet, such as Skype. Building upon Thorne’s (2006) acknowledgement that technologies have changed language learning by shifting the emphasis on language teaching to intercultural and pragmatic competence and by expanding the classroom instruction context to encompass interaction between communities, we aim to discuss what students expected and what they claimed to have learned during teletandem exchanges.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Collaborative learning in Teletandem

Teletandem is a collaborative learning model based on tandem learning that makes use of videoconferencing tools such as Skype to put people in contact to learn foreign languages collaboratively. Each person in the partnership helps his/her partner to learn his/her native language (or a language in which he or she is proficient). In this way, we can say that foreign language learning in teletandem involves pairs of (native or competent) speakers whose aim is to learn each other’s language by means of bilingual conversation sessions (Vassallo & Telles, 2006; Telles & Vassallo, 2006).

The name Tandem comes from bicycles that have two seats and two sets of pedals. It represents a metaphor for collaborative learning through the image of the two persons on such bike having to work collaboratively to successfully ride it together. In the case of language learning, this collaborative work lies in the fact that each person in the partnership is both a foreign language learner and a mentor of his or her own language. According to O’Rourke (2007, p. 44), tandem learning represents a context where “learners can take control of and responsibility for their own learning”, for it is based on autonomy.

Originally, according to Vassallo and Telles (2006), the concept of in-tandem learning arose in Germany in the 1960s and was based on promoting partnerships for face-to-face encounters between learners of foreign languages. The authors explain that it was only in the 1970s, in Spain, that
the name Tandem was used, and that during the 1990s the systematization of its principles effectively occurred. Based on the theorization of tandem learning, Telles and Vassallo (2006) proposed the Teletandem Brazil Project, in which collaborative learning in tandem takes place through digital resources on the internet, such as Skype or other video conferencing applications.

From a theoretical point of view, the fundamental principles underlying the partnership of learners in tandem or teletandem are reciprocity, autonomy and equality. Because it is a collaborative learning enterprise, it should encourage positive interdependence (Kohonen, 1992) between the learners to work together for mutual benefit. The principles of reciprocity and autonomy in tandem only make sense if understood together, since partners may not achieve their objectives unless they are both committed to their own learning and to the learning of the other (Little, 2002). The principle of equality requires that the tandem sessions be composed of two parts, in which the two languages are to be used separately, ensuring the same length of time for each participant to practice each language. Vassallo and Telles (2006) call this principle separation of languages in Teletandem.

According to Salomão, Silva and Daniel (2009), all the principles are linked, since reciprocity assists the separation of languages in the pursuit of practical equality of opportunity for both participants. It is also part of a collaborative kind of autonomy, which is co-constructed in peer interaction. This is because both participants work together in understanding the delimitation of their needs as well as in the definition of practices and/or procedures that will lead them to reach their individual and mutual learning goals. Thus, autonomy in this context does not mean making decisions alone, but in conjunction with one another, due to the collaborative basis of the context and the need for positive interdependence (Kohonen, 1992).

Little (2002), Brammerts, Calvert and Kleppin (2002) and Stickler (2003) espouse the need of advising sessions for participants of a partnership in tandem. According to the authors, practitioners may not know how to explore this collaborative context and follow the fundamental principles involved, despite their motivation. Therefore, assistance aims at encouraging students to use their own abilities to learn in an independent and collaborative way, to reflect on their learning process, to establish goals and continually review them, and to assess their learning progress.

There are differences in the way assistance is implemented in teletandem practice in each higher education institute involved in the partnership, i.e. institutional non-integrated or institutional integrated (Brammerts, 2002; Salomão, 2006; Aranha; Cavalari, 2014). In the integrated institutional modality, tandem practice is part of the curriculum, consisting of a mandatory activity for students and is assessed. In this context, assistance is given by the professors in charge of the disciplines in each of the higher education
institutes involved. In non-integrated teletandem sessions, assistance is named mediation and builds upon the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1998), acknowledging the construction and development of subjects through their social relations and language interaction. Thus, the teletandem group has a mediator, who will conduct a debriefing session after the interaction attempting to offer scaffolding for participants to reflect on their own practice as both language learners and tutors of their own language.

2.2. Learners’ Expectations and Self-assessment
Bordia et al. (2006) alerted about the surprising omission of studies on student expectation in SLA research. For the authors, research on expectations can help clarify ambiguities in the results of motivation studies, by considering the reasons why students learn. Therefore, it is important to develop theoretical knowledge on student expectations based on the learner’s perspective, which may aid teachers and program coordinators in creating courses that meet students’ needs and goals.

Students’ expectations usually stem from their beliefs about what constitutes learning a foreign language. Barcelos (2006) defines beliefs as a way of thinking, of seeing and perceiving the world and its phenomena, built from our experiences in an iterative process of interpretation and (re)signification. As such, beliefs are social (but also individual), dynamic, contextual and paradoxical. Understanding expectations in collaborative contexts is important as they may influence students’ attitudes towards learning, depending on their objectives and mutual commitment, in the way collaborative work is performed together and the kind of interdependence generated.

Dufva (2003) asserts that beliefs are mediational tools used to regulate learning and problem solving, which resonates with the idea of reflecting on learning efficacy and efficiency. Taking into consideration that students must be active and autonomous in their learning to develop language skills, it is important that they have the opportunity to evaluate their progress by themselves. In turn, this practice may lead to more realistic self-assessment and mitigate bias towards L2 acquisition (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997).

For Punhagui and Souza (2012), inviting learners to the process of self-assessment gives them a greater understanding of their own learning and goals. It is through self-assessment that individuals evaluate their own actions and adjust their future ideas and behaviors. We agree with the author that the ability to evaluate one’s own work and development, or even another colleague’s, is something that does not happen quickly or spontaneously, but is rather a process developed over time. More specifically in the teletandem context, one could argue that the benefits of self-assessment extend to the fact that the student learns to collaborate and cooperate with a colleague in a
similar situation, which may help them develop an understanding of different criteria based on distinct sets of expectations and beliefs elicited by their partners.

For Kohonen (1992), there are five factors necessary for a successful collaborative learning endeavor: positive interdependence (working together with common goals and concern for the learning of the other); active contribution and individual and joint results; ample face to face (verbal interaction in abundance); enhanced social skills to deal with communication and conflict; and group reflection, to periodically evaluate what has been learned, how well the collaborative work is performed together, and how it can be improved.

Next, we present the research questions and the methods used to investigate English and Portuguese learners’ expectations and self-perceived linguistic achievements through self-assessment.

### 2.3. Research Questions

The following three research questions guided this study:

- **RQ1**: What do learners expect to learn during teletandem interactions?
- **RQ2**: How do Portuguese and English learners’ expectations differ?
- **RQ3**: Is there a discrepancy between Portuguese and English speakers’ self-assessment?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants and Design of the Study

A total of seventy language learners participated in this study: thirty six (N=36) were speakers of English (henceforth, N/nNES) enrolled in Portuguese classes at a mid-size private university in New England (USA), and thirty four (N=34) were native speakers of Portuguese (henceforth, NSP) affiliated with a public university in the state of São Paulo (Brazil). The N/nNES group comprised native speakers of either English or Spanish enrolled in beginning I and II, intensive beginning, and intermediate Portuguese courses. The NSP group was composed of students, professors or staff at the Brazilian university. Some NSP participants were not enrolled in an English course. While the N/nNES participated in the teletandem project as a compulsory part of their language course, for the NSP the teletandem interactions were optional. Before the first week of teletandem, these two groups responded to a questionnaire that intended to assess participants’ areas of interests. Responses from this questionnaire guided professors in matching learners adequately so as to maximize the chances of producing effective, and sustainable partnerships (Little et al., 1999).

The NSP and the N/nNES met weekly in their institute’s language
laboratory, interacting via Skype for six one-hour sessions. Instructors and mediators would require participants to switch languages halfway through the hour-long session so as to enforce bilingualism and honor the teletandem principle of equality. It is important to note that for N/nNES, teletandem comprised an integral part of their Portuguese course (e.g. class meets four times a week, with one of these meetings reserved for tandem interactions, debriefings and contextualized tasks). For English learners in the NSP, teletandem was an optional activity through which they could earn extra credits. After each teletandem session, a mediator would conduct a group debriefing. The debriefing involved posing questions for them to examine their practice and language learning in the collaborative context, and to reflect on the principles of autonomy, reciprocity and separation of languages when interacting with their partners.

Respondents’ learning expectations were examined using quantitative and qualitative data collected from two online surveys. These questionnaires were administered before the first (week 1) and after the last teletandem interaction (week 6). Whereas the first questionnaire used one direct question to assess learners’ expectations and the linguistic abilities which they sought to improve, a 15-item Likert-scale question was added to the second questionnaire to examine how learners assessed their learning outcomes with respect to teletandem, the frequency of interactions, and the role of moderators/instructors in teletandem after the 6-week experience. This investigation will only report on the questions and the Likert-scale items germane to this study’s proposed areas of exploration. The following section reports on qualitative and quantitative data analysis used and presents a discussion of results.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1. Qualitative Insights

Questionnaire data were examined using mixed methods. (Dornyei, Z., 2007). In order to analyze responses to the surveys’ open-ended questions (“What do you expect to learn or improve during teletandem interactions?” and “What did you learn and improve during teletandem interactions?”), responses were listed in a chart in categories of emerging and frequent themes. These answers were later counted and ranked based on the number of times they appeared among participants in both groups. Findings from this analysis revealed that oral skills such as listening comprehension, speaking and pronunciation appeared more frequently among the expectations listed by both the NSP and the N/nNES. These results are listed below with the respective number of times that each item (language skill) was detected.

Before the teletandem interactions, Portuguese learners (N/nNES)
expected to improve pronunciation (9), which was the most cited item followed by an interest in gaining a better understanding of Brazilian culture (7), and learning the colloquial language (7) including use of idioms (7). Following these three linguistic aspects were: gaining fluency (6), developing oral communication abilities (6) and expand vocabulary repertoire (5). It is relevant to note that, before starting the interactions, [increased] confidence was not mentioned as a trait that N/nNES expect to attain. However, during the second phase of this study (after 6 interactions), when learners were asked to describe what they have [had] learned or improved through teletandem interactions, getting more confident (6) to use the language appeared on [at] the top of the list. N/nNES also described the use of idioms (7) and being more fluent (6) as part of their self-assessed learning outcomes. After six (6) teletandem interactions, N/nNES mentioned pronunciation (4) and oral communication abilities (5) less frequently than before starting the teletandem practice. Figures 1 and 2 show responses to the first research question “What do learners expect to learn during teletandem interactions? proposed for this study.

Figure1: Portuguese Learners’ Expectations and Self-assessment

Among the NSP’ expectations, in the first phase of the study, vocabulary expansion (14) and overall oral communication abilities (13) appeared more often than culture (9), confidence (8), fluency, pronunciation, and the use of idioms (seven times for each). On one hand, after the teletandem interactions, NSP’s self-perceived learning achievement indicated that becoming more confident (8) to use the target language, improving pronunciation (8) and learning how to use idioms (8) continued to be relevant, being cited almost as often as prior to commencing teletandem interactions. On the other hand,
becoming more fluent (14) and learning about the target culture (20) twofold on the list of expectations.

A comparison of responses gathered from both the NSP and the N/nNES groups shows some contrasts: 1. While the quest to attain confidence appears as an expectation in the results of NSP, among N/nNES it is only mentioned after the interactions, as a learning outcome; 2. Participants (in both groups) expected to master the target culture (NSP=9; N/nNES=7), yet when learning outcomes were assessed, it appeared more often among NSP (20) than N/nNES (5); 3. English learners (NSP) also mentioned their fluency (7, 14) and oral communication skills improvement (13,8) more than learners of Portuguese in N/nNES (Fluency= 6,6; Oral competency= 6,5) group. Additionally, similar learning outcomes were cited in both groups: the use of idioms and mastering of colloquial language as well as improvement of vocabulary were mentioned with the same frequency as they appear in the list of expectations before the first interaction. Next, figure 3 displays the answers to the second research question “How do Portuguese and English learners’ expectations differ?”.
In addition to commonly cited prospects for attainment, it is worthy to note that participants in the NSP also see teletandem as an opportunity to make friends, build networks, and help their teletandem partner learn the target language and culture. It is also critical to highlight that none of the participants explicitly added practice grammar structures or improve writing as one of their expectations. Yet N/nNES realized that their teletandem experience gave them an opportunity for more than simply improving language skills. The following excerpt corroborates that students had the chance to establish personal bonds with their partners: “I loved the fact that we made friends with the people and got to know the culture.” (N/nNES participant #51). Next, quantitative results are analyzed.

4.2 Quantitative Findings
As mentioned above, learning outcomes were assessed by examining data collected through an open-ended question, and with 6 out of 15 items in the Likert-scale, with ratings from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale was administered after the six (6) teletandem interactions and sought to access participants’ self-assessment. The Independent samples T-test was employed to examine how each group of participants evaluated the role of teletandem in helping them to speak with more ease. Statistical findings from this T-test showed that NSP displayed a mean score of 3.74 (SD= .448), while the mean score for N/nNES was 4.51 (SD=.658). In analyzing the variance, Levene’s Test outcomes showed that the difference is significant (p<.018) if both groups are compared. As for the possibility of improving pronunciation through teletandem interactions, a mean score of 3.65 (SD=.544) was obtained for NSP, and a mean of 4.17 (SD=.878) was found
for N/nNES. These results demonstrated significant difference (p<.007) between English and Portuguese learners’ scores.

Regarding an improvement of listening and comprehension through teletandem, Portuguese learners (N/nNES) obtained the highest mean score of 4.56 (SD=.877), English learners (NSP) mean score was 3.71 (SD=462), with a significant difference (p<.035) between samples. The Independent Samples T-test was also used to assess the role of teletandem in helping learners become more comfortable when speaking the target language. Results showed that the NSP mean score was 3.53 (SD=.706) and N/nNES attained a mean score of 3.67 (SD=1.219), confirming significant difference (p<.007) between groups. The prospect of perceiving teletandem as a tool for the improvement of writing was small - both groups obtained the lowest score: 2.65 (SD=.849) for NSP, and 2.81 (SD=1.064) for N/nNES, with no significant difference (p<.396) between groups. In regard to using teletandem interactions to learn the target culture, English learners (NSP) obtained a lower mean score of 3.74 (SD=.448) than N/nNES 4.53 (SD=.696), with significant difference (p<.013). This data points to: 1. There is a difference in NSP and N/nNES self-assessment; 2. There is a disparity between learners’ expectations and self-assessment gathered in the qualitative and quantitative sections of this study. Interestingly enough, NSP has lower score if compared to their counterparts; however, the highest mean scores were found in the use of teletandem practice to learn culture along with the perspective of speaking with more ease via telecollaborative practice. Table 1 displays statistical results that illustrates the answers to the third research question “Is there a discrepancy between Portuguese and English speakers’ self-assessment?”.

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<tr>
<th>Types of speakers</th>
<th>Independent Samples Test - Learners' self-assessment</th>
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<td></td>
<td>speak with more ease</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSP</td>
<td>Mean Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD= .448)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N/nNES</td>
<td>4.51 (SD=.658)</td>
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<td>(p&lt;.013)</td>
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Table 1: Learners’ Self-assessment - Statistical Results

In general, N/nNES seemed to be more confident not only while setting their expectations (gaining confidence to use the target language was not
listed by N/nNES in the first phase of the study), but also when rating their achievements: they acquired higher mean scores in all categories. The collaborative context that characterizes teletandem practice fosters language production, which in turn leads to successful communication and results in higher self-confidence. In addition, telecollaboration uniquely presents students with opportunities to be both a learner and a tutor during the same interaction (Little et al., 1999). In practicing this reciprocity, learners are largely free from self-consciousness stemming from their speaking abilities. The teletandem environment differs from the language classroom as it is free from formal evaluation and the presence of hierarchy represented by an instructor.

Furthermore, participants’ expectations expressed both qualitatively and quantitatively varied significantly, yet it is possible to sustain that the quantitative data, for the most part, corroborate the qualitative findings. While some expectations seemed to match with respondents’ self-assessment (pronunciation, colloquial language, and vocabulary attainment), oral communication skills and fluency appeared to be distant from learners’ self-perceived achievement. One possible explanation for this is that oral communication abilities as well as pronunciation might be difficult to be measured by the speakers: they expected to improve but could not assess it. Another possible argument is that for Spanish speakers in the N/nNES group improving pronunciation and having a realistic self-assessment represent great challenges as found in Gontijo (2012) and Soares & Gontijo (2013). This would, in turn, lead to idealistic expectations and nonrealistic self-assessment. Another argument is that N/nNEs’ students may hold a healthier linguistic self-esteem and perhaps a less distorted L2 self-image (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009) than learners in NSP.

Among the disparities revealed by qualitative findings, it is worthy to mention that improving fluency appeared in NSP sample the triple of times that it was cited by N/nNES, and that learning culture was detected in the NSP list of expectations nine times but could be observed in the list of achievements twenty times. These results are particularly interesting as they reflect the difficulties in defining culture teaching and learning. They may also show that learners of English (NSP) had the opportunity to learn much more about the N/nNES’ culture than they have anticipated. Another possible explanation is that the Portuguese learners’ group was more culturally diverse than the NSP providing them with more than just pure North American culture. This argument can be validated by an English learner: “Aprendi bastante sobre vocabulário, expressões e cultura norte-americana e cubana (NSP - Participant # 6; See translation in footnote)”.

3 “I learned a lot about vocabulary, expressions and North American and Cuban cultures”
linguistic backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities. During debriefings, in the mediation sessions, held after teletandem practice, NSP participants consistently mentioned how diverse the N/nNES group was, deconstructing the idea of what it is to be an American. One can argue that this remarkable difference in the number of which learning culture is cited lies on the fact that NSP had opportunities to reflect about their own culture as mentioned by some participants: “Acredito que pude melhorar minha pronúncia e aprender um pouco mais da minha cultura e também da cultura do meu parceiro (NSP - Participant #35; See footnote for translation)”.4

5. Final considerations
In general, participants expect to improve oral communication skills, learn idioms, improve pronunciation and vocabulary. Interestingly enough, N/nNES also mention their interest in making friends, building networks, and helping their teletandem partner learn the target language and culture. The fact that participants mentioned more than linguistic aspects related to language learning shows their awareness of the differences between this telecollaborative and a traditional classroom environment. It may also imply that they see teletandem as an informal practice of the foreign language, an opportunity to learn about mundane themes not covered in class.

Even with a major difference in learners forms of participation: NSP voluntarily and N/nNES compulsorily; similar expectations were detected, which can be conducive to generate positive interdependence in collaborative work. This in turn may lead partners’ successfully working together to establish common goals and care for each other’s learning. Thus, it is important for professors and mediators to help them examine their expectations, including reflections on their active contributions and individual and joint results to be achieved. Furthermore, the process of evaluating their development through self-assessment can help them to establish frequent evaluation of what has been learned, the quality of collaborative work accomplished together, and how it can be improved.

Learners’ expectations seem to have been met in the self-assessment with some disparities. These discrepancies noted between self-assessment mean scores for the two groups can be attributed to the fact that for Portuguese learners teletandem practice was compulsory with grades being assigned for participation whereas English learners’ participation was voluntary. This contrast may also be linked to English learners’ low linguistic self-esteem coupled with fear to speak the target language reported to mediators during debriefings sessions. Also, the fact that these learners knew that they were going to interact with students from an Ivy League school may have caused a

4 “I believe that I was able to improve my pronunciation and learn a bit more about my culture and about my partners’ culture.”
domino effect: NSP’ stereotypical views of counterparts might have led to construct an idealized image of their partners resulting in intimidation and affecting their confidence. This process explains the presence of gaining confidence in their list of expectations before starting teletandem. Portuguese learners, on the contrary, did not mention confidence as one of their expectations before the interactions; they seemed to be comfortable and displayed low language anxiety during discussions in the debriefings prior to teletandem. It is interesting to note that they mentioned building confidence to speak the foreign language after the interactions. This puzzling outcome may serve to show that Portuguese learners might need to be trained to be able to set more realistic expectations and self-assessment.

In addition, one should also note that the discrepancies found in the way English learners regarded “culture” or expected to learn it might be related to the extremely difficult task to define culture and what it means to learn and teach it.

In summary, this study suggests that it is imperative to advise learners to set expectations for teletandem that are different from the ones that they set for classroom context. It also points to the relevance to guide them to propose realistic expectations that consider the uniqueness of teletandem and the roles students play (mentor and mentee) in this telecollaborative context.

6. Limitations and Future Studies

One limitation that is worthy to mention is the lack of studies investigating learners’ self-assessment in the context of telecollaboration, and the need to develop and validate a scale to measure self-perceived linguistic achievements making results more reliable. Additionally, this field of study would benefit from research that evaluate if there is a relationship between learners’ perceived and actual language use, as well as the possible connection between self-assessed achievements and proficiency levels.

The role that individual differences (i.e. motivation, self-esteem, anxiety, language identity) play on language acquisition in the context of a foreign language classroom have been extensively investigated, however, there is a dearth of research assessing these individual differences in dyads that engage in telecollaborative practices.

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