Introduction

Tandem language learning, as an original language learning approach, occurs when “two language learners with different native languages communicate with one another sharing the common objective of learning from each other” (Little, 1998). How to benefit most from this “ideal” language learning approach within this autonomous, reciprocal and collaborative learning context has been an interesting research question. Many language teachers and researchers have applied the approach formally or informally in their teaching and research practices, be it through face-to-face or any other modes of asynchronous or synchronous interaction (O’Rourke, 2007).

This article presents a summary of the findings of a three-year eTandem exchange course between two distant languages – Chinese and French at institutional level – between the Unit of Chinese Studies of the University of Geneva, Switzerland and the French Department of Hubei University, China. The summary focuses on the students’ perspectives about the eTandem course. It is based on the data obtained from the pre-exchange survey of students’ language profile and expectations for the exchange, from the formal yearly course evaluation administrated by the University of Geneva, from the statistics given by the students’ logging on Moodle, as well as the face-to-face interviews with the students from both universities at the end of each academic year.

The project was initiated in 2009 by the Unit of Chinese Studies of the University of Geneva as an important part of the Chinese blended-learning programme called ChineWeb. It is still ongoing. The participants are, for each academic year, the second year language students from both sides (Level B1-B2 according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2005). The course includes theme-based asynchronous learning activities in the LMS Moodle as well as task-based synchronous oral communication via Skype.

The main objective is to promote autonomy in the language learning process in order to make the students aware of the importance of “learning to learn” as well as helping them to become responsible for their own language learning. The immediate objectives involve developing the...
students’ linguistic competence through communication with native speakers of the target language as well as getting them to better know and understand the target culture.

Socio-institutional context

The two universities share certain basic features in language teaching, such as the emphasis on the development of linguistic skills that include communication skills on similar topics. Compared to Hubei University, the Unit of Chinese Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Geneva focuses more on developing the students’ ability on learning and understanding Chinese society and culture, especially ancient and modern Chinese literature. The strength of the curriculum is thus laid more on reading and writing than on oral comprehension and communication. The 9-hour Chinese courses that the second-year students attend each week do not involve linguistic skills practice courses as listening and speaking. As a result, many students express a strong need for practicing what they learn in face-to-face instruction. Besides, the fact that some students take other optional subjects at the same time also prevents them from investing too much time on Chinese learning.

On the other hand, the training and the practice of linguistic competence come first in the curriculum of the French Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Hubei University, especially for second-year students. However, they do not have many opportunities to speak French due to the great number of students in each class (25-30 per class). The opportunity to communicate with native French/Chinese speakers of their own age is undoubtedly a big attraction to students from both universities. In order to know exactly what the students expect to benefit from the eTandem exchange, we have collected information from a pre-course survey at the beginning of each year’s course.

The results show that the benefits the students’ expected from an eTandem exchange include improving oral communication skills, establishing a good friendship or a stable collaborative relationship with their language partners, exchanging cultural knowledge, and improving oral comprehension. Some also expected benefits in terms of vocabulary and grammar learning, as well as improving writing skills.
The course structure

As a language practice course integrated in the whole Chinese blended-learning programme, the eTandem course has chronologically gone through different design cycles. Before launching a large-scale course, a pilot project was conducted between the two universities. Based on the students’ feedback and the ergonomical analysis of the course feasibility, pre-course preparation, fixed course schedule, the bilingual course environment and online tutoring were kept to design the large-scale course that started in 2010. The courses in the year 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 have been iteratively redesigned on the basis of the analytical results of the former design so as to better adapt to the curriculum as well as to the students’ needs.

Before the course began, all students were required to fill an online questionnaire to get registered. The survey included students’ language profile and open questions about their expectations from the exchange. A face-to-face training session was organized by the teachers of both universities to help the students get familiar with the Moodle platform and Skype. As for the forming of eTandem partners, in the year 2010-2011, it was the teachers who matched the language partners. In the year 2011-2012, in response to the students’ suggestions, this was replaced by a “tandem forum” where the students were encouraged to present themselves, to exchange messages and get in touch with each other through e-mails to find their partner.

Before each exchange, the students checked the task instruction for the session and consulted their partners’ learning materials as a reference as to what extent they could provide aid during the exchange. There were 3 kinds of tasks for each theme, including: 1) a theme-based description or narrative task in the target language; 2) a question-answer discussion in both mother tongue and target language; and 3) a written summary of the exchange in their native language in the forum of each session. During the exchange, the students were required to strictly respect the principle of reciprocity: 30 minutes in French and 30 minutes in Chinese.
The outcomes of the course

Data collections

At the end of each academic year, the students from Geneva were asked to fill in a formal course evaluation questionnaire administrated by the University of Geneva. A complete evaluation report was sent to the teachers directly afterwards. The evaluation form consisted of 4 parts with 12 5-scale questions about the course content and its organisation, teaching evaluation, as well as global appreciation, and 4 specific questions on the eTandem exchange, together with 3 open-ended questions about the comments or suggestions on the exchange. The questionnaire was translated in Chinese and was sent to Hubei University, where the data was then treated separately. Besides, after each weekly session of the exchange, the students were required to fill in a short self-evaluation form to report on the exchange process. And finally, an interview at the end of each semester was organized at both universities to collect students’ comments on the course.

Students’ global appreciation of the eTandem course

In general, the Geneva students’ perceptions as whether they have achieved the objectives are overwhelmingly positive (see the graph below, 100 % in 2010-2011, 100 % in 2011-2012, 97 % in 2012-2013). The result from Hubei University was not different from that of their counterpart.

Despite a small drop in the year 2011-2012, the students showed their satisfaction with the eTandem course.
The obstacles

Technical problems were reported to be the biggest obstacle for a successful exchange. The breakdown of the Internet connection (during the academic year 2010-2011, the campus internet current was limited by the government, which was especially disastrous for the students of Hubei University), the cutting off of Skype, as well as other small technical problems discouraged the students from time to time. Besides, some students also regarded the preparation load to be a little too heavy and they demanded that the course materials be more related to their curriculum.

Do the benefits meet the students’ expectations?

The students’ perceived benefits included improving their speaking skills and understanding better the cultures. A lot of students noted the increased confidence in their use of the target language, as they were not afraid anymore of “speaking Chinese/French”. The practice in the authentic target language with native Chinese/French speakers helped them to better know the target language as they were really put “in the bath” during the exchange. They also emphasized the precious experience of learning about the target culture through exchanging with people of their own age. As the statistics were completed by interviews with the students
at the end of each year, we include below some of the students’ commentaries regarding the benefits that they mentioned.

*Ilss* permettent de mettre en place du vocabulaire en plaçant les mots dans un contexte. Ils nous donnent des structures/phrases utiles à l’oral. (The course helped to put the vocabulary into context. They teach us structures and sentences that are useful orally.)*

首先，交流课的时间比较灵活，便于我们自由安排；其次，可以与搭档畅所欲言，能了解到很多书本上学不到的东西；最后，对彼此的口语水平和词汇量都有很大的帮助。（First, the flexible exchange time helped us to organise our learning autonomously; second, talking with a language partner helped us to know a lot of non-book knowledge; last, it was really beneficial for the improvement of speaking skills and vocabulary learning.）

（As we don’t have much opportunity to speak French at school, the course provided a platform for us to communicate in French with REAL French native speakers. Besides, we can talk about other subjects instead of being constrained by the textbook. We are no longer afraid of speaking French.）

该课程为我们所学的词汇和表达法提供了一个很好的运用的平台，帮助我们培养说法语的习惯，加深了对国外文化的了解。*The course provided a good chance for us to practice the words and expressions that we have learnt. It helped us to develop a good habit of speaking French, and at the same time deepened our knowledge about the French culture.*

Besides the linguistic benefits, almost all students mentioned the enthusiastic experience of the cross-cultural exchanges they had with their partners. For one Swiss student, the Chinese students were no longer “OVNI” (UFO) since he got a lot of information about Chinese culture “en live” (on live) with a “vrai Chinois” (real Chinese). The course was “grammaticalement et humainement intéressant” (grammatically and humanly interesting).

Most students felt that their partners “aident vraiment à nous ouvrir et progresser” (really help us to open up and make progress), that they mutually gained more confidence in oral communicative skills.

Parts of the students’ perceptions were actually quite accurate as the final results of the oral test showed a clear improvement in the development of their speaking skills, especially pronunciation, higher confidence in their use of the target language and a greater knowledge
of the target culture. However, more evidence is needed to prove the relation between these improvements and the eTandem exchange.

Students’ participation in the forums

The statistics extracted from the Moodle LMS also showed the students’ active participation in the online course, especially the posts in the forums opened for each session. After each exchange, the participants were encouraged to write a summary of the exchange in their mother tongue for their language partners. In the year 2011-2012, most students did not understand the real benefit of this task and they mentioned that during the interview. We thus emphasized the importance of the feedback-summary in the pre-course training. As a result, the messages that the students posted almost doubled during the first semester of the year 2012-2013.

Table 1: The comparison of students’ posts in Moodle forums (2011-2012, 2012-2013_1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
<th>2012-2013_1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students number</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total student post number</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average post per student</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students not only resumed what their partners said during the exchange, they also added their own comments concerning the cultural information that they had learnt during each session, their personal feeling about their partners and the exchange process.

By exchanging about cultural topics they get to know each other, understand each other, share the same point of view or become open to different opinions with less bias.

在瑞士，很多学生都是靠自己打工来支付所有的开销。（In Switzerland, many university students work on their own to pay for all the daily expenses.）

谈到怎样保护环境的问题时，我才发现 Sara 是个很热爱大自然的人，她作为一个志愿者加入了一个保护动物的机构，她认为自然和人类都是应该相互尊重的。Sara 真是个讨人喜欢的女孩！（When talking about environmental protection, I found out that Sara was a nature-lover. She joined an animal protection association as a volunteer; she thought that nature and human being should respect each other. She is really adorable!）

我们都觉得没必要花钱玩网络游戏，钱应该花在更有价值的地方。（We both agreed that money should be spent on something more worthwhile than on playing video games.）
这次对话，我从James身上了解了很多巴黎人的日常开销以及他们对待奢侈品和中国人对待奢侈品的或相同或不同的态度，我受益匪浅！（In this exchange, James let me know how most people in Paris pay for their daily expenses, and the different attitudes towards luxury products between the Chinese and the French. I’ve learnt a lot!)

Elle m’a appris l’adage: le matin, manger comme un empereur, à midi manger comme un homme ordinaire et le soir manger comme un mendiant. Je suis donc un mendiant du matin qui devient empereur le soir! (She taught me a Chinese saying: Eat breakfast like an emperor, lunch like a king, and dinner like a beggar. I’m a beggar in the morning and an emperor in the evening!)

Selon l’expression, ‘les voyages forment la jeunesse’, il est vrai que les voyages en solitaire permettent de prendre confiance en soi et de pouvoir prendre les bonnes décisions. C’est une bonne occasion pour apprendre à se débrouiller seul. (According to the expression, “travel broadens the mind”, it is true that travelling can help to gain confidence and to be able to make good decisions. This is a good opportunity to learn to be independent.)

The joyful learning experiences enrich their vocabulary, especially the proverbs.

Je remercie beaucoup mon etandem Fanny qui me fait mieux connaître la Chine et qui m’apprend des nouveaux mots et a beaucoup d’humour. (I am very grateful to my tandem Fanny who helps me to know better China and who teaches me new vocabulary with a lot of humor.)

Elle m’a appris une expression pour parler des gens qui, contrairement aux gens qui voyagent, ne connaissent pas grand chose: 井底之蛙. (She taught me an expression to describe people who, contrary to those travel a lot, know nothing about the outer world: a frog at the bottom of the well.)

A propos de Guilin, elle m’a appris une expression disant que les paysages de Guilin sont les plus beaux du monde: 桂林山水甲天下. (About Guilin, she taught me an expression to say that the Guilin landscapes are the most beautiful in the world: East or West, Guilin landscape is best.)

A pleasant collaborative friendship was also established step by step as the course progressed.

我们互相了解，互相帮助，互相学习，纠正聊天中的错误。我觉得能有一个互助的伙伴是一件很好的事情，很期待下次的交流。 (We tried to understand other, to help each other, to learn from each other and correct each other. I found it wonderful to have a helpful partner. I’m looking forward to our next exchange.)
Elle parle très bien français et elle me corrige quand je fais faux. C'était très sympathique de parler avec elle et je pense qu'on va devenir de bons amis. Trop cool! (She speaks very good French and she corrects me whenever necessary. It was very nice talking to her and I think we will become good friends. It’s really cool! /Too cool!)

Elle m’a corrigé mon chinois avec beaucoup de patience. J’ai eu des scrupules à raccrocher après 1h de conversation avec une personne aussi adorable! (She corrected me with a lot of patience. I was reluctant to cut the conversation after talking for one hour with such an adorable person!)

The teachers felt very happy to read the high-spirited posts written in the forums week after week. Another proof of the success of the exchange was found in the fact that several students from the 2010-2011 academic year reported keeping contact and continuing exchange with their partners even after the course. They decided their own learning objectives, chose the topics they felt like discussing, and tried to get the best from the exchange with their language partners.

**Future work**

Undoubtedly, the Chinese-French eTandem course has brought great benefits to the students, not only linguistically, but also culturally. We will continue this course with a more adaptive design according to the students’ feedback. A solid partnership between the University of Geneva and Hubei University is vital for the success of this Chinese-French eTandem exchange project. Taking into consideration a long-term collaboration, the future work will focus on finding a solution to the technical problems as well as “normalizing” the course (O’Dowd, 2010) in Hubei University. Among others, research questions like how to evaluate the oral exchange, how to foster students’ learner autonomy for their future language learning remain to be solved in the long run.
References